

June 2017

Review of *Signing and Belonging in Nepal* by Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway

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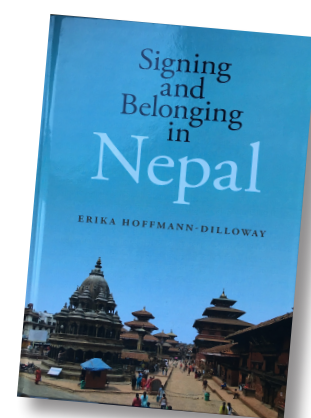
Hofer, Theresia (2017) "Review of *Signing and Belonging in Nepal* by Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 37 : No. 1 , Article 27.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss1/27>



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Signing and Belonging in Nepal.

Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway.

Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2016. 135 pages. ISBN 9781563686641.

Reviewed by Theresia Hofer

This book offers the first full-length ethnography of Deaf people and their varied communication practices in Nepal. Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway has engaged with Deaf people and studied Nepali Sign Language (NSL) since 1997, when she came to the country through a study abroad program. Based on long-established friendships and work with members of the National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NFDN), she tells a fascinating story of how Deaf activists countered their plight of being seen as karmically

and ritually polluted and polluting. They did so by aligning themselves with the ethno-linguistic frameworks newly emergent across the country during Nepal's "People's War," in which Maoist-allied forces aimed to turn the Hindu-led monarchy into a less hierarchically-governed, multi-ethnic republic. And yet, particularly in the urban centers that remained largely controlled by the Nepalese army, efforts were at the same time made to link lexical items of NSL to symbols of high-caste Hindu cultural practices.

For instance, the correct, "standard" NSL sign for "mother" was socially constructed to be a bent index finger at the side of the nose followed by the finger being laid near the side of the mouth. It was also depicted in NSL dictionaries, whose artists and compilers understood the sign as pointing to a nose-ring (or stud), and thereby indexing in these drawings social groups in which women wore this kind of jewelry, in particular caste Hindus. Anyone familiar with the cultural diversity of Nepal will, however, know that women in other social groups, such as the Newars and Sherpas, tend to not wear such jewelry (or, for that matter, the bright red color in the clothing depicted in some of the dictionaries). A common alternative sign for "mother" in the homes of Deaf people was pointing to the breast, which those working for the cause of socially elevating Deaf

people rejected and even discouraged the use of. The social mediation and promotion of such indexical notions of particular signs, and indeed the many encounters drawn on in the book, took place during the tumultuous decade from the first agitation by the Maoist People's Liberation Army in 1996 to the signing of the Maoist and Seven Party Alliance peace accord in 2006.

The main thesis of the book is that in this period, a new Deaf *jat*, or "kind," as well as novel and related Deaf socialities could be imagined in radically fresh ways, diverging from deaf Nepalis' previously regarded status as often low, polluted, and polluting. In the three main ethnographic chapters and Hoffmann-Dilloway's expertly chosen vignettes, we see these processes of imagination and realization at work. Firstly, they are shown in the lives, work, and language practices of NSL users in urban centers (Chapter Three). Thereafter, Hoffmann-Dilloway explores these processes among those who rely to various extents on "homesigns" (i.e. signs created in the home between deaf and hearing family members) and are only able to partially draw on NSL (Chapter Four). And finally, the encounters of hearing people with Deaf waiting staff at the Bakery Café chain in Kathmandu are examined (Chapter Five), where instead of perceiving the Deaf employees as polluting the food they serve, customers (and

the hearing owner) can embody *bikas*, "development," and espouse "disability rights."

The great strength of the book lies in the author's lucid interweaving of linguistic analysis of the indexical connotations of Deaf Nepalis' communicative practices with the daily manifestations of language ideologies, including but not limited to the "linguistic monolith" (Irvine, Judith and Susan Gal. 2000. "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation." In *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*, edited by Paul Kroskrity, 35-84. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press) and "personalism" (Hill, Jane. 2008. *The Everyday Language of White Racism*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell). While Hoffmann-Dilloway offers more detailed analysis pertaining to these and other debates in linguistic and linguistic anthropology journals, the current book provides a great way in for students and also non-specialists.

The Introduction and Chapter Three focus on what NSL as a "mother tongue" for Deaf Nepalis may mean and are a must for any anthropologist of Nepal. They give a valuable extension of long-standing anthropological debates on "ethnicity" and language in Nepal to the kinds of socialities emerging from new and mainly visual modes of communication. The discussion of how homesigners can be included and excluded through their respective mirroring or copying

The author thus drives home a key contribution of linguistic anthropology: namely, the ever-shifting nature and boundaries of “languages” and their co-production with people within wider social and political formations.

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of NSL in Chapter Four makes an important contribution to the study of gesture and homesign systems. It also sheds new light on debates regarding second sign language acquisition in relation to the so-called ‘critical window’ of language development in (deaf) children. Taken altogether, this book succeeds well in addressing its main audiences of students and scholars of linguistic anthropology, Nepal anthropology, and international sign language and Deaf Studies.

While the author is meticulous about placing her encounters in the historical period of the “People’s War,” the concluding Chapter Six considers post-2006 developments. Alongside changes to the political structure in Nepal since then have come transformations in local language ideologies and practices. For instance, the diverse signs for “mother” mentioned earlier (and other concepts) were again permissible, widespread even, now sometimes perceived to be “ethnic signs.” The author thus drives home a key contribution of linguistic anthropology: namely, the ever-shifting nature and boundaries of “languages” and their co-production with people within wider social and political formations.

A new challenge for a Deaf *jat* emergent during the author’s most recent fieldwork was the move away from language to territory as a key issue in the post-2006 “classificatory

moment” for ethnic and social groups in Nepal (cf. Shneiderman, Sara. 2013. “Developing a Culture of Marginality: Nepal’s Current Classificatory Moment.” *Focal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 65: 42-55). And yet, a new “territory” in the “Deaf World” (Lane, Harlan. 2005. “Ethnicity, Ethics, and the Deaf-World.” *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 10(3): 291-310) might be in formation, at least for urban Deaf Nepalis, through Deaf-led international tourism and trekking operations as well as, hopefully, through Deaf Nepalis’ own increased mobility.

I recommend this book very highly, both to readers of *HIMALAYA* and to colleagues and friends in the field of Nepal and South Asian studies. Enjoyable on every page, I was especially gripped by the ethnography and in-depth linguistic analysis, which are beautifully married in this slim, readable gem of a text. Gallaudet University Press published this book and is the home press of Gallaudet University, the American Sign Language-medium University for the Deaf in Washington DC, founded in 1864. This choice of publisher, together with Hoffmann-Dilloway’s scholarly efforts, in my mind prompt us all to appreciate the infinite strength, beauty, and creativity of the world’s many, as yet largely unknown, sign languages.

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Fellow at the University of Bristol as well as a research associate at the University of Oxford’s Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, UK. She has written an ethnography and various articles about Tibetan medical practitioners and memories of Communist reforms in the Tibet Autonomous Region, China, and curated Bodies in Balance at the Rubin Museum in New York in 2014. She has since moved into studying the newly emerging Tibetan Sign Language in Lhasa and associated language ideologies and novel social formations.