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Signing and Belonging in Nepal, by Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway
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ONE OF THE newest offerings by Gallaudet University Press is *Signing and Belonging in Nepal*, a slim volume by Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway, a hearing linguistic anthropologist. This ethnography is the latest contribution to a growing body of work in the anthropology of deaf groups in the Global South. Currently the chair of the Department of Anthropology at Oberlin College, Hoffmann-Dilloway conducted most of her fieldwork as a graduate student in Nepal between 2001 and 2008. This volume is based primarily on the data Hoffmann-Dilloway collected during this period and, as such, should be understood as a partial glimpse into the lives of deaf people in Nepal during this time. Divided into six chapters and an afterword, this book is presented as an introductory volume for undergraduates.

In the introductory chapter, Hoffmann-Dilloway lays out her arguments and the theoretical framework for her analysis. She introduces her approach to “language” and provides an overview of specific concepts from linguistic anthropology. The chapter also presents the arguments that she takes up throughout the book and contextualizes Nepal, as well as her methodology and positionality. Chapter 2 provides the historical and social context for the underpinnings of Hoffmann-Dilloway’s arguments, such as Nepali conceptualizations of personhood, social categories, and national context. In chapter 3, Hoffmann-Dilloway argues that Nepali associations of deaf people linked a standardized Nepali Sign Language and a Deaf identity with practices and symbols of high-caste Hinduism connoting good karma

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and purity in order to combat the understanding of deafness as a stigma. Chapter 4 is a continuation of the author's discussion of Nepal's deaf community and some of its understandings of language, such as situating the origins of Nepali Sign Language in the visual-gestural interactions between the first few cohorts of deaf students at the first formal school for deaf students in the country, framing NSL as having emerged "naturally." Chapter 5 is a discussion of how the Nepali deaf associations deploy concepts of "modernity" and "development" to contest historical associations between deaf people and ritual pollution and to highlight the role of the Bakery Café, a restaurant chain in Nepal, which employs deaf people in that effort. With data from her trip to the country in 2015, Hoffmann-Dilloway concludes the book with a description of being deaf in a "new Nepal."

Hoffmann-Dilloway's research took place within the specific historical and social context of Nepal as experienced by an anthropologist and her interlocutors during a period of increased political mobilization by many of Nepal's ethnolinguistic groups (1997–2006). The author argues that, during this period, deaf people in Nepal reterritorialized the concept of deaf people as a linguistic minority for their political project. In the first chapter, Hoffmann-Dilloway introduces the d/D framework, arguing that deaf people in Nepal adopted a Deaf ethnolinguistic identity, a view that advanced in Nepal as a result of relationships between the Nepali association of Deaf persons and a range of international organizations of deaf people, in order to advance their political goals.

The author uses capitalized "Deaf" throughout the book, which I found interesting, especially given recent work in the anthropology of deaf people that contests the wholesale application of an identity-based framework to theorize how deaf people in diverse (and understudied) contexts understand themselves. Hoffmann-Dilloway immediately flags her use of the d/D convention in one of the first few paragraphs of this book, noting that she is following "the common Deaf Studies convention of writing the English word 'deaf' in lowercase to indicate the inability to hear, 'Deaf,' written with a capital D, to indicate identification as a member of a signing community, and using the mixed case, d/Deaf to refer to groups or situations in which both biological and cultural framings of d/Deafness are relevant" (2).

She ends this footnote with a statement that her use of this convention should not be taken to mean that she views this distinction “as relevant in the same ways across social contexts” (3).

I appreciate Hoffmann-Dilloway’s engagement with this important topic but wonder whether this discussion could possibly have warranted a more in-depth treatment within the text itself instead of in a footnote, especially because the problematic application of the d/Deaf identity framework is so widespread in the literature. It would have been more theoretically engaging and perhaps a more accurate representation of local frameworks if Hoffmann-Dilloway had used Nepali-language terms (e.g., *lato* and *bahira*) throughout the text. It would also have been helpful to see a discussion on whether deaf people in Nepal completely accepted the d/D framework or just selected aspects of it for certain political projects.

The author closely examines the stigmas connected to being deaf in Nepal, and there is an especially good description of the relationship between deafness and social status. This helps the reader to better understand some social attitudes toward deaf people in Nepal, but I would like to have seen more in-depth discussion of both the urban/rural and the public/private dichotomy, especially in Hoffmann-Dilloway’s discussion of “public displays of Deafness” (35).

Hoffmann-Dilloway devotes a great deal of space to an analysis of karma and the ritual pollution of deaf people. She discusses tensions between ideas of “modernity” and development as opposed to the “backward” belief in karma. In some of the nonacademic literature on deaf people and people with disabilities in Buddhist societies, social beliefs about karma play an important role in shaping social attitudes toward deaf people; however, in some contexts, such as the Cambodian context where I work, understandings of disability are not necessarily always connected to a belief in *kamma* (“karma” in Cambodia). Some authors who write about people with disabilities in Cambodia have gone so far as to say that it would be overly reductive to attribute uniform beliefs about disability and deafness to all members of a given social group (e.g., “Cambodians,” “Nepalis”). It is necessary to understand social attitudes toward people with disabilities and deaf people, but it is also important to note that reducing Nepali explanatory models to notions of karma and ritual pollution could

perhaps be a simplification of the eclectic and changing rationales of disability causation maintained by people with different backgrounds in various contexts (e.g., rural and urban, deaf and hearing).

Hoffmann-Dilloway's discussion throughout the book includes several humorous descriptions of her missteps as she navigated a new culture and tried to understand a worldview different from her own, an experience shared by many anthropologists newly arrived in the field. This adds a layer of relatability and makes this book even more accessible to the introductory reader.

In all, Hoffmann-Dilloway effectively outlines her arguments and nicely introduces theories of language and social categories for the introductory reader. This is a welcome addition to the anthropology of deaf people, especially those who live in the Global South. I look forward to seeing more work like this contribution to Deaf studies and anthropology.