# Book Review

**Erika Hoffman-Dilloway: *Signing and Belonging in Nepal*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press. 2016. 176pp. ISBN 9781563686641**

This ethnography gives an account of what it means to be deaf in Nepal, and how people frame their identity as members of a Deaf community in relation with, or in contrast to, existing models and political discourses. Focusing on the historical period that runs through the ten years of civil war in Nepal (1996-2006) the author explores the way in which Deaf signers constituted themselves as "a distinct, but marginalized, ethnolinguistic group, identified and constituted by the use of a particular language, Nepali Sign Language (NSL)" (p. 3). This process happened through a series of linguistic and social practices, including meetings aimed at establishing an appropriate etymology for signs, or aimed at choosing standard signs to be preferred to other natural sings often used in the domestic environment. This new way of understanding themselves as a linguistic minority, redefined the Deaf community in opposition to two other models: a biomedical model, that would interpret deafness as a disability; and a highly stigmatizing karmic model, specific of the Nepalese cultural setting, that would consider deaf people as suffering a condition derived from accumulated bad karma, and as carriers of potential pollution for higher castes or groups. The opposition between the linguistic and biomedical frames is marked by the author, according to international conventions, with the use of a non-capitalized 'd' when referring to the hearing impairment, and a capitalized 'D' when referring to the self-identification of members as part of a signing community. In the context of a karmic model of caste pollution, the author notices that Deaf members of high castes were often expelled from their kin networks, and deaf villagers were relegated to do jobs like herding or gathering the wood that would keep them isolated and far from social life (pp. 34-35). Within this context, the linguistic framework thus offered a new model of belonging to a group that declared to share the same mother tongue and have a distinct heritage (p. 38).

A second and connected argument addresses the fact that, in the specific cultural and historical context of Nepal, reframing one's identity as an ethnolinguistic minority in the 90s had the effect of aligning the Deaf community with other similarly framed ethnic minorities that were increasingly politically active in looking for recognition from a Hindu state – that is, a state that had relegated them to the lower part of a highly hierarchical social structure, based on the Hindu model and supported by the elite in power. As being aligned with these oppositional groups could potentially attract governmental discrimination or oppression, the members of Deaf associations actively worked to standardize NSL in a way that would simultaneously promote Hindu values and symbols. In so doing, the Deaf community and especially the leaders of Deaf associations in Kathmandu, were trying to affiliate themselves with a dominant Hindu high-caste religious and cultural ideology, and thus reduce the stigma vehiculated by discourses on karma and pollution. In other words, Deaf identity was constructed both in opposition to, and drawing on, local ideas of personhood linked to ritual pollution and karmic effects. This is ethnographically accounted for, by describing for example, how explanations connected to Hindu traditional culture were preferred by Deaf associations' members in order to define specific etymologies. The author also notices however, that in the

process of establishing a standard version of NSL, certain home-signers, especially elders who had not received enough exposition to standard NSL, found themselves somehow marginalised within the community. Gender was also an important factor of marginalisation, in that women married to a hearing partner who often did not learn NSL, were, after marriage, restricted to the domestic environment. They were thus unable to join the community of Deaf associations' members where they had previously taken part into socialising activities. In doing so, they suffered a higher degree of isolation compared to the correspondent male experience (p. 61).

The dominant Hindu high-caste discourse was not however the only frame within which or against which the Deaf community tried to re-define itself, as during that specific historical period other ideologies were coexisting and competing with karma for defining social relations: the discussions on *bikās* (development), class, and modernity (p. 89). According to these new ideas Deaf community members could further redefine karmic pollution as a mark of backwardness, ignorance and underdevelopment, while simultaneously addressing for recognition that part of the society which on the contrary defined itself as modern, civilised, and middle-class (p. 7). A clear example of these practices is given in chapter five, where the author describes the opening of a restaurant chain that employed Deaf staff as waiters, and how the business, branded as "a sort of development project" (p. 97) especially targeted the modern upper-middle-class who would identify discriminating practices towards Deaf people as uncivilised, or backward (p. 96). Throughout the ethnographic accounts presented in the book the author shows how language, understood "as practice rather than product" (p. 12) of interactions, can reflect existing identities, ideologies, or stances, thus revealing a lot about the identity of the language user, but can also effect change in those already existing identities, ideologies or stances, thus producing new "social formations" (p. 13).

The brevity and clarity of the book makes it easily accessible, however, this also leaves the reader with the feeling that conciseness has been reached at the expenses of a broader and richer comparative perspective. Although anthropological studies of Deaf communities are referred and acknowledged in the book, the author could have engaged in a more in-depth discussion with other ethnographic accounts. In particular, the author could have discussed the work of Karen Nakamura (2006) who focused on Deaf identity in Japan, similarly addressing the issue of Deaf communities navigating different frames (ethnic, linguistic, biomedical etc.) in order to redefine one's own identity in relation to the state, society, and other international organisations. This kind of comparison would have located the ethnography in the broader context of international Deaf communities outside Nepal and in Asia more specifically, while better highlighting the theoretical significance of her case, in relation to different strategies of belonging. However, the book still stands out for its in-depth ethnographic description and analysis of the multiple layers characterizing the discourse of Deaf communities, in a particularly complex period of Nepal's history, while providing a well-written account of how people emerge, and mutually shape themselves, from and through language.

**References**

Nakamura, Karen. *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006.

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