

Communications to the Editor

DAVID N. GELLNER responds to WILLIAM HECHLER's review of ARJUN GUNERATNE's *Many Tongues, One People: The Making of Tharu Identity in Nepal*, *JAS* 62(3):983–84.

William Hechler's review of Arjun Guneratne's new book, *Many Tongues, One People: The Making of Tharu Identity in Nepal*, begins by praising the "extremely interesting details of political organization" in various Tharu organizations, "some excellent information about the Backward Society Education organization (BASE)" (p. 984), and Guneratne's attention to class differences within the Tharu. It then moves on and spends the greater part of the review pursuing the reviewer's own agenda in biological anthropology. Biological anthropologists have the right, of course, to review books in social and cultural anthropology, but if they insist on doing so in biological terms, they should not then be surprised if they are rebuked for massively missing the point. Hechler concludes his review with the damning and entirely incorrect judgment that Guneratne's "theoretical framework is not particularly relevant to [his] data" (p. 984).

Hechler seems to believe that the Tharu consist of one people in the genetic sense, that they must have shared one language in the past even if they do not do so today, and that any study of Tharu ethnicity must seek to prove this and be based on this premise. The point that Hechler has missed is that *even if* it is shown that all Tharus share a common genetic inheritance and that they are more biologically similar to each other than they are to other Nepalis or that they are similar to the Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes of the Nepalese hills, this is entirely irrelevant to the discussion of Tharu ethnicity today. (However, it may become relevant at some time in the future, if scientists make such a claim and Tharu intellectuals take it up.) A hundred years ago, the Tharu shared an ethnonym occasionally used by outsiders for all tribal people living by shifting agriculture in the Tarai; thus, they shared a way of life and a similar relationship to the Nepalese state. But, they did not share a culture or a language, and the different groups of Tharu did not have any relationships with each other. Today there are still many groups (such as the Rajvamshi) which could, if they chose, align themselves with and call themselves Tharu, but they do not. There are many other Nepalese cases—for example, the Newars, for whom there is most definitely no genetic uniformity in the population, yet there is a sense of ethnic identity (D. N. Gellner's "Caste, Communalism, and Communism: Newars and the Nepalese State," in *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*, ed. D. N. Gellner, J. Pfaff-Czarnecka, and J. Whelpton [Amsterdam: Harwood, 1997], pp. 151–84). There are other cases, to restrict oneself only to Nepal, in which there is cultural, religious, and linguistic commonality, yet there is no desire to construct a single ethnic group, for example, the Tibetan-speaking populations of northern Nepal (C. Ramble's "Tibetan Pride of Place; or, Why Nepal's Bhotiyas Are Not an Ethnic Group," in *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*, pp. 379–413). In yet other cases, the boundary of ethnic identity is drawn much more tightly than by the Tharu, for example, among the Thakali (W. F. Fisher's *Fluid Boundaries: Forming and Transforming Identity in Nepal* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2001]). The explanation in all these cases cannot be found in genetics and must be sought in history and contemporary cultural and political pressures.

If the Tharu of Nepal have now come to see themselves as the members of a single ethnic group, this has nothing to do with biology and everything to do with the material and the historical and strategic factors so lucidly analyzed by Guneratne. In other words, it is Hechler's theoretical framework, not that of Guneratne, which is irrelevant to explaining the social phenomena of ethnicity and nationalism, whether in Nepal or elsewhere.

DAVID N. GELLNER
University of Oxford
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

WILLIAM HECHLER responds to DAVID GELLNER.

I regret that David Gellner feels that I made a “damning . . . judgment” of Arjun Guneratne's *Many Tongues*. Actually, I think that *Many Tongues* is a very good book. It is worth reading just for the story of the Tharu author who wrote an article (never published) advocating the reintroduction of malaria to the Tarai region of Nepal (p. 98)—a story that Guneratne would not have understood properly if he had stuck to his former opinion that malaria resistance in the Tharu is merely a social construct (“Modernization, the State, and the Construction of a Tharu Identity in Nepal,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57[3][1998]:749–73) (see Stephen Sanderson's *The Evolution of Human Sociality: A Darwinian Conflict Perspective* [Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001] for a pertinent critique of social constructionism).

Even the best book has its minor flaws, and it is perhaps the unfortunate duty of the reviewer to mention these at least in passing. Arjun Guneratne announced in the first chapter of his book that he would use the Tharu as his example to refute the doctrine of primordialism, the idea that ethnic identity may be influenced by factors associated with prehistoric origins (pp. 2–3). He then demonstrated in the body of his book either that he did not know what the prehistoric origins of the Tharu really are or that he chose to evade this information, which is readily available in the physical anthropology literature. According to Gellner, who was mentioned glowingly in the preface to *Many Tongues*, knowledge of the actual origins of the Tharu “is entirely irrelevant to the discussion of Tharu ethnicity today” (p. xii). This is incorrect because the origins of the Tharu are an essential part of the hypothesis that Guneratne undertook to evaluate.

Guneratne apparently assumed that the various Tharu populations originated in separate and independent acts of creation; if this were the case, their convergence would indeed tend to refute primordialism. However, Gellner claims that it is impossible that the recent common prehistoric origins of the Tharu populations are in any way related to their common ethnic identity—that is, that it is merely an odd coincidence that they have common origins and common ethnic identity. I suspect that this is unlikely. Gellner's argument, which takes the form of “some factors of category *a* have some effect on phenomenon *x*; therefore, no factor of category *b* has any effect on phenomenon *x*,” is transparently fallacious.

Gellner's examples are not incompatible with the hypothesis that common prehistoric origins tend to facilitate the development of ethnic identity. Since it is his position that factors associated with prehistoric origins have exactly no effect on ethnic identity, he should have attempted to refute my Tharu-related examples from western Nepal, which present difficulties for Guneratne's attack on primordialism.

On the positive side, Guneratne did some excellent fieldwork that is interesting for reasons that have nothing to do with controversies over primordialism. *Many Tongues* reads better as political science than as anthropology, and I do not regard this as an unfavorable judgment.

WILLIAM HECHLER
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

