

# Rethinking community in upland, 'indigenous' South Asia

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Jiji M. Sangma with the author. Credit: Henysing A. Sangma, 2014. (photograph from: "Reworking Culture: Relatedness, Rites, and Resources in Garo Hills, North-East India")

Indigenous communities are often perceived as intrinsically cohesive, cherishing shared values, and united by common interests. The "tribes" of South Asia are no exception. Stereotypical and outdated characterizations such as these cannot do justice to the economic, religious and generational differentiation that exist among people who see themselves as a part of such groups. Erik de Maaker wrote a monograph on how Garo, an indigenous community of the extended eastern Himalayas, experience and negotiate such disparities. The book shows how relatedness is reinterpreted as religious practices change, and communally held land ends up being privately controlled. Erik de Maaker answers six questions about the book, and his relation to the people it focuses on.

## **What is the book about?**

The book takes readers into the everyday lives of hill farmers, analyzing how an increasingly close relation to markets and state funded schemes to improve rural livelihoods links to the reinterpretation of (religious) traditions. An important part of the ethnography focuses on how people participate in funerals. Quite apart from their religious implications, these set the stage for the continuation of marriages, beyond the death of spouses. Cultural practices such as these are continuously subject to reinterpretation, transforming what relatedness entails in the present.

## **What does 'Reworking Culture' mean?**

The book focuses on what people locally consider culture. Having a well defined culture is in the Indian context mandatory for communities to be recognized as "tribe," and to qualify for preferential discrimination. But in the everyday cultural normativity is also essential to express what is considered appropriate behavior. The title of the book refers to the interplay between these different levels of the interpretation of culture.

## **You dedicated the book to Jiji, why?**

"Reworking Culture" is based on long-term ethnographic engagement. In the initial stages of my fieldwork Jiji adopted me into her family. My friendship with her, an elderly woman, reflects in many of the stories included in the book. These biographical accounts highlight the challenges her family faced with respect to their responsibility for their ancestral land, their ability to fulfill religious obligations, including—sadly—the impact which Jiji's eventual passing had on them.

## **Who should read the book?**

The book is located in the anthropology of South Asia, but I really hope it will also reach people who are outside academia. Many people, both in South Asia as well as abroad, have a rather one dimensional, overtly romantic understanding of what constitutes an "indigenous people." Such portrayals foreground an intrinsic relationship to the environment, while suggesting that membership of such groups depends on primordial ties. "Reworking Culture" goes against such a-historical depictions, in that it shows that people do not value cultural traditions because these derive from a timeless past, but because these can positively contribute to their lives in the present. The book wants to de-essentialize the reader's framing of indigeneity and show that in everyday life tradition and modernity are closely intertwined.

## **How has your engagement with the thematic of the book changed over time?**

When I first met the hill farmers who the book focuses on, I became painfully aware of the disparities existing within the ethnic community they belonged to. This related to class, but religious identification played an important role as well. For me, as an outsider, it appeared easier to

cross some of these divides than it was for people locally. But as a European, I have also felt quite uncomfortable in being cast a representative of the kind of modernity that rendered Garo villagers, from the perspective of the Garo middle class, remnants of a past. Over time, as I learned more about the connections people maintained across classes, I became aware that cultural conventions are often adapted in such a way that they can bridge such divides. Having said that, I continue to be convinced that the growing dependence on markets in places such as the extended eastern Himalayas results in an increase of social and economic inequality.

## **What is your next project?**

I continue to be appalled by the enormous inequalities that characterize today's globalized world, and how these are rendered acceptable in cultural terms. In my current research I explore how people engage with, or ignore, such differences. Here notions such as heritage, place making, and the ontological perspectives which inform these are essential. I continue to be fascinated what people consider [culture](#), the normativities this encompasses, how they maintain relationships with others, as well as how they locate themselves in the larger world.

"Reworking Culture" is available via the [publisher's website](#).

Provided by Leiden University

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