

BOOK REVIEW

by MARK TURIN

Lo and behold



The kingdom of Mustang, bordering Tibet to the north and Thak Khola to the south, has long been an object of fascination to foreign scholars of the Himalaya. Although three generations of Western and Japanese travellers and professors have cut their teeth on the cultures, languages, geology and archaeology of Mustang, few Nepalis have conducted substantial research projects in the region.

Dr Ramesh Kumar Dhungel, a cultural historian at the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) of Tribhuban University, is a notable exception. He is one of a handful of Nepali academics with professional interest in the culture and history of the high Himalaya. As Dhungel pointed out at the launch of *The Kingdom of Lo (Mustang): A Historical Study*, working in Mustang required him to keep an open mind regarding local observances. It is a tribute to Dhungel's obvious good cheer and unjudgemental approach to scholarship that the Crown Prince of Mustang, Gyalchung Jigme SP Bista, privately published the present monograph to raise money for the restoration of Mustang's ancient gompas.

Dhungel's early research in Mustang was conducted between 1982-83, so this monograph can truly be said to have had a long gestation period. Largely based on genealogical documents, the book is a historical study of the kingdom from the 7th century to about 1950. It charts both the emergence of a polity in 1440 (which came to be called Lo/Mustang) and how "key geographical, cultural and political realities had earlier shaped its regional identity". On account of both its geographical location on the trans-Himalayan trade route and the vibrancy of the local Buddhist culture, Mustang retained considerable political autonomy until its incorporation into Nepal in 1789, to which it paid tribute as a dependent until 1961, when this status was rescinded by the Dependent Principalities Act. The title of *raja*, together with a selection of traditional rights, allowances and honorary positions are still retained to this day. Including the present king of Mustang, the kingdom has been ruled continuously by 21 generations of *rajas* heralding from the same dynasty.

The book is divided into five chapters with a physical and cultural overview to the region, the background to the emergence of Lo/

A welcome antidote to the trend of condescending Nepali research on Mustang.

analysis of genealogical, chronological and bibliographical documents. Many of these texts, originating in Tibetan, Nepali or older variations, make for fascinating reading. Other disciplines, however, are a little beyond Dhungel's remit and he is misinformed when he writes: "no detailed study on the languages and cultures of the entire Lo/Mustang region (both upper and lower) has been attempted". There have been scores of detailed linguistic and ethnographic studies of the area since he conducted his research in the 1980s.

Dhungel pulls no punches, and is as critical of other scholars as he is supportive of their achievements. In his chronology of Mustang-ologists and the associated 30-page bibliography, however, there are some glaring omissions, most notably the many published works by Charles Ramble and Dieter Schuh. Likewise, while foreign scholars are lambasted for not conducting grassroots fieldwork, there is little recognition by Dhungel of the difficulty of obtaining permits for such empirical research. Given that Nepalis can travel to Mustang freely, Dhungel could have perhaps recommended that more Tribhuban University scholars focus their research interests on this important area of Nepal.

The appendices include a fascinating discussion on the etymology of Mustang place names, 26 historical Nepali documents and 24 Tibetan ones, both reproduced in the original scripts. Readers casually interested in the history of Mustang should be forewarned: this is a serious, scholarly historical work, requiring some previous exposure to Tibetan historiography and an interest in genealogy and dates. The facts come alive through the 30 pages of well-reproduced colour plates, many of them photographs by the professional photographer Macduff Everton, while others depict a young Dhungel in various locations throughout Mustang.

The author cites the writer Victor Kiernan who has suggested that colonial scholars, in particular the British, were "bound to see the local history from a standpoint of their own". Such orientalist perspectives are sadly still quite widespread, particularly among socially-dominant and high caste Nepali scholars whose condescending research writings on Nepal's minority ethnic and linguistic communities leave much to be desired. Dr Dhungel's book, on the other hand, is a welcome antidote to this depressing trend, since his respect for and appreciation of the people of Mustang and their history pervades every page of his impressive monograph.

The Kingdom of Lo (Mustang): A Historical Study Ramesh K Dhungel
Jigme SP Bista for Tashi Gephel Foundation, Nepal, 2002
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375 mouths and handfuls of raw rice



This fortnightly column continues with Man Bahadur Rai's narration of fighting the Japanese in Burma during World War II. After the rout at the Satang River, most of the British leave by plane and tell the Gurkhas and other Indian regiments to get to Calcutta on foot. The men begin a long, bloody march till they reach the Irrawady. With no other option, they hijack a steamer and cross the mighty river. Rai's story appears in *Lahurey ko Katha*, a collection of memoirs based on oral testimonies of 13 retired Gurkha soldiers, all but one above 75 years. It has been translated from Nepali by Deb Bahadur Thapa for *Nepali Times*.

Nothing of consequence happened on the way. We disembarked at Katha. We didn't pay the steamer because we had no money. As we marched ahead we saw somebody had burned bundles of Burmese currency notes. Their money looked like ours except for a little more red. When we reached Katha, we saw a heap of new rifles and rations with no signs of any troops. Only a number of Burmese families with their children were there. The men had gone to war. The British had left them there with future plans to shift them to Machina, but then fled without making proper arrangements. Only six or seven family members were from our regiment and more than 1,500 were families of soldiers from other regiments.

They implored us to take them with us. We had just escaped death and chances were slim that we'd let them tag along. We told them that they could not keep pace with us. The babies had to be carried and they would need food and clothing. We marched on. They followed. The bombardment started three or four miles out of camp. Since only women and children were in the column, they must have been torn to shreds.

It was an exhausting march to Thavettu. There was a river, a pier and boats. The Burmese boatman did not bring in the boat even though we kept hollering. I asked the Bren gun operator to fire a few volleys, which he did. After that we asked him in Burmese whether or not he would bring the boat to our side of the river, if not we would set his

entire village on fire. To substantiate our threat we aimed the tracer towards the sky and produced an enormous ball of fire. That display of firepower killed three people, and made him bring the boats. We joined four boats together with bamboo to make a barge and crossed the river. The moment we reached the other side, we received word that the Japanese were only two miles away. To prevent the Japanese from using the boat we hacked it with *khukuris* and set the pieces adrift on the current. We came upon a village and ordered the locals to bring rice and chicken. We were dead tired but had to take care of ourselves. Eating rice and chicken curry, it felt like Dasai.

We left very early the next morning, each of us carried about 2kg of rice in our bags. We walked till 10 in the morning and then entered the forest. We were in a fix about how to cook our food since we had no pots. Each of us made something like rice pudding in the mess tin, ate and then off we went. We had gone about six or

seven miles from the place where we ate our meager meal when we came upon heaps of rations dumped by Americans in the sal forest, left for retreating troops. They brought food in fighter planes and dropped it along with the troops. Rice, dal, sugar and tinned meat were stored in thick layers of sal leaves. They also left instructions for the approaching troops to eat properly and carry food with them. They had even thoughtfully left a big pot behind for cooking.

The following day, we agreed among ourselves that we'd carry only rice and salt, till we saw the new uniforms. We decided to put those on and leave the rest behind but a few opted to carry big bundles of clothes. How far could they carry that heavy load in the heat of April? There was no rain and the atmosphere was dry. We marched on and reached the foothills of the Naga range the following day. We had to protect ourselves if we encountered the enemy and so gave priority to ammunition over rations. We had less than a kilogram of rice left per person. We had to trudge nearly a week

to reach the top and descend down the other side. We ran out of food in the middle of the ascent. There were 30-32 British servicemen walking along with us. Sometimes they went ahead of us and sometimes we overtook them. They were weak. They would climb and as soon as they saw a pond, they would undress and swim around like water buffaloes. They contracted cholera, diarrhoea and began vomiting. They even smelled bad. But they were determined and continued walking with the help of sticks for three days. Later, we found them dead on the way. We decided that since the British soldiers had cholera and since it is a contagious disease, it was prudent to keep a safe distance from where they stayed.

When we reached the summit of the Naga hills, there was nothing to eat. There were 375 of us and a handful of raw rice. The hunger was unbearable. These days the Naga hill people will talk to strangers, but in those days as soon as they saw us they muttered incomprehensible words and disappeared. ♦

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