

Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies. Volume Five, Concept of Tribal Society¹
Edited by Georg Pfeffer² and Deepak Kumar Behera³

Reviewed by Peter W. Van Arsdale⁴

For those of us who cut our teeth on tribal studies, this book, edited by Georg Pfeffer and Deepak Kumar Behera, can serve both as a welcome theoretical refresher and an innovative pragmatic compilation. It contains a well-written introductory chapter which lays out the history of tribal studies from interactive – and at times contradictory – Euroamerican and Indian professional perspectives. The introduction reminds us of the classic work of anthropologists such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Marshall Sahlins, and Edmund Leach. It also reminds us that “tribe” is by no means a unitary or unifying term.

What is a tribe? This is the central conceptual question asked by the book. More than any other recent book of its type, *Concept of Tribal Society* successfully addresses the diversity of tribal societies found in the world. As the various contributing authors of the 17 chapters make clear, “tribe” and “tribal society” differentiate along at least five disciplinary dimensions: historical; ecological; political; socioeconomic; and socio-cultural. As the editors make clear, and as anthropologists now well understand, the unilineal evolution of societies – and particularly of tribal societies – is not what occurred. Better to conceptualize a diverse array of socioeconomic, socio-cultural, and political processes “underwritten and guided” by ecological and demographic forces. The editors, and most of the contributing authors, take pains to emphasize the power of culture in shaping societal evolution.

South Asian (particularly Indian) tribal studies are featured in the first section. This proves important to the book’s overall success because it is only in the second section that other tribal studies, including several from North America, are featured. By structuring the book in this way Pfeffer and Behera clearly tell the reader that insights will be deepened, ideas will be generated, and issues will be raised in different ways if scholars begin in South Asia. Reflecting back on my own Masters-level training in the early 1970s when I first began to cut my teeth on tribal studies, I would agree. We dealt with no South Asian tribal societies as I worked toward completion of my M.A. at the University of Maryland. This,

fortunately, was rectified as I worked toward completion of my Ph.D. at the University of Colorado, although Southeast Asian societies received more attention than did South Asian societies.

For this review I have selected two chapters from the first (South Asian) section of the book and two from the second (non-South Asian) section to emphasize. They stand out not only as being well-researched and well-written but as exemplars of the diversity of material Pfeffer and Behera have included. Each in its own way strongly reinforces the notion that cultural – perhaps even culturological – analyses have merit as researchers attempt to understand tribal society in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Each also reinforces the notion that to understand contemporary tribes you must understand their histories.

Hans Hadders’ contribution to Section I is entitled “The Jadopatias: Parasitic Charlatans or Benevolent Priests?” As with four of the book’s other authors, Hadders attempts to ferret out understandings of the interaction of caste and class, tribe and clan. His goal is to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the complex pattern of interactions characterizing northeastern India’s Jadopatias and Santal populations. Jadopatias loosely translates “painter-magician,” thus referring to this Bengali group’s roles as scroll painter/exhibitors and Brahman-like ritual specialists working for the Santal. Early on, Hadders states: “[The Jadopatias] eagerly await the news of any death that may have occurred in a Santal household . . . [and later] visit that house and perform a mortuary ritual known as *cokhodan*. One of the central events of this ritual performance is the bestowal of eyesight to a pictorial representation of the deceased person” (p. 92). The practitioner is rewarded accordingly.

As the chapter unfolds, the reader comes to realize that this simple introduction is meant by Hadders as a kind of warning: don’t take this seemingly parasitic relationship merely at face value. In fact, class and caste in India have enabled complex ethnic/cultural relationships to evolve which benefit both parties. The

lower-ranking Jadopatias are not only tolerated but welcomed by the higher-ranking Santal. Through the *cokhodan* and related Hindu ceremonies, a quasi-Brahman ritual role has evolved for the former which benefits the latter. As with all of the book's authors, Hadders includes ethnographic accounts to illustrate his points. By the chapter's end we realize that the Jadopatias are neither parasitic charlatans nor benevolent priests, but rather, caste-bound people who have creatively evolved useful roles which maximize their interactions with others.

Harald Tambs-Lyche's chapter is entitled "Townsmen, Tenants and Tribes: War, Wildness and Wilderness in the Traditional Politics of Western India." For me this contribution was the most provocative of the entire book. Although the title sounds like an alliterative mouthful, it nonetheless is intended to conjure images of the complexities of developing tribal life in and around the Rajput kingdoms which evolved from the 13th through 18th centuries A.D. My own work with systems analysis has increasingly taken me into core-periphery-semiperiphery interpretations; thus, I was particularly pleased that Tambs-Lyche has taken much the same approach as he attempts to discern "wildness" within a tribal context. He appropriately warns about the danger of using the term "tribe" too simplistically: "[While there are many, tribes] do not stand out as a separate kind of community." Wildness is one barometer of their interactional style, in some cases, as at the "fringes" of the Gujarat sultanate, where peripheral groups could be described as pirates. Over the course of a millennium, a kind of clan – tribe – caste amalgam (my descriptor) evolved, itself interactive with and contributing to Rajput state formation.

The chapter is conceptually integrated; it certainly "hangs together," yet it was frustrating in the central sections as I attempted to gain a sense of consistency in the author's use of the terms "state," "kingdom," "chiefdom," "tribe," and "clan," all used within a few pages. Adding further frustration was his use of "tradition," "sultanate," "fief," and "caste." Virtually every group-specific term known to cultural anthropologists, except "band," is utilized. It would have been helpful if Tambs-Lyche had set out more clearly the following dichotomies, as imperfect as they might be: Tribe – caste, civilized – wild, center – periphery. It helps to learn that he sees his analysis as targeted primarily to "the periphery's periphery." I would agree. It also helps to appreciate that his rich ethnographic insights are in no way stereotypical to

any one discipline, be it anthropology, sociology, or history. The interpretations are extremely dynamic.

Lawrence Van Horn's contribution to Section II of the book is entitled "The Group Ethic versus Individualism among North American Micmacs." While not as explicit as that of Tambs-Lyche, Van Horn also employs a kind of systems-analytic framework as he adroitly discusses the Micmac of northeastern North America. Using materials gathered from the time of his doctoral fieldwork to the present, a span of nearly 30 years, his goal is to present the strategies and capabilities of a tribal people who are successfully adapting to the increasingly complex, industrialized society which spans the U.S.-Canadian border. Using both socioeconomic and socio-cultural examples he focuses on the interplay of cooperation and individualism in the context of an open system. We learn that many contemporary Micmac people operate in a kind of "international interactional setting" as commuters, whereas others operate in a kind of "local interactional setting" as laborers and micro-entrepreneurs (my descriptor). I would not have been able to appreciate this as fully as necessary had I not recently visited Maine, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, where most of them live.

For analytic purposes Van Horn uses the term "chief" to describe the head of a historic Micmac band. The role and status of the chief are of particular interest to him. Once an ascribed and now achieved/elected position within still-existing bands, the chief maintains a key leadership role. Yet, as this role plays out, the leader does not stand out. In their introductory chapter in which the editors summarize each of the book's 17 chapters, it is stated perfectly: "Van Horn describes egalitarian values which in fact imply the idea of *noblesse oblige* for the leaders: a man of influence makes it 'a point of honor to be always the worst dressed of his people' (p. 25). The author himself states: "The importance of not being perceived as 'too proud' is a concomitant and corollary of Micmac egalitarianism" (p. 344). Therefore, it is through this lens that we come to appreciate the tension between individualism – as enhanced by interactions with Anglo-dominated society – and the group ethic – as enhanced by ongoing socioeconomic and socio-cultural cooperative activities linked to more traditional Native American strategies. Van Horn's thoughtful interpretation of Micmac education is particularly helpful in understanding this.

The fourth chapter that I have chosen to feature (also from Section II) is that by Peter Suzuki: "Law and Disorder on the Winnebago and Omaha Reservations of Nebraska." A well-known ethnographer with a penchant for legal analyses, Suzuki builds his contribution around a court case involving a crime that occurred on the Winnebago Reservation. Featured is a sexual encounter with an underage Winnebago girl as perpetrated by a 19-year-old member of the Blackfeet Tribe named Robert Weaselhead, who was living on the Winnebago Reservation at the time. As the case unfolded it was learned that the defendant had been involved in other acts that also were prosecutorial. He entered into a plea agreement with the Winnebago Tribal Court that dismissed these other acts, but which followed by his being sentenced to jail for the sexual offense. Yet a federal court also became involved, bringing up the question of double jeopardy and sovereign jurisdiction.

Suzuki also discusses other tribal cases, including some impacting the Omaha Reservation, as he successfully illustrates the jurisdictional complexities facing Native Americans charged with major and minor crimes. While reading his chapter, I was reminded of my many conversations with Pearl Casias, a former member of the Southern Ute Tribal Court. She described how important tribal sovereignty is, yet how crucial the maintenance of good relationships with the federal legal system also is. (As an aside, in one conversation she had noted that formal legal training is not required for those who serve in certain tribal judicial capacities.) Returning to Suzuki, he does a good job of presenting the Weaselhead case *per se*, but is even more adept at describing the development of the tribal court system within the context of the U.S. legal system. The issue of double jeopardy – as in cases like Weaselhead's cross-jurisdictional lines – prove illustrative of the challenges facing tribal attorneys and defendants.

As I noted earlier, I chose to feature chapters which best illustrate the diversity of material presented in this book. Inevitably, there is a bit of unevenness in the 17 chapters; writing and interpretive style varies from the overly descriptive (Margaret Trawick, on the songs of "assimilated" tribes within Tamil Nadu) to the overly analytic (Robert Gregory, on quasi-tribalism in Appalachia). Yet taken in its entirety, *Concept of Tribal Society* offers a useful panoply of interpretive options on what the late Morton Fried called "the

notion of tribe." Without exception, the chapters are well-researched, rich in detail, and – most importantly – fascinating reading for the cultural anthropologist.

Notes

1. New Delhi, India: Concept Publishing Company, 2002. 424 pages: introduction, two sections, seventeen chapters, bibliography, index, notes on contributors. Cloth, \$38.00 U.S.

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