HIMALAYA

Research Article

The Fate of a Text: András Höfer's Study of the Muluki Ain and the Limitations of South Asian Area Studies

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2023.7426

Abstract

The ethnography of Nepal has much to contribute to discussions concerning the relationship of caste systems to the state and to kingship, but this material is almost entirely absent from the discussion as it has taken place in Indian ethnography. Yet the Nepal material — in particular the legal code known as the Muluki Ain of 1854 — not only throws light on dominant caste conceptions of the relations among castes and their relations to the state or to kingship, but also on the supposed distinction between caste and tribe, which appears to have had as little utility in nineteenth century Nepal as it did elsewhere on the sub-continent. This paper argues that although the study of the British Empire in India has been replaced by the area concept of South Asia, in the intellectual practice of American anthropologists (and perhaps other scholars) working in India, the modern Indian state is treated in effect as being synonymous with the concept of South Asia, and their scholarship shows little engagement with studies carried out in the other countries of the region. This approach is encouraged by the architecture of South Asian area studies, which is organized on the basis of national political boundaries.

Keywords

Area Studies; muluki ain; Himalayan scholarship; caste and state; citation practices

Recommended Citation

Guneratne, A. (2023). The Fate of a Text: András Höfer's Study of the Muluki Ain and the Limitations of South Asian Area Studies. *HIMALAYA* 42(1): 12-27.

Introduction

In 1978, the anthropologist James Fisher edited a significant book for Himalayanists, called *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface* (1978), in which he proposed treating the Himalaya as an interface between the great cultural traditions of South Asia and Central Asia. What he hoped to do, he said in his introduction, was to set our work as scholars of the Himalaya within a larger social and cultural framework, and thus help us steer clear of ethnographic provincialism. His book might be thought of as an early attempt to conceptualize the Himalaya as an area, an idea that has had other incarnations, as in Sara Shneiderman's application of Scott's "Zomia" concept (Scott 2009) to what she terms the "Himalayan Massif" (Shneiderman 2010). Fisher's book illustrated an approach to area studies that traces the flow of cultural traits as they move, mingle, and take on new shapes in a zone of contact between major cultural forms — in this case, Tibetan Buddhist cultural forms to the north, and from the west and south, those of Indic and Persian civilization, as well as the indigenous ways of being that are already in place. How these disparate cultural processes can be corralled within the rubric of area studies is a question I shall sidestep in this paper, except to point out that the patterns of settlement, social organization, industry, economy and so on are very different south of the Himalaya than they are to its north, but that in the Himalaya these different cultural forms meet and engage each other. Ethnographic provincialism, however, is still with us, an idea I propose to explore with reference to the relationship between Himalayan anthropology and the anthropology of India as it has been practiced in the United States.

This paper originated in my participation, many years ago, in a seminar, termed the Globalization Project, organized by Arjun Appadurai at the University of Chicago, where the concept of area studies was subjected to an extended critique (Appadurai et al. 1997). While the seminar concluded that "no serious engagement with the comparative study of global processes can avoid the specificities of place, time and cultural form," it also noted that "existing geographical approaches [...] frequently draw the wrong boundaries, ignore important interactions and are driven by obsolete assumptions about national interest, cultural coherence and global processes" (Appadurai et al 1997: 1). That seminar called for shifting our analytical gaze away from what Appadurai termed "trait" geographies to what he called "process" geographies, to the successful study of which the traditional area studies concept appeared to pose significant barriers.

The concept of an Indo-Tibetan interface as a zone where two trait geographies meet and mingle, and where cultural processes flow across boundaries of all kinds — cultural, political, geographical — represents a productive variation on the usual model of the "area". But I add a twist to Appadurai's argument: if process geographies are constrained by the boundaries laid down by area studies according to a Cold War logic, trait geographies, I argue, are similarly constrained by national boundaries. To put it another way, although scholars in the humanities and social sciences identify with particular areas as they have been defined in the area studies scheme that developed during the Cold War, the scope of their work tends to be defined by the national political boundary of the country they happen to be working in. As in every assertion of this sort, there are obviously exceptions; nevertheless, it is a pronounced tendency that can be crosschecked by referring to the citations in Google Scholar (which is the most comprehensive source of citation data available). This is not a matter of much concern for the study of China, where country and area are more or less synonymous, nor Africa, where both popular imagination in the United States and American scholarship converge (perhaps for different reasons) in their treatment of the continent as a singular entity, but it is salient in the study of South Asia, where cultural processes that

cross political boundaries — such as caste — are typically studied without reference to the forms those processes produce in other political jurisdictions. The problem is magnified in South Asia because of the vast size of one of its constituent countries, which has a population triple that of the rest of the region combined, making it easy to conflate the modern state called India with the area studies concept of South Asia.

The ethnographic provincialism that characterizes area studies — at least in its American manifestation — is illustrated by the fate of Himalayan scholarship. The Himalaya itself does not constitute an "area" in the formal architecture of area studies. How different parts of the Himalaya relate to area studies in the formal sense (as embodied, say, in the Association for Asian Studies' division of Asia into four regions), depends entirely on national boundaries. Kashmir, Garhwal and Kumaon (of which the latter two were once part of Nepal), are part of India and thus relevant to South Asian area studies; Yunnan, at the other end of the Himalayan massif is part of China and belongs in Chinese area studies. Tibetan scholarship can go either way; anthropologists in the United States who study Tibetan societies in Nepal or India tend to attend the South Asia conference at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and think of themselves more or less as South Asianists; those who study Tibetan culture in Tibet proper or in those Chinese provinces with substantial Tibetan populations, are seldom seen in Madison and have no necessary affinity with South Asianists. The focus of my paper, however, is the fate of scholarship on Nepal. Although Nepal is considered part of South Asia, scholarship on Nepal is seldom cited by American (and indeed, other) scholars working south of the border.

Some examples may serve to demonstrate this point. Between 1996, when the book was first published, and 2016, when I wrote the first version of this paper, there were 161 citations to David Holmberg's *Order in Paradox* (1989), of which only two were by Indianists, one of whom cited him in a work on the Indian Himalaya.[1] Of the rest, 77 percent were by Nepalists, and the remainder included several publications on shamanism (not focused regionally) and review articles. Rather than undertake the tedious labor of bringing these figures up to date, I examined citations to Holmberg between 2019 and 2023. His book was cited 51 times in that period, 40 of them in works on Nepal. There were three citations in works on Ladakh and tribal India. Of 120 citations to Kathryn March (2002) by 2022, only two are by an Indianist (the same individual); 106 (88 percent) are by scholars of Nepal. Surely March's account of the lives of Tamang women in Nepal should be of interest to all those scholars studying the lives of women in India? Apparently not. These examples may easily be multiplied. One might argue that both books deal with "tribal" people and are thus of little interest to scholars of South Asia; but there is a vast literature on tribalism in India that could invoke the literature on Nepal to some purpose. Besides, both books are also concerned with topics such as shamanism, gender, and cross-cousin marriage, which are more broadly of interest to South Asian scholarship.

What accounts for this relative invisibility? I suggest it is the existence of a national boundary that separates India from Nepal and makes scholars of India tacitly assume that what lies on the other side is not relevant to their work. This point was made earlier by Mary Des Chene (2007), but the focus of her analysis is on the deficiencies of the anthropological representation of Nepal, stemming mainly, she argues, from the failure of western anthropologists (and it must be said, many Nepali ones) to pay attention to Nepal's *national* political past and to "Nepali [language] writings on culture and politics, both fictional and non-fictional" (Des Chene 2007: 9). This is a fault shared by much western social science scholarship with regard to the literary traditions of the societies they study. The historian Sujit Sivasundaram has made an argument similar to mine for Sri Lanka; in *Islanded* (2013), he discusses how British colonialism partitioned (at least conceptually) the island of Sri Lanka from the wider

cultural and economic sphere of which it was historically a part. Consequently, he writes, "Sri Lanka is roundly ignored by India historians, even as sources relevant to Lankan history have been housed in different places to those relevant to Indian history" (2013: 17). My argument, however, focuses on the consequences for scholarship of modern political boundary making: I argue that area studies in the United States (with some exceptions, as noted above) is really nation-state studies. In that sense, so long as Sri Lanka became an independent nation-state and not part of the Indian polity, it would have been "roundly ignored" by Indian historians—irrespective of whether it was "islanded" in the way Sivasundaram so effectively describes. While this is readily apparent and taken for granted in a field like history, it is also the case with reference to anthropology, which, as an explicitly comparative discipline, should be more open to crossing national borders.

Although the study of the British Indian Empire has been replaced by the area concept of South Asia, which encompasses all of the successor states of the Raj plus Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bhutan, and Nepal, the modern Indian state is often treated in the intellectual practice of American scholars working in India as being synonymous with the concept of South Asia. At the 2014 South Asia conference in Madison, 11 of 34 panels (32 percent) with the phrase "South Asia" in the title dealt exclusively with India. The number at the same conference in 2022 (excluding panels dealing, under the rubric of "South Asia", with the colonial period) was 11 of 39 — or 28 percent. This calculation is based on my reading of paper titles; I did not have access to the abstracts of the papers. However, if we subtract the roundtables from the total number of panels with South Asia in the title (because the roundtables list only the names of the participants, without paper titles), as well as panels on pre-colonial South Asia, we get 11 of 29. In other words, in this revised reading, 38 percent of the total number of panels with "South Asia" in the title dealt exclusively with India. This is a salient point because of the status of India — with a land area almost a third the size of Western Europe, and far more populous and culturally heterogeneous — as a nation state. The cultural and linguistic complexity and variation that characterizes an "area" is packed into the confines of a single country. The implicit reification of national boundaries as demarcating the proper field of inquiry makes it both possible and logical for scholars working in a particular region of India to draw on the scholarship of those working in other regions of that vast polity to illuminate the problems with which they are concerned, while failing to consider relevant work in adjacent South Asian countries — because the implicit unit of study is not the area as a whole but the nation-state.

This point is illustrated by two major anthropological texts on the western Indian Himalaya, both by American anthropologists; unlike most scholarly work on Nepal's anthropology, which tend to go unremarked on in Indian studies, both these books have been well cited in the scholarship on India. I will compare their reception to that given to approximately contemporaneous ethnographies of Nepal on similar subjects. My original tabulations were made in 2015-2016; I have added to my analysis citations to the works since 2019. If there has been a significant shift in a book's visibility in South Asian Studies since my original analysis, that should be enough to show it.

Of 209 citations (as of 2015) to Berreman's *Hindus of the Himalaya* (1963),[2] 53 percent are in works on India other than its Himalayan region (which accounts for an additional 21 percent of citations). Berreman is cited in nine works on Tamil Nadu, five on Bengal, four on Rajasthan, and one each on Haryana and Chattisgarh. Works on Nepal cite him twenty-five times (12 percent). Between 2019 and 2023, his book is cited seventy-six times, 60 percent being in works on India. In contrast, John Hitchcock's *The Magars of Banyan Hill* (1966) has only three citations in works on India (two by the same author) of a total of 111 citations in Google Scholar in 2015. All

other citations to Hitchcock are by (mostly American) anthropologists of Nepal.

The second text is William Sax's *Mountain Goddess* (1991) , which, like Berreman's book, deals with Kumaon and Garhwal, both once under the control of Nepal before the treaty of Segauli transferred them to British control, and both ethnologically similar to Nepal's western region. *Mountain Goddess* has been cited 160 times (as of 2015), and eighty-five (53 percent) of the citations are in works on India *outside* its Himalayan region. Citations to Sax in works *on* the Indian Himalaya add another twenty-one (13 percent) to the total number of citations in the Indian literature. Scholars of the rest of the Himalayan region, including Nepal, have cited Sax eighteen times. Scholars of South India have cited him twelve times, of Odisha four times, and of Bengal and Maharashtra once each. In contrast, Mary Cameron's *On the Edge of the Auspicious* (1998), which examines the life experiences of low-caste women in western Nepal (essentially the same ethnic population described by Berreman and Sax, but on the "wrong" side of the border), and which discusses how caste shapes gender status, is not cited in any works of scholarship produced by scholars working in India on Indian themes (as of 2015).[3] Her book garnered 83 citations between 2019 and February 2023, of which four were in works on India. If the Gorkhas had retained Garhwal and Kumaon after Segauli, would any ethnographies of those regions have continued to be relevant to the work of scholars of Bengal and Tamil Nadu? What makes the ethnography of Kumaon and Garhwal relevant to an anthropologist of other parts of India, even in the Dravidian south, while that of Nepal is not, is the existence of a political boundary, not a cultural one.

We could take a different tack to examine the citations in a significant text of Indian anthropology. In *The Hollow Crown*, a historical ethnography of a small Tamil kingdom and its vicissitudes under colonialism, Nicholas Dirks critiques analyses of caste that fail to reflect how caste relations are mediated by relations of power. He cites an extensive array of sources on South India, and in addition, sources on North India, Central India, the Swat Pathans, Bengal, and Rajasthan, and even Sri Lanka. The citations on Sri Lanka reference Leach and Obeyesekere, but also Alex Gunasekara (1977) whose paper on *rājakāriya* (services provided to the king in return for access to land), appears in a collection edited by Wendy Doniger, who was on the faculty at Chicago when Dirks was a graduate student. He has no citations to scholarship on Nepal, and is apparently unaware of the Austrian anthropologist András Höfer's analysis of Nepal's old legal code, which, in an attempt to create a national identity for Nepal and bolster the position of Nepal's Rana oligarchy, created for the country a national caste system (Höfer 1979, 2004). I should add parenthetically that where anthropologists of India *have* ventured elsewhere in South Asia, it is usually to invoke the work of Leach, Obeyesekere, and Tambiah — all of them major theorists. Theory flows well across national boundaries, but ethnography apparently does not. I suggest that it is that same political boundary, absent the sort of networks that might have led him to a little-known scholar like Gunasekara,[4] that leads Dirks to overlook a text on Nepal that is, as I will show below, of significance to his own analysis.

András Höfer's study of the *muluki ain*

Although it is conventionally understood to be part of South Asia, works on Nepal, as I argued above, get little notice in the ethnography of India. One seldom finds reference to Nepali materials in scholarly works on the anthropology and history of India, even to make comparative points, and even when the Nepal materials could provide insight into Indian situations.[5] While anthropologists and historians of a particular region of India cite works that cover other areas of that vast country, they seldom cite works on Nepal. It is possible that this is because scholars of Nepal by and large have not, with a few exceptions, achieved status as major theorists of anthropology, which

might lead to their works being cited widely. Although there is something to be said for this, it is far from a satisfactory answer; the range of people cited in any given anthropological work on India is quite broad, and the vast majority of these citations are not done with a view to theory but in the invocation of ethnographic facts, usually to make a comparative point. Although the anthropology of Nepal can illuminate a matter that has dominated the anthropology of India since the British censuses of the sub-continent began, this Nepali perspective has not found its way into the general scholarship on the subject. I am referring to caste.

The relationship of kingship to caste is one of the major themes of Indianist anthropology, and has engaged the attention of American scholars like Gloria Raheja (1988), Nicholas Dirks (1993; 2001), and Ronald Inden (2000), among others. What scholarship on Nepal has to contribute to this theme is a comprehensive analysis, by the anthropologist András Höfer of the University of Heidelberg, of a caste system as it was conceptualized and implemented by a Hindu state —the *muluki ain* (MA), the national legal code of Nepal promulgated by the Rana prime minister Jang Bahadur in 1854. Höfer's book, which was first published in 1979, deals only with that portion of the legal code that deals with caste. The MA can be seen as an attempt to consolidate the state created by the Gorkha conquests by bringing all of the conquered territories enclosed within the borders created by the treaty of Segauli under a common system of law. To quote from Messerschmidt's summary of the MA,

> The treatise includes detailed exegeses and excursus of purity/impurity; commensality; sexual relations; status; the varna model and division of labor; slavery and ascetism; ethnic groups and caste; the place of natives and foreigners under the law (which gives the MA a sort of universal applicability); tolerance; the sanctioning of customs; change of caste and mobility; public authority; the role of the state; and the effects of recent (1951) legislation (Messerschmidt 1981: 824).

Höfer himself saw his book as a contribution to the anthropological study of caste, and especially to the debate on Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus*. He writes in his preface to the second edition, published by Himal Books in Nepal:

> It was rewarding to see to what extent and with what degree of consistency the opposition pure/impure had been applied in the Code, long before Western sociology came to recognize it as a basic, generative structuring principle of caste—and even more rewarding to learn from a tradition-guided Nepalese legislator that caste in South Asia was an intrinsic social category, rather than a mere construct of colonial administrators or "orientalist" intellectuals, as some authors would have it today. (Höfer 2004: xxx)

Höfer's study not only throws light on the way the dominant castes conceived of how relations among Nepal's various *jat* and their relationship to the state or to kingship should be organized and sanctioned, but also on the distinction between western concepts of "caste" and "tribe", another topic on which much ink has been spilt south of the Himalaya. The MA itself does not distinguish between these concepts; the various categories of people it deals with are referred to by the single term *jat*, meaning kind or species. The MA is an indigenous statement of the relation of the ruled to the ruler, and is predicated on ideas of ritual pollution, which is used to separate the population of Nepal into five super-categories of people and order their relations to one another (see Fig. 1). A salient point is that social order is clearly shaped by secular power to which ritual purity is subordinated (see Burghart, 1984).

The MA predates by at least two decades the British obsession with caste, given expression in the various censuses beginning in 1871, and therefore cannot be attributed

to British influence on Nepal's elites. Some scholars, such as Rishikesh Shaha (1990: 243), have suggested that Jung was inspired to promulgate it by his visit to Britain, yet its conceptual source is the Dharmasastras. It privileges the Brahmin, yet it comes into being at the behest of a secular ruler; secular power is not invisible in the *muluki ain*, it is front and center, and the Brahman owes his position to the ruler, who can strip him of his caste status. In short, as Messerschmidt observed, Höfer's study has a great deal to contribute to the study of caste in India, yet it is invisible in scholarly writings on the subject south of the Indo-Nepal border.

Figure 1. The Caste Hierarchy in Nepal under the muluki ain of 1854

1. Caste group of the "Wearers of the holy cord"

Upadhyaya Brahman • Thakuri ("warrior") • Jaisi Brahman • Chhetri ("warrior") • Newar Brahman • Indian Brahman • ascetic sects • various Newar castes

2. Caste group of the "Non-enslaveable Alcohol-Drinkers"

Magar • Gurung • Sunuwar • some other Newar castes

3. Caste group of the "Enslaveable Alcohol-Drinkers"

Bhote (People of Tibetan origin) • Chepang • Kumal (potters) • Tharu • Gharti (descendants of freed slaves)

4. Impure, but "touchable" castes

Kasai (Newar butchers) • Kusle (Newar musicians) • Hindu Dhobi (Newar washermen) • Muslims • Mlecch (Europeans)

5. Untouchable castes

Kami (Blacksmiths) • Sarki (Tanners) • Kadara (stemming from unions between Kami and Sarki) • Damai (Tailors and Musicians) • Gaine (minstrels) • Badi (musicians and prostitutes) • Cyame (Newar scavengers)

Höfer's was the most fully worked out and comprehensive analysis of Nepal's old legal code published in English until Khatiwoda, Cubelic and Michaels published a complete translation of the MA in 2021.[6] His book was published in 1979, unfortunately from a rather obscure — from the point of view of English-reading scholars — university press in Innsbruck, Austria (Höfer 1979). There is a new edition published in Nepal (Höfer 2004) and the book is also available online from the Center for Research Libraries in the U.S.[7] One could argue that Höfer's study of the *muluki ain* first appeared in a publication not readily accessible to someone doing literature searches before the age of the internet and digitized data bases. Even so, there are ample references to his text in the writings of anthropologists and scholars of Nepal since it was first published in 1979. Of course, to be aware of that, one has to have read those works, which returns us to the point I made earlier. It was cited and discussed in two book reviews in English (Messerschmidt 1981; Heinze 1981), and two articles citing it appeared in the *Journal of Asian Studies* in the 1980s (Burghart 1984; Levine 1987), making it known to anyone casting a wide net for material on caste and its relationship to the state. In addition to Messerschmidt's review in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, Jennis reviewed it in *Anthropos* (a European journal; the review is in German) in 1981, and Ruth-Inge Heinze in *Asian Folklore Studies* (now *Asian Ethnology*), a journal published in Japan. Heinze's review is quite detailed and takes the reader through every chapter; even the most casual reading will demonstrate the relevance of the book to the study of Hindu ideas of caste and kingship. More importantly, Burghart discusses Höfer's book in his article on "The formation of the concept of nation state in Nepal", published in 1984 in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, the premier area studies journal in the United States. Nancy Levine cites the book in a paper on the fluidity of ethnicity in Nepal published in 1987 in the same journal. On the second page of her paper, Levine highlights the significance of Höfer's study: "The response . . . [to the problem of unification]

was to create a national caste system that stipulated a place for each of those groups, guided, as would be expected, by the rulers' own notions about caste" (Levine 1987: 72). The words "caste" and "state" both occur in Levine's title, flagging her article's potential relevance to any study of caste and the political order.

When the anthropologist Donald Messerschmidt wrote in his review of Höfer's book that "It will serve as a basic reference (and inspiration) for further analyses of caste, both within and outside of Nepal", he was being unduly optimistic; although scholars of Nepal have referenced it widely, it remains largely unknown to South Asian scholarship generally. Of 269 citations to this book in Google Scholar (as of 2015), 238 citations in English language articles (88.5 percent of the total) are from scholars of Nepal, in a broad range of fields besides anthropology and history. Eleven additional citations are from German language articles and ten from French ones, all by Nepalists. Thus, ninety-six percent of all citations to the work were from scholars of Nepal. There is one citation to Höfer in Peter Van der Veer's work on religious nationalism in India (1994), the only citation I could find in a work on India written in English, but by a scholar based in Europe; Van der Veer uses Höfer's book to support his contention that before colonialism, state institutions were involved in constructing religious communities (1994: 32). I could find no citations to Höfer's work, however, by any US or Canadian scholar writing about India. In particular, Gloria Raheja (1988), Nicholas Dirks (1993 [1987], 2001), and Ronald Inden (2000), make no reference to him, although what he has to say is directly and intimately related to their own interests in the relationship of caste to kingship. All of them wrote after Höfer's book was published, and also reviewed and cited in papers in the *Journal of Asian Studies*.[8]

Raheja sets out the central issue in the study of caste and kingship in her 1988 essay:

> The relationship between a hierarchical order of castes, with its focus on the superior position of the Brahman, on the one hand, and a conception of sovereignty focused on the Hindu king . . . on the other, has been a central reverberating issue in the anthropological and historical study of South Asian society, so much so that it has been called "the central conundrum of Indian social ideology". (1988: 497)

As Raheja points out, both colonial ethnography and western sociology have regarded the caste system as centered on the Brahman, and the role of the king or the dominant caste in the ordering of the system has been relegated to the periphery (1988:498). Höfer calls the *muluki ain* "one of the ethnotheories that a particular caste society has of itself" (2004: xxxvi) and it is a text that illuminates the relationship of the dominant castes and the state to the caste order as a whole. It is clear from his account that the king and the dominant caste are by no means peripheral in the ordering of the caste system. "The State", Höfer writes, "is to sanction the caste inter-relations not only qua legislative, but it also is to enforce them qua executive and judicial power" (2004: 175). The provisions of the MA are enforced by local agents of the state "such as the village headmen, tax collectors and/or functionaries responsible for organizing public labour service [...]" (Höfer 2004: 185). In short, the state mandates how its legislation on the matter of caste and the practices of inter-caste relations (which are prescriptive and highly detailed) are to be enforced. At the same time, the MA should not be regarded necessarily as a guide to what actually took place locally; that probably varied somewhat from place to place, but the MA does represent what the elite thought of as appropriate social relations, which they did their best to enforce throughout the realm.

Although Raheja cites Burghart (1984) in a very comprehensive bibliography of seventy-six sources, he is the only representative from the world of Nepal Studies that she invokes. Burghart actually deals at length with the *muluki ain* — in much more than a passing reference — and what he has to say

about it demonstrates its relevance to any study of caste and kingship or caste and the state. What Raheja focuses on however is Burghart's discussion of how the Gorkhalis conceptualized their territories at the turn of the nineteenth century; his discussion of the *muluki ain* comes towards the end of his essay, in a section entitled 'The interpretation of country in terms of species'. It is the significance of this section and its source that she overlooks. Burghart's point is that "the government had consolidated its preeminent claim over the territory of the kingdom and therefore was inclined to look upon the ethnic groups of the kingdom as social bodies (*jat*) rather than as territorial bodies (*des*)" (1984:117). After succinctly summarizing the key aspects of the MA that relate to the organization of ethnic groups in terms of the attributes of purity and pollution, Burghart concludes, "The implication of the 1854 rewording of country as species is that all species interacted in the same system of interdependence" (1984: 118). In this way, the different caste systems that had predated the Gorkha conquest were all collapsed into a single system that was uniquely identified with the new state.

Nicholas Dirks argues in *Castes of Mind* — which discusses processes shaping caste in nineteenth century India — that while the British did not invent caste, they were crucial in shaping it into its modern form. Dirks' exhaustively researched book was published in 2001, more than twenty years after Höfer's book first appeared. Nowhere in it does Dirks refer to the *muluki ain*, nor does he mention Nepal. Yet the *muluki ain* represents a fully worked out conceptualization of a caste system undertaken by the elites of a Hindu state independent of British rule, and incorporating the well-known organizational attributes of caste — such as principles of purity and pollution, hierarchy, and the regulation of marriage across caste boundaries. The form that caste takes in modern Nepal has been shaped to varying degrees by the provisions of the *muluki ain*, which remained the law of the land until 1963 (Sharma 2004: xv), and was the product of the "cast of mind" of Nepal's ruling elites. A concern for how "caste was not, as Louis Dumont would have it, defined by its own autonomous logic of purity and pollution based in religion but was rather embedded in a political context shaped by royal authority and the award of honors" is also, as one reviewer (Metcalf 1990: 237) put it, a central concern of Dirks' other study of the relation of caste to political power, *The Hollow Crown*. The *muluki ain* is surely relevant to that as well.

A third important writer on kingship and caste is Ronald Inden, whose major work, *Imagining India* (1990), is framed as a critique of orientalism. In a massive and erudite bibliography of at least 448 entries, there is not a single entry on Nepal — even though the martial races of Nepal were a focus for much British ethnological imaginings. British military writers saw the hill people of Nepal as the epitome of a martial race, and recruited them into their army. The extensive literature they produced on the subject (discussed by Caplan 1995) was readily available in that repository of the knowledge of the Raj known as the India Office Library (since folded into the British Library). Höfer's work is relevant for Inden's final chapter on the nature of precolonial Indian society and its relationship to the state, as well as for his chapter on caste. But what India means in Inden's book is the British Raj. What falls within the boundaries of the British Empire is grist for his mill, what falls outside of it (even though it belongs to the same genus of cultural process that concerns him—the Indic rather than the Indian) is not considered.

I have chosen to discuss the work of these three authors because they exemplify some of the best scholarship that is to be found on South Asia. Their ideas are the product of a lifetime of immersion in the anthropology and history of the subcontinent. As their bibliographies demonstrate, they are exhaustive and meticulous in their research. It is not carelessness or lack of effort that accounts for their failure to engage the ethnography of Nepal, especially so significant a text for their subject as Höfer's study of the *muluki ain*; it is that the basic organizational foundation on which

scholarship is carried out is shaped by the political reality of nation states rather than area studies. Although Appadurai was quite right to draw attention to the constraining effect of area studies boundaries on the study of cultural processes, such as the spread of Buddhism out of India, the existence of the area studies concept does not in and of itself promote the comparative study of cultural traits (such as caste) that are associated with an area. As Indianists, all three authors largely operate within the political confines of modern India when discussing contemporary sources, and the British Raj when discussing colonial ethnography. But just as Nepal is seldom mentioned, so too is the modern ethnography of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and as Sivasundaram has so cogently argued, of Sri Lanka. In effect, the boundary of the nation state organizes the way scholarship is conducted. It is not, however, the only factor shaping how we study South Asia; in the next section I consider some others.

The structure of scholarship

In what follows, I examine some aspects of the structure of scholarship that encourage ethnographic provincialism, although there are also countervailing intellectual and technological forces that operate to mitigate this, such as ideas of globalization and the technology of electronic databases. The situation is also changing because of the emergence of global studies, which encourages scholars to pay more attention to process geographies. The Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC) for instance, now offers multi-country research fellowships designed to promote trans-regional research, and multi-sited ethnographies are becoming more common in anthropology (e.g., De León 2015; Hoskins 2015; Shneiderman 2015). Even so, the basic architecture built up since the end of World War II is hard to change. Some constraining aspects of this architecture that I discuss below are (1) the institutes that fund and provide logistical support to American scholars; (2) the organization of libraries; and (3) scholarly conferences.

In the United States, scholarship is supported by federally funded institutions under the umbrella of the Council of American Overseas Research Centers: thus, scholars of India can look to the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), Sri Lanka scholarship is supported by the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies (AISLS), and so on. The American Institute of Indian Studies exists to promote research on India; it is no use applying to them for funding to do a project in Bangladesh. Other sources of Federal funding, like the Fulbright program, are also country-focused. The existence of such institutions (and more finely tuned organizations, such as the Maharashtra Studies Group or the Rajasthan Studies Group), encourage networks and links that are narrowly focused (and there's nothing wrong with that) but which are not conducive to developing an "areal" perspective. CAORC does provide funding for multi-country research fellowships intended to facilitate research in two or more countries, but these need not necessarily be part of the same area.

Or consider the organization of our libraries. American libraries are mostly organized on the basis of the Library of Congress classification system. This system assigns books to one of 21 basic classes, each identified by a letter of the alphabet, and further sub-divided into classes identified by a combination of two letters or in some cases, three.[9] Class D, which covers history and ethnography, is organized by country. This is the class that is most intimately associated with area studies; other classes, such as economic history (HC) are similarly organized, while yet others (such as "the family") are not. Subclass DS organizes books on Asia in general, but within this category, the material is further sub-divided by country. Works on India, for instance, are numbered from DS 401 to 486.8 and are sub-divided into three more sections: works on Ethnography; on History; and on Local History and Description, as are works on Pakistan and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka (DS 488-490) gets only Ethnography and History as its subdivisions, and Nepal and Bhutan are not subdivided at all. "Goa.

Portuguese in India" is a separate classification from "India". As Sivasundaram noted of the "islanding" of Sri Lanka in the organization of scholarship, "the sources for Indian history are kept primarily at the British Library, separated by a tiresome journey from the sources for Lanka in the National Archives" (2013: 17).

What does this mean for scholarship? How do scholars actually find the material they draw on to make their arguments? Without going into an exhaustive dissection of scholarly practice, for which there is no room in this paper, we might note that even in this age of the internet, one makes serendipitous discoveries by browsing the library stacks, by coming across a book next to the one you were looking for that you didn't know existed. But the stacks are organized by country, not by cultural trait. If you searched for Racine and Racine's *Viramma*, about the life of an untouchable woman in South India, you would find it at DS 422.C3 V49613, and if you were to browse the books and shelves adjacent to it, you might stumble upon Eleanor Zelliott's *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Untouchable Movement* at DS 422.C3 Z39. Serendipity will not necessarily reward you, however, with Mary Cameron's *On the Edge of the Auspicious*, at DS 495.8.B456 C36, which examines the lives of Dalit women in Nepal, and could profitably interrogate your reading of *Viramma*. Coming from a liberal arts college, which focuses on the education of undergraduates, I can attest that the distance in linear inches between *Viramma* and Mary Cameron's book is actually not all that great, as our library holdings are relatively small; but having trained at the University of Chicago, I can also testify that you will not stumble upon *On the Edge of the Auspicious* serendipitously in the Regenstein Library when retrieving *Viramma* from the stacks. You will be separated from Cameron's book by the vast accumulation of knowledge that lies between DS 422.C3 and DS 495.8, most of which a major research library on South Asia will have gathered up. The point is that the structure of area studies scholarship that has grown up since the Cold War, which organizes the world according to nation states, encourages us in certain directions rather than others.[10]

The original edition of Höfer's book is available in 33 libraries in the United States, including all the major centers for research on South Asia, and in the Library of Congress. According to Höfer, "Soon after the publication of the 1st edition in 1979 some Americans (about a dozen, all Nepalists) asked me to provide them with a copy, simply because their (local?) booksellers had not been in a position to order any books from continental Europe. Efforts to offer the book for sale in Nepal and India foundered at last on the non-convertible currency problem" (András Höfer, pers. comm., March 30, 2015). His observation adds another element to the structure of scholarship that constrains area studies, although the book's wide availability in major research libraries in the U.S. does obviate this limitation for American scholars. I read Höfer's book for the first time in the University of Chicago library. And, of course, no such limitations exist for works on Nepal published by university presses in the United States and the United Kingdom; even so, such works are consistently overlooked by anthropologists and other scholars studying India.

The situation is changing because of the rise of new technologies that can counteract some of the structural limitations imposed by traditional libraries. Some modern electronic library catalogues, for example, allow one to browse, virtually, the books on the virtual shelf adjacent to the one you might be interested in. Type "caste AND kingship" into WorldCat and at or near the top of your results will be Declan Quigley's *The Interpretation of Caste* (1993)[11] — a book not specifically about Nepal but written by a scholar of Nepal. On the other hand, type "caste AND state" and the first page of entries is a mixed bag; the first citation is to a work on India, and the second to Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of our discontents*, which is about the application of the idea of caste as a framework to discuss race relations in the U.S.[12]

The final aspect I mention is the organization of area studies conferences. The majority of panels in such conferences (I take the South Asia conference held annually at the University of Wisconsin as my example) typically deal with a single country. At the South Asia conference in 2014, for instance, of 112 panels (excluding ten that dealt with pedagogical issues and archaeology), sixty-six (59 percent) dealt with a single country, mainly India. More interestingly, these included eleven panels with "South Asia" in the title that were exclusively about India; another twenty-three with "South Asia" in the title, although they were mostly about India, had at least one paper focused on another state in the region. At the 2022 conference, of eighty-eight panels that could be easily identified as focusing on a particular region within the South Asian area, forty-seven (53 percent) dealt with a single country (and of them, eleven, dealing with India, had "South Asia" in the title). The number might have been greater, but without access to the abstracts, it is hard to tell. My point is not that there is something wrong with focusing on a single country, but that such a focus militates against the cross-regional comparisons that integrate the study of an area.

Several years ago, the Thai Studies Conference met at the University of Wisconsin at the same time as the South Asia Studies Conference. The organizers of both hoped for synergies by putting them in the same hotel, but unfortunately the two conferences met on different floors. The participants at those two conferences had little to do with each other. Intellectually and socially, they were ships that passed in the night. But the same is true of the South Asia conference itself: Nepalists mostly attend the panels of other Nepalists, those working on Sri Lanka congregate where papers on Sri Lanka are being read (unless they have a friend presenting a paper on Nepal or India, when they might attend that presentation from a sense of friendship or curiosity to see what their former classmate has been up to since they parted company after graduate school). The Indianists talk to each other. The metaphorical ships here are at the country level, not the area level, and it makes little difference. What precluded synergy between scholars of Thailand and of South Asia was not so much that they met on different floors, (it would not have mattered had they been placed in the same corridor); rather all of these scholars (no doubt there were a few exceptions) were intellectually, conceptually, and socially, ensconced within the boundaries of the study of their respective countries and not particularly inclined to venture beyond them.

That was what I observed when I organized the first Himalayan Studies Conference at Macalester College in 2011, which met in tandem with the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs (MCAA), for which I was also responsible. The MCAA mainly draws people working on China and Japan; although sessions were scheduled in adjacent rooms and people shared the same social spaces, there was little interaction between these different constituencies. When, greatly daring (for I controlled both programs), I scheduled a few panels with presenters drawn from both camps, the Himalayanists so assigned were the ones who were least taken with the idea; they would rather have been with their own kind in their own space. The China and Japan scholars may have shared those sentiments, but I did not hear about it.

I shall conclude by noting however that if Nepal is invisible to India, the reverse is not necessarily true; Nepalists readily cite the literature on India (even if they don't go to the panels) and it is usually the context in which their own endeavors are framed. The best example of this is Höfer himself, who has read extensively and cites extensively the work of Indianists; over a third of his 243 citations are to works of scholarship on India. This may be because scholars of Nepal who work on issues shared by Indianists, such as caste, *do* see themselves as South Asianists and see the significant questions to which they respond or contribute as part of a larger conversation. But they tend not to cite work on Sri Lanka, Pakistan or Bangladesh. Scholars who work

on Hindu Nepal emphasize the Indo-aspect of the Indo-Tibetan interface; I suspect that scholars who work on Tibetan Buddhist societies are less interested in that aspect.

In sum then, the boundary of the nation state exerts a significantly constraining influence on scholarship, making the concept of area not much more than a useful device with which to group countries for bureaucratic convenience. We don't really do area studies; we study countries. This is masked in South Asian studies because India is so vast and the scholarly literature about it so plentiful, but I suspect that similar parochialism is present elsewhere; certainly, casual conversations with colleagues who study those other places suggests this might be the case. South-east Asia in particular seems 'a thing of shreds and patches' in a way that South Asia, with its unifying influence of a shared heritage of British colonialism and its institutions, including a language shared by elites across the region, is not, and need not be. The idea of an Indo-Tibetan interface with which I began was designed to make porous the boundaries of areas as they have been traditionally understood, but contributions to our understanding of the cultural processes that give shape to South Asia move uneasily, and sometimes not at all, across the borders that define South Asia's national territories.

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Endnotes

1. All my references to citations, unless otherwise specified, refer to those listed in Google Scholar.

2. These figures, like the rest, are based on an examination of the citation data in Google Scholar (accessed January 8, 2015). I have not looked at the citation data for the second edition of Berreman's book, published in 1972. I have included citations in all scholarly fields, not just anthropology.

3. The only three citations to Cameron (1998) of 112 in Google Scholar (as of 2015) that may be considered works on India are in two papers examining the migration of Nepali labor to India (Thieme 2003 and Thieme, Kollmair and Müller-Böker 2003; both by European scholars who study migration across south, southeast and central Asia, at least one of whom is a specialist on Nepal. The third is in a book whose ethnographic focus is Nepali tea plantation labor in Darjeeling (Besky 2014).

4. The genesis of *The Hollow Crown* is in the dissertation research Dirks did at Chicago.

5. One exception is Mark Liechty's *Suitably Modern* (2003). Focusing on middle class culture, consumerism and media in Kathmandu, the book broke new ground in a field that was still emerging at the time in which it was written. Another exception is Lynn Bennett's *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters* (1983), which has been widely cited outside Nepal Studies. Although it is difficult to determine why certain books on Nepal gain more traction in the wider academic world, one factor might be the extent to which they get reviewed: Bennett's book received at least 12 reviews (according to WorldCat) in leading journals in the fields of anthropology, gender studies, religion and Indology. Liechty's book received at least 7 reviews. In contrast, there are only three reviews of Cameron's book in WorldCat. In any event, the question here is not how widely a book is known, but how widely a book about Nepal is known and cited by U.S. based scholars who work in India.

6. There is, in addition, an article on the MA by the Nepali historian Prayag Raj Sharma, published in the obscure (to non-Nepalists) journal *Kailash* (1977), and a treatise on the role of the religious judge as described in two chapters of the *muluki ain* of 1854 and 1888 by Michaels (2005).

7. *The caste hierarchy and the state in Nepal: a study of the Muluki ain of 1854*. https://dds.crl.edu/crldelivery/14196

8. Google Scholar lists 52 citations to Höfer between 1979 and 2000, almost all of them by Nepalists.

9. Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/lcc.html (Accessed January 7, 2015).

10. In a similar vein, Hoffmann (2015) shows how the Library of Congress's classification system scatters books on African-American foodways throughout the library, instead of gathering them under one rubric, or even placing them under the shared classification of American Cooking, which is defined regionally.

11. This is what appears when I do this through my college library. However, if I conduct this experiment on the WorldCat webpage (https://www.worldcat.org), I get Akio Tanabe's *Caste and equality in India: a historical anthropology of diverse society and vernacular democracy*. This was on February 18, 2023; note that the results from this experiment are constantly changing.

12. This is not a stable experiment, as what WorldCat throws up is not constant.

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Special note:

This is a revised and expanded version of a paper that was originally published in an edited volume in 2018 (Dev Pathak, ed., *Another South Asia: Questions, Rhetoric and Quest*. Delhi: Primus Books). The publisher introduced a great many unauthorized changes to the text that distorted both its meaning as well as my writing style (including changing citations and the syntax of my sentences). I received no cooperation from the editor of that volume in effecting a resolution to the problem, and the paper languished. I am grateful to the editors of HIMALAYA for making it available to a wider audience in this revised version. I have retained the original title.