



Arkotong Longkumer. *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement in Northeast India.* London: Continuum, 2010. xiv + 258 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8264-3970-3.



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Published on H-Asia (September, 2011)

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Northeastern Belongings: Engaging Reform and Identity among the Heraka

In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in and literature on the complex and varied landscape of India's Northeast. Against the backdrop of increasing militarization, insurgency, and tension, authors have explored various separatist movements, the interrelations and historical tensions within the region, and the complicated relationships between various states and the politics of the Indian center. For all of this literature, the dynamics and complexities of the Northeast's many and varied religious and political movements, as well as the complexities and divisions within broad ethnic categories, such as "Naga," remain often understudied. Arkotong Longkumer makes an invaluable contribution to literature on religion in the Northeast by shining a light on the Heraka movement, a reform movement among the Zeme, a Naga tribe living in Assam's North Cachar Hills. In *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging*, Longkumer provides an extraordinarily detailed look at this movement, examining both its religious practices and its broader impact on identity and belonging in the North Cachar Hills. The monograph situates Her-

aka practices and politics within the broader politics of Naga separatism and Indian nationalism. In doing so, Longkumer exposes the Heraka not just as a project of religious reform, but also as a complex site of negotiation of a range of competing claims, anxieties, and tensions.

The Heraka is a monotheistic, but non-Christian, religious reform movement dating back to the late colonial period, though only coalescing under the name "Heraka" in 1974. The book systematically explores Heraka history, cosmology, and ritual practice, seeking, in Longkumer's words, to examine "the evolving project of reform and its intersection with narratives of identity" (p. 1). To this end, Longkumer examines the notion of religious reform in its broadest connotations, suggesting that reform projects are not just about abstract notions of progress, but also about longer and more complex dialogues with questions of tradition. For the Heraka, reform is thus an engagement with, on the one hand, questions of modernity and social change and, on the other, the relationship between the self and society. The meanings of Heraka, as Longkumer shows, are various, but,

most directly, connote a notion of purity associated with the worship of the God Tingwang and the relinquishing of blood sacrifices to the "small gods" of Paupaise ancestral worship. Longkumer also highlights the ways that Heraka practice is intimately linked with questions of mobility (social and spatial), social organization, and meaning in an often-unstable space.

Longkumer traces the origins of Heraka to a millenarian movement launched by two charismatic leaders, Gaidinliu and Jadonang, in the mid-1930s. Branded as "trouble-makers" by the colonial administration, Jadonang was captured and hanged in 1931 and Gaidinliu was imprisoned until after Independence. Yet, more specifically, Longkumer links the growth of the Heraka movement more directly to social and political-economic shifts. Situated against the backdrop of famine and agricultural shortage, the reform movement offered a monotheistic alternative to the costly blood sacrifices associated with older Paupaise traditions in the North Cachar Hills. The ensuing transformations, as Longkumer shows, resulted not just in shifts in ritual practice but also in the social and spatial organization of Zeme villages, facilitating various forms of mobility within and beyond village life. The adoption of Heraka practice thus offered practical appeal, allowing changes in property regimes and social structures as well as cosmological systems. As Longkumer argues, "This enabled the Heraka to change in a way that was demonstratively beneficial, aiding adaptation to a changing world that the existing ancestral religion, Paupaise, could not" (p. 201).

Ethnographically, the text offers a rich and textured analysis of both the transformations the movement has wrought on identity in the North Cachar Hills and on the fractured and contested meanings of Naga, Zeme, and Heraka. Longkumer examines the Heraka movement in a broader context of tribal identity, focusing on the interplay between Heraka reform and Paupaise practice. Longkumer argues that the Heraka movement is grounded in a religious rationalism that begins to make distinctions between religious, political, and economic life. The reorganization of cosmology under the Heraka movement is grounded in a direct and reflexive engagement with a changing world. Yet the notion of Heraka is not simply an engagement with shifting social and political-economic realities, it is also an ongoing discussion about what the notion of free community (*heguangram*) might be. As Longkumer shows, the very idea of community is one that continues to produce divisions within the movement itself, most markedly between urban Heraka, who adopt a more "progressive" brand of Heraka practice, and

rural Heraka, who still adhere more closely to the movement's millenarian roots and promises.

Longkumer's work is at its strongest in its capturing of the tensions of belonging for members of the Heraka movement. Particularly, a central chapter, "Negotiating Boundaries," explores the ways that the Heraka, as a monotheistic movement that is neither Christian nor Hindu, are wedged between the broader movement for an independent Christian Nagaland and a Hindu nationalist movement that seeks to negate their claims. As non-Christians, the Heraka are branded as Hindu sympathizers—those whose "feathers have been smudged by Hindu incense"—by many Nagas (p. 157). The Heraka, as Longkumer shows, are indeed claimed as part of Bharat Mata and linked with notions of Hindu civilization by Hindu Right groups, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, many of whom run education and development programs among the Heraka in the North Cachar Hills. However, this linkage is made through an inscription of the Heraka as *vanvasi*, or jungle dwellers. As Longkumer argues, the notion of *vanvasi* eschews a sophisticated notion of *adivasi* (original inhabitant) identity and politics in favor of a pure and pristine "state of nature" view of the Heraka, a view that at once incorporates them into the Indian nation and relegates them to a state of perpetual backwardness. To be Heraka, as Longkumer argues, is to be in a state of perpetual negotiation between and with these two conflicting positions.

Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging is a deep, empirically driven monograph, drawing on a range of historical sources and ethnographic encounters. It is focused on elucidating and enumerating the complexities of belonging in Heraka life, rather than using the Heraka as a case study to explore emergent theoretical concepts in anthropology, religion, or South Asian studies. The book itself is enormously complex, moving through a broad range of historical narratives, analytic categories, and problematics. At times, Longkumer's comprehensive treatment of the Heraka comes at the expense of narrative coherence and the argument of individual chapters of the book often build not just on what has come before but what will come after. While rigorously argued, Longkumer's work is also theoretically eclectic, drawing broadly from contemporary and classical anthropological theory to elucidate concepts as various as religious rationality, identity and difference, conversion, and notions of community. Rather than offering new or synthetic theoretical formulations, *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging* employs these literatures to explain particular empirical problems or concerns.

If the book's deep, complex, and nuanced exploration of the Heraka is its primary strength, it also might be said to be its weakness. Longkumer focuses on his subject often at the expense of broader context. With the exception of the above-mentioned chapter on boundary negotiation, the book eschews a broader discussion that situates the Heraka in the complicated context of the politics of the Northeast. While such politics are clearly important for Longkumer's narrative, they appear much more as things occurring in the background than as central issues of the text. Questions of insurgency, Hindu nationalism, and separatist movements haunt much of the text but only are addressed sporadically. This has two unfortunate implications for this otherwise excellent text. First, the book is clearly targeted at specialist audiences and assumes a fair amount of knowledge about the Northeast. Yet more important, it misses an opportunity to use the Heraka case as a means of understanding and illuminating broader concerns. Another way of saying this is that, while Longkumer uses context judiciously to explain the Heraka, the Heraka ultimately do little to explain the context.

This is, perhaps, an unfair criticism to make, as Longkumer's project is quite explicitly to understand

identity within the context of Heraka reform. *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging* accomplishes this with both sensitivity and analytic rigor. At the same time, Longkumer highlights a critical and, as yet, unanswered problematic in contemporary studies of such movements. If the question of belonging is one that is central in the context of the Heraka movement, it is also one that continues to emerge as essential within a broader literature concerned with movements, populations, and peoples on the margins of state and nation. How might we think about this critical but elusive concept? While the book provides no specific theoretical answer to this question, it does expose the abstract concept of belonging as what it is: a primarily ethnographic concern that is, at once, broadly urgent and deeply contextual. The notion of belonging is both abstract and grounded—one that transcends the boundaries of specific movements and is, necessarily, confined within them. As such, the Heraka case, and Longkumer's reading of it, aptly demonstrates the need for and advantages of engaging the question of belonging not as a set of ossified concepts, but rather—as the Heraka themselves do—as a set of ongoing, unstable, and often tenuous negotiations with history, identity, and politics.

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Citation: Jason Cons. Review of Longkumer, Arkotong, *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement in Northeast India*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

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