

Revolutionary Activist Shakti Yogmaya in Nepal's Grade Ten Schoolbooks!

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It was just a local rumor in a remote Himalayan village. Now it's a history lesson for children across Nepal.

I doubt if an entry in grade 10 English textbooks is what a normal anthropologist aspires to? I certainly never dreamed of it. But it happened.

Am I thrilled? You bet.

My longtime colleague in Nepal, Sukanya Waiba, informed me yesterday that her nation's standard grade 10 textbook added an exercise for students based on the history of a rebel lady. The extract is from ["Heir to a Silent Song"](#), my 2001 book on the revolutionary activist Shakti Yogmaya who lived from about 1860 to 1941.

(Happily, the passage includes a selection of her fierce poems too.)

What more could a student of culture and history ask of her labor? This news means far, far more than reviews of my book in a prestigious literary or academic journal—there were none; it surpasses any academic honor.

Imagine: my unearthing of a controversial Nepali leader denounced, slandered, then purposely concealed from her nation's history almost 80 years ago, is today offered to the nation's schoolchildren. No matter that 36 years have transpired since I began my journey into this woman's political career. (It's always the time to review, correct and deepen our histories.)

I've constantly argued that anthropology, at its best, is a recording of history.

In 1981 when I began that work, Nepal was ruled by a dictator monarch; free political expression was prohibited just as during Yogmaya's life. Years of review and reflection on my side were necessary. It took time for me to digest what I had learned in that remote hill settlement. I needed daring and astute Nepali colleagues to support my pursuit. My teachers – (scientists call them 'informants')–all now deceased, were Hindu ascetics, mostly elderly women, in 1981. But when their leader was alive, young and resolute they were members in her revolutionary movement.

Yogmaya's political philosophy survived in a secretly published collection of her utterances—beautiful and poignant quatrains. These needed time to comprehend and translate. Combined with the oral testimonies, those poems made Yogmaya's position in history irrefutable.

My personal political growth, a maturity essential to write about any revolutionary, would require much more time. So did my writing. (Standard anthropology templates proved unable to embrace this history.)

Since 2001, others in Nepal have enthusiastically taken up traces I gathered and they are fleshing out the story and moving Yogmaya into her rightful place in their history. Before these gratifying developments within Nepal, political acumen awakened in me and I began to grow in an altogether different direction. Pursuing Yogmaya was for me an epiphany. By 1989 I left Nepal to struggle with their historical inheritances. I turned my attention to my own Arab heritage.

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