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Subjugated nomads: the Lambadas under the rule of the Nizams - By Bhangya Bhukya

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and Samoa (Mageo), and Indonesia (Hollan), we are presented with both detailed descriptions and often insightful analysis of the various problems and conundrums of dealing with others in a region in which they are widely held to be inscrutable – as Rumsey reminds us in his afterword.

The acid test of any anthropological concept, however, is whether it can withstand an encounter with the ethnographic work that it inspires. Empathy, one feels reading this collection, is too flimsy a notion to accommodate the excellent ethnographic work that the individual essayists have produced.

In their introduction, Hollan and Throop lay down the claim that empathy is an inherent human capacity, elucidated by the discovery by neuroscience of so-called ‘mirror neurons’ which reproduce the perceived emotional states of others *as if* they were one’s own. With this as its premise, the volume rests on a series of irresolvable tensions. Geertz’s critique of anthropological pretensions to know and understand others from his essay ‘From the native’s point of view’ (*Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28, 1974, 26–45) casts a long shadow over this collection. The contributors are divided between those who agree with the editors that empathy is a universal human trait, and those who, with Geertz, are sensitive to the mediation of others’ experiences through public forms of symbolism.

For those who agree that empathy is a positively identifiable feature of a universal human psyche (Mageo, Lohman, von Poser, in addition to Hollan and Throop), the attempt to *understand* others through careful interpretation is undermined: the dimensions of empathy are known in advance, and the analysis focuses on the variables affecting the precise social form a natural empathy takes. This positivistic perspective recalls Malinowski’s theories of kinship and human needs, in which complex cultural formations are constructed on the basis of simple, and in his case arbitrary, ‘laws’ of human behaviour.

Other authors in the collection (most notably Lepowsky, but also Hermann) take a more nuanced and reflexive path. They contend that whatever we think we know of another’s emotional state, especially in unfamiliar cultural contexts, is always mediated by language. In these essays, empathy as such disintegrates into various particular indigenous representations of the care people of different cultural origins have for other people. Here the project recalls

Malinowski in his guise as a naturalistic, Conrad-esque observer and storyteller.

At the root of this division within the papers in the collection is exactly the same series of difficulties that derailed anthropological concepts of kinship and gender, reducing them to gestures indicating sites of apparent commonality, related only metaphorically or in the perception of anthropological observers. When gender was understood as a naturally occurring distinction amongst people, the problem for anthropologists was to map indigenous concepts onto their own vocabulary; the result was necessarily a loss of specific meaning. Once it was understood that ‘gender’ was a cultural concept proper to Western people, attention to the specific modes in which other people spoke about men and women led to the collapse of gender as a cross-cultural concept; the result was necessarily a loss of comparative power.

Exactly the same challenges attend this volume. Once Hollan and Throop define empathy as a natural capacity of humans, culturally expressed in different forms, the project is in a sense already exhausted. The work of the anthropologist becomes a task of explaining away the oddities in which universal empathy is couched across the Pacific, or of managing the chronic unease of attempting to speak of a putative (Western) ‘universal’ in terms of the incommensurable representations of others, which do not refer to it, and can be made to do so only through violence. Therefore, while it seems clear that empathy *gestures* to features of great significance in Pacific social life, like gender it is difficult to deploy ethnographically. In this volume, the notion serves as a provocation for some challenging and excellent descriptive and interpretative work; whether the concept of empathy as the editors frame it can survive this encounter with ethnography remains to be seen.

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Historical anthropology

BHUKYA, BHANGYA. *Subjugated nomads: the Lambadas under the rule of the Nizams*. xxiii, 296 pp., maps, tables, illus., bibliogr. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010. Rs 550.00 (cloth)

This is a book by a historian that promises, in the introduction, to employ oral history methods to

reveal an alternative history and historiography of subaltern community identity. The author, Bhangya Bhukya, wants to explore everyday experiences of politics, to understand the Lambada community through its oral narratives, and his focus is, in the subtitle, on the Lambadas in the Nizams' state of Hyderabad. Yet Bhukya never clarifies what the spoken language of the Lambadas was and cites very few interviews, although the book has copious materials up to and beyond 1948 (when the Nizams' rule ended), and he cites hardly any Telugu sources and mentions only a very few titles in the text that seem to be in Urdu or Hindi.

Rather, he falls into the habit of citing 'oral literature' and takes most anthropological information from English-language ethnographic reports by British colonial officials or officials of Hyderabad state. And here is the second problem: the first paragraph of the book begins with 'Under colonial rule', and in almost every chapter the introductory paragraphs focus on 'the colonial state'. Hyderabad, a princely state, comes into the discussion after that, and it is clear that Bhukya believes that British India was setting the stage, forcing the Nizams' state to follow its lead (albeit usually thirty to forty years later, in the events described here) and making it unnecessary to differentiate the princely state from the colonial overlord.

However, the fascinating material in this book comes from the detailed account of the differences, of policies affecting the Lambadas between British India and princely Hyderabad. Bhukya looks closely at the timing and implementation of policies regarding trade and transit duties, raising and policing of cattle, the arrest and sentencing of dacoits, and the provision of land and changing land relations in colonial India and the princely state, showing patterns of conflict, of differential treatment not only of the Lambadas but of each class of which they form a part. And that, too, is interesting, because they are one among several sets of traders, of cattle-raisers, of dacoits, and of peasants, and one gets little sense of them as a distinct community. Bhukya, who comes from this Hyderabad Lambada community, uses his fieldwork to good effect only once, it seems to me, when he discusses the settlement of Lambadas with others at a 'Criminal Tribes' location and his interviewees mention that the castes there began to intermarry (p. 155). Only at the end of the book, in chapter 5, in the conclusion, and in the appendix, do we get a

sense of what this 'community' might have been in the past and what it has become (there are a few brief paragraphs earlier about their organization into '*thandas*' [tribal communities] led by Naiks or chiefs). In chapter 5, on 'spiritual culture', religious reform, and identity politics, we learn that in previous centuries some followed Guru Nanak, some followed a Muslim *pir* (elder), and many followed a Hindu emphasizing vegetarianism and non-violence. Here also one wonders about the author's understanding of his sources, since he cites this reviewer twice but wrongly. I did not, as asserted on p. 217, argue for an Indo-Muslim or Deccani synthesis but against it (the note concerning Osmania on p. 222 is also misleading). The final irony comes as the conclusion opens by referring to the transformation of caste and community 'under colonial rule' (p. 235) and asserts that the 'colonial mode of rule' in Hyderabad 'involved a ruthless exploitation of subaltern communities' (p. 238).

Yet the previous chapter stated that 'Hyderabad State appreciated the new values that were evolving in the Lambada society' (p. 220) and that 'the Andolan [Lambada] movement and political mobilization got considerable support from Hyderabad State', including support for education, for schools and textbooks in Devanagari and Telugu, and efforts to distribute forest land and agricultural loans to them (pp. 232-3).

Despite Bhukya's inclination to treat Hyderabad State as simply part of British India, this is one of the best studies available of the interactions between the two entities, of the different policies and paths taken, and the ongoing conflicts because of these. The material concerning the Lambadas is disappointingly scarce and based almost entirely on English-language sources, but what there is reveals a 'community' of different origins, different religious orientations, and, after 1956, different categorizations by the states of postcolonial India (variously as a Scheduled Caste, a Scheduled Tribe, and a De-Notified Tribe). I hope Bhukya returns to the oral materials he undoubtedly collected and attempts a fuller delineation of the social organization, oral traditions, and religious orientations and movements among members of this fascinating group; his refutation of Dirks's argument that colonial categories produced new realities will then be more powerful.

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