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Review of "Demoting Vishnu: Ritual, Politics, and the Unraveling of Nepal's Hindu Monarchy" by Anne T. Mocko

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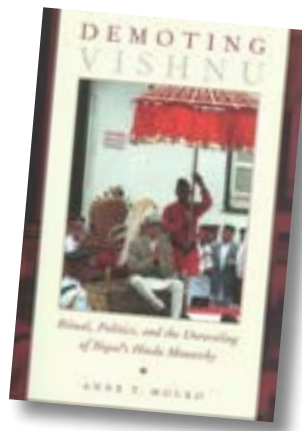
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Book Reviews



Demoting Vishnu: Ritual, Politics, and the Unraveling of Nepal's Hindu Monarchy.

Anne T. Mocko. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 256 pages. ISBN 9780190275228.

Reviewed by Michael Baltutis

To say that the Shah dynasty of Nepal had been plagued with difficulties throughout its 240-year history would be an understatement: the family line was strewn with infant rulers due to its strict rule of descent through primogeniture, was divested of its power and kept under virtual palace arrest for more than a century by the upstart Rana family, was nearly eliminated in a bloody palace massacre, and engaged in a decade-long battle with Maoist rebels who sought to eliminate all vestiges of the Hindu monarchy. All forms of power are tenuous, but the elevated status of a single hereditary family whose reliance upon the idioms of Hindu monarchy in the twenty-first century is certainly among the most tenuous of all. And, in fact, the center could not hold; in a process that lasted from 2006 to 2008, the Shah king, Gyanendra, was summarily stripped of all of his rights, responsibilities, and powers as the Hindu King of Nepal, and was replaced by a similarly tenuous series of elected leaders representing parties from across Nepal's political spectrum.

Anne Mocko, in her book *Demoting Vishnu*, explores this narrow and contentious time frame: the final years of Gyanendra, of the Shah dynasty, and of the very institution of Hindu kingship in Nepal. The author's focus on such a short duration allows her to maintain an intense focus throughout the book on its methodological approach to kingship in general and to the person of Gyanendra specifically. Namely, "it was the ongoing practice of royal rituals that at a most basic level underwrote his social identity as 'king,' and it was the collapse or discontinuation of those rituals that would enable the institution of kingship to be permanently brought to a halt" (p. 3). Placing her thesis loosely within a framework of classical works on kingship (Sir James Frazer and A.M. Hocart), the author incorporates a variety of sources in her analysis of the monarchy's unraveling: histories of Nepali kingship, local newspaper accounts detailing Nepali palace intrigue, and interviews with Nepali officers from the government, the palace, and local organizations.

But it is the author's use of scholarship from within the field of ritual and performance studies that most productively structures her argument regarding the ritual basis of Nepali royalty. Her first chapter introduces the connections between ritual, politics, and kingship, and cites such scholars as Judith Butler, J.Z. Smith, and Roy Rappaport to

establish the ways that a ritual—here, a systematic body of royal rituals in twenty-first century Nepal—"grows out of and then contributes to a socially and culturally specific history of practices, embedded in the bodies, experiences, memories, and ideologies of its performers and observers" (p. 16). Following the second chapter in which the author provides a thumbnail sketch of the history of the Shah dynasty—beginning with the Shah invasion of Kathmandu during its 1768 performance of the Indra festival and culminating in the 2008 national election of the Maoist party and the elimination of King Gyanendra—she devotes the next four chapters to the ways that traditional installation, succession, and reinforcement rituals publicly supported the office of kingship and the strategies by which this office could be (and ultimately was) de-constructed through the re-arrangement or elimination of these same rituals.

Chapter Three details one of the darkest days in the history of the Shah dynasty, the palace massacre of June 1, 2001, that eliminated the majority of the royal family and that left Gyanendra, the former king's brother, as the sole royal fit to rule. In describing the ways that the government handled the investigation into the massacre, coronated the new king (actually, two new kings), and cremated the many royal bodies, the author has recourse to Ronald Grimes' "ritual infelicity," a

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multi-faceted concept that accounts for the many ways that ritual can go wrong (p. 62). Though some might take issue with the broad application of the term "ritual" to an event such as the press conference at which the findings of the investigation were communicated, the author's use of Grimes' varieties of ritual infelicity here—the gloss, flop, and defeat, for example—establishes a vocabulary for understanding similar infelicities in the following three chapters.

Chapters Four through Six constitute the core of the book, as each chapter details a single "reinforcement ritual." Set in the context of a traditional Nepali festival, these rituals are meant to sustain "the social reality of kingship" generally and, in the case of Gyanendra, to make "his kingship seem established and, if not exactly inevitable, at least basically stable" (p. 92-3). In analyzing the royal rituals of "Seeing the Sacred Vest" at the Machindranath Jatra in the city of Patan (Chapter Four), of "Gaining the Goddess's Blessing" at the Indra Jatra of Kathmandu (Chapter Five), and of "Celebrating the Nation's Patriarch" during the nationwide Dasai festival (Chapter Six), the author draws attention to the various ways that the basic idioms of kingship underlie much of the religious culture of contemporary Nepal and, thus, the diverse ways that the king of Nepal is socially constructed. This inherent diversity of the king's identity—as head of

state, Commander-in-Chief of the military, scion of the Gorkha-based Shah dynasty, and (occasionally) manifestation of Vishnu (itself a contemporary construction and the tongue-in-cheek reference in the book's title)—multiplies the types of resulting infelicities performed and complicates the government's ultimate goal of the surgical removal of the king from these traditionally royal rituals and the appropriation of the power that results from their performance (p. 182).

Each of these three chapters can be read independently by an undergraduate audience to get a taste of how classical conceptions of (Hindu) kingship are negotiated in the "modern" world (the so-called "New Nepal"), though the entire monograph will be of great interest to students and scholars of South Asia interested in the performative history of the downfall of Nepal's Shah dynasty.

Michael Baltutis is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. His research and teaching focus on the religion and ritual of India and Nepal. He has published on the South Asian festival of Indra in the Mahabharata and in contemporary Kathmandu.