

# In Their Own Words

*Riddum* is the Kulunge term the story of the beginning of the cosmos and the ethnogenesis of the indigenous peoples of the world

BY MARK TURIN

**M**artino Nicoletti, formerly professor of Visual Anthropology and the History of Religions at the University of Perugia in Italy, is presently the director of the anthropological section of an Italian research project. He has been working in the Himalaya for over a decade, and English translations of two of his books have recently been published by Vajra Publications. “*Riddum: The Voice of the Ancestors*” is a charming and fascinating little book, which serves as a perfect counterpoint to “*Shamanic Solitudes*,” a more traditional academic monograph on ecstasy, madness and spirit possession among the Kulunge Rai of eastern Nepal.

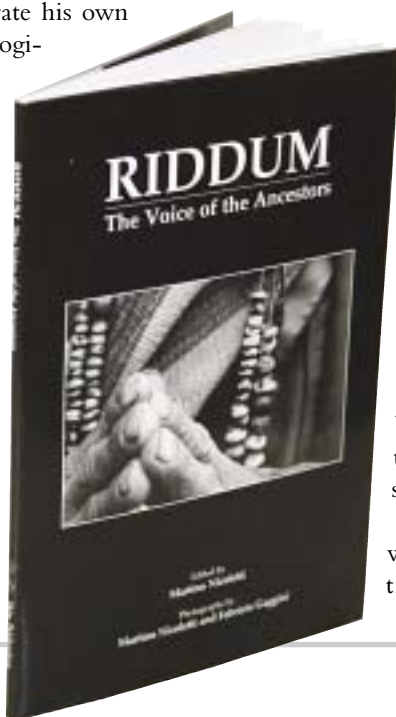
*Riddum* is the Kulunge term for what many of the Rai and Kiranti peoples refer to as *mundum*, the story of the beginning of the cosmos and the ethnogenesis of the indigenous peoples of the world. In this short book, Nicoletti chooses to let an aged shaman, Sancha Prasad Rai, who passed away in 1999 and to whom the book is dedicated, narrate his own story. Nicoletti’s anthropological and analytical involvement is limited to a modest three-page Foreword and what he terms “Card on Kulunge Rai,” which comes at the end and situates the ethnic group in the context of neighboring Himalayan peoples. This

**Riddum: The Voice of the Ancestors**

By Martino Nicoletti, with photographs by Martino Nicoletti and Fabrizio Gaggini  
Vajra Publications (2004)

**PAGES:** 63

**PRICE:** Rs. 300



structure works well, since the narration of the story is as engaging as its contents are intriguing, and we learn that the *riddum* is a “teaching tool: it explains the origin of things and their interconnections, bringing them closer and making them more comprehensible” (page 10).

The presentation of the narration of the origin tale itself deserves special mention. Nicoletti has opted for a stylized and graphically-rich format with large print on the right hand side of the page and thought-provoking black and white photographic reproductions on the left. Since the allusions are subtle and nuanced, only half way through reading

the text did I begin to find linkages between the content of the *riddum* and the associated images. I then turned back to the beginning and re-read the text with a greater focus on the photos and was struck by how carefully they had been chosen.

The text reads well, although the translation is at



times a little over-wrought and archaic. This may be put down to the fact that the text has been translated out of the Kulunge ritual language into Italian and then into English. The usage of terms such as “the gelid waters of the river” (page 33) and “eventide” (page 34) adds a level of lexical complexity that I doubt the shaman had intended.

In common with the cosmologies of other Himalayan peoples, the Kulunge *riddum* is full of sex, incest, death and other archetypal themes. The interactions between the animate world (insects, birds and humans) and the inanimate world (pebbles and the wind) make for an absorbing tale that takes the reader from the origin of the world to the present moment. “Thus it was,” Sancha Prasad tells us, “without interruption, right from the beginning” (page 55). **N** s

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