Ecological Change and Adaptation Among the Gurungs of the Nepal Himalaya

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Shepherding among the highland Gurungs of Nepal is examined in its historical and contemporary settings. Change from pastoral nomadism augmented by hunting, swidden agriculture, and trade to sedentary rice agriculture augmented by transhumance and migrant labor (soldiery) is considered in terms of adaptive response to change in cultural and physical environments. A brief examination of adaptive strategies in one village is presented to highlight the interplay of ecological, economic, and social variables. Data from Gurungs studies are compared with recent Magar village studies in the Himalaya by John Hitchcock. Throughout the article, a methodological stance is pursued by which many dynamic adaptations, such as those of the Gurungs, can be understood by comparing past and present ecological-cultural processes.

KEY WORDS: mountain ecosystems; pastoral nomadism; montane agriculture and trade; Nepal Himalayas.

INTRODUCTION

The ecological study of highland populations of Nepal in terms of their unique cultural adaptations to a multizoned Himalayan environment is in its infancy. This article is an introductory attempt to characterize certain ecological-cultural adaptations of highland, or lekhabi, Gurungs who dwell in the northern

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hills of Lamjung District in west-central Nepal. The discussion will center on:

1. Gurung ethnohistory, to put into perspective what is known and speculated about early high-altitude ecological adaptations and relatively recent shifts to lower-altitude ecological zones; (2) contemporary Gurung village life, to describe a typical highland village; and (3) a contemporary Gurung village’s cultural adaptations and economic strategies, to analyze and compare them with those of two distinct Magar tribal villages of the Himalaya described by Hitchcock (1973).

There are two further underlying questions: What strategic adaptations occur in the shaping of cultural and social institutions in moderately high-altitude Himalayan villages that exploit several ecological niches? And what strategies are conspicuously absent or attenuated because of the unique nature of adaptations in these villages? The Gurung village of Ghaisu will be described in light of these questions.

The data on the Gurungs reveal a unique adaptation to differing environmental conditions. Early Gurung culture and adaptation of several centuries ago were based on alpine, subalpine, and high cool temperate forest resources exploited by means of transhumance, hunting, gathering, swidden agriculture, and trans-Himalayan trade. Contemporary Gurung economy and exploitation, on the other hand, are based primarily on temperate and subtropical sedentary field agriculture in which irrigated rice farming predominates. A few Gurungs living in the highest and most northerly villages still maintain vestiges of their earlier forest and alpine exploitation, and it is these Gurungs with which this article will be most concerned (see also Messerschmidt, 1974a,b, 1976).

GURUNG ETHNOHISTORY

The earliest descriptions of the Gurungs are found in the published writings of Francis Buchanan (1819) and in the unpublished mid-nineteenth century notes of Brian H. Hodgson (n.d.). Both of these writers observed that the Gurungs were based on alpine, subalpine, and high cool temperate forest resources exploited by means of transhumance, hunting, gathering, swidden agriculture, and trans-Himalayan trade. Contemporary Gurung economy and exploitation, on the other hand, are based primarily on temperate and subtropical sedentary field agriculture in which irrigated rice farming predominates. A few Gurungs living in the highest and most northerly villages still maintain vestiges of their earlier forest and alpine exploitation, and it is these Gurungs with which this article will be most concerned (see also Messerschmidt, 1974a,b, 1976).