

1996

Book review of 'Contested Hierarchies: a Collaborative Ethnography of Caste in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal' by David Gellner and Declan Quigley (eds.),

Gregory Price Grieve
University of Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Grieve, Gregory Price (1996) "Book review of 'Contested Hierarchies: a Collaborative Ethnography of Caste in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal' by David Gellner and Declan Quigley (eds.)," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 16: No. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol16/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Lopez, Donald. 1994. *New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet*. *Tibetan Review*. 28 (5): 16-20.

Meschievitz, Catherine S. and Marc Galanter. 1982. In Search of Nyaya Panchayats: The Politics of a Moribund Institution. In Richard Abel, ed., *The Politics of Informal Justice*. New York: Academic Press.

Moore, Sally Falk. 1978. *Law as Process*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Nader, Laura. 1990. *Harmony, Ideology, Justice, and Control in a Zapotec Mountain Village*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Pospasil, Leopold. 1974. *Anthropology of Law: A Comparative Theory*. New Haven, CT: HRAF Press.

Reissman, Catherine Kohler. 1993. *Narrative Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.

Rosen, Lawrence. 1989. *The Anthropology of Justice: Law as Culture in Islamic Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____. 1984. *Bargaining for Reality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Ruffini, Julio L.. *Disputing over Livestock in Sardinia*. In Laura Nader and Harry Todd, eds., *The Disputing Process: Law in Ten Societies*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Starr, June. 1978. *Dispute and Settlement in Rural Turkey: An Ethnography of Law*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Woodburn, James. 1979. *Minimal Politics: The Political Organization of the Hadza of North Tanzania*. In William A. Shack and Percy S. Cohen, eds., *Politics in Leadership*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Anne Frechette
Harvard University

Contested Hierarchies: a Collaborative Ethnography of Caste in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. Edited by David Gellner and Declan Quigley. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Pp. xiii+324, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index.

Even though many contemporary scholars attempt to downplay its importance, South Asian Anthropology still lingers under the shadow of caste. Edited by David Gellner and Declan Quigley, *Contested Hierarchies: a Collaborative Ethnography of Caste in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal*, not only provides an innovative study into the role caste plays in the Kathmandu Valley, but also develops a systematic approach for the study of caste in general. The book is a well-rounded and balanced work which neither follows Louis Dumont's understanding of caste as the essence of South Asia (University of Chicago Press: 1980), nor that of Ron Inden who dismisses caste as the creation of Western cultural hegemony (Blackwell: 1990). Instead, David Gellner, Hiroshi Ishii, Todd Lewis, Rajendra Pradhan, Gérard Toffin and Declan Quigley—the six authors of this collection of essays—combine their vast ethnographic knowledge of the Kathmandu Valley to analyze how specific Newar caste (*Jat*) structures operate.

Besides mediating the caste debate, *Contested Hierarchies* also treads a middle path between the two extremes of Nepalese studies and the available academic methods. On one side is the static structural model, as preeminently represented in Nepalese studies by Robert Levy's *Mesocosm*, which describes the Newar city of Bhaktapur as a clockwork mechanism (University of California Press, 1990). And on the other side, are the post-modern transnational cultural flows exemplified by John Gray in his essay "Driving in a Soft City: Trafficking in Images of Identity and Power on the Roads of Kathmandu" (in *Anthropology of Nepal*, Mandala Book Point, 1994). Unlike the contextualized

studies in *Contested Hierarchies*, both Levy and Gray misconstrue the actual ethnographic evidence: Levy because he places agency in a timeless South Asian ballet, and thereby ignores the people who actually live in Bhaktapur; and Gray because he concentrates on what is 'modern' in Kathmandu, and thereby ignores how indigenous social structures have been used to negotiate the far-reaching social changes which have occurred in recent decades.

Between these two extremes, *Contested Hierarchies* takes a middle path which does not break with previous Western or South Asian scholarship on caste, but builds upon it by concentrating on specific ethnographic accounts. The essays in the book analyze such topics as the coexistence of competing caste hierarchies; the complexity of actual caste and 'sub-caste' organizations; the importance of kingship and symbols of the center; the influence of territorial location on caste; and the use of ritual specialists as markers of status and as makers of identity. The collection also demonstrates that grounding a debate on caste in Nepal is not arbitrary, but necessary. In the introduction Gellner argues that there are three main reasons for the necessity of studying caste in the Kathmandu Valley. First, Nepal is the last Hindu Kingdom and thereby preserves pre-British and pre-Muslim social patterns. Second, the Kathmandu valley's small size, makes possible a comprehensive study of all the caste groups within it. And third, because the Valley contains both cities and villages it is possible to conduct a study which avoids the rural emphasis which has biased most anthropological work on caste.

Contested Hierarchies opens with an excellent introduction by David Gellner which summarizes the valley's historical background and the contemporary context of Newar society. The central chapters trace out most of the major Newar caste groups: Buddhist merchants and priests, urban Sresthas, village patrons, Brahman kingly councilors, and various low castes such as the Citrakars. Chapters Six and Eight by Gérard Toffin are extremely useful because so little of this eminent ethnographer's work has been translated into English. Chapter two by Todd Lewis on the Buddhist Merchants of Asan Twah, is also exciting, because of how it so clearly contextualises the Uray in a specific geographic and historical location. Declan Quigley concludes **Contested Hierarchies** with a comparative analysis which locates Newar caste structures within a wider scholarly context. Quigley illustrates the necessity of using examples of caste from the Kathmandu Valley for wider theoretical debates.

While **Contested Hierarchies** is a welcome addition to Nepalese and South Asian studies, one feature of the book slightly diminishes its effectiveness. Except Todd Lewis' chapter, the book tends to ignore contemporary history. The radical changes which have

occurred since the emergence of the Peoples' Movement in 1990, the rapid 'development' which has occurred since 1951, as well as the overcrowding, inadequate drainage, pollution, traffic jams, water and electrical shortages, and soaring land prices that have become a part of everyday life since the 1980's. This lacuna is not really the fault of the authors, considering that most of the field work was done before these changes became so drastic. Still, a welcome supplement to the book would be a second volume which takes Nepal's contemporary history into account, while still concentrating on indigenous social structures. Such a work could discuss how Newars are using older social patterns to negotiate new trends in social mobility, the relaxation of caste barriers, and the rise of ethnic identity based on culture and language. It should be stressed, that my concluding criticism is offered as constructive response, and in no way diminishes the book's importance. In fact, I hope the authors take it to heart, and produce a second volume which highlights such contemporary changes.

Gregory Price Grieve
University of Chicago

Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest. Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual. David N. Gellner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. xxiii + 428, 12 Plates.

The Newars have had as much scholarly attention, perhaps more, than any group living in Nepal. One thinks immediately of the large works of Gerard Toffin, Robert Levy, Siegfried Lienhard, Dhanavajra Vajracharya, Kamal Prakas Malla, and John Locke, but also of the numerous smaller if no less important contributions of Todd Lewis, Declan Quigley, Niels Gutschow, Michael Witzel, and many others. And of course, David Gellner. Already well known through a series of excellent articles and papers, Gellner establishes himself with this work as one of the major students of Newar Buddhism. Much of the field work for it was done over a period of nineteen months from 1982 to 1984 and was continued in later trips to Nepal in '85, '86 and '89. Originally written as a doctoral dissertation at Oxford, the work that we have is considerably expanded and revised from its dissertation form. The site for the research was Patan, though the author lived in Kathmandu during his brief visit in 1989.

This is a long, careful narrative, one that contains much that is interesting methodologically, one that is rich in detail. It will benefit all who give it the thoughtful reading and study that it deserves. There is almost no issue, no concept, no argument concerning the intricacies of Buddhism in the Kathmandu Valley that the author does not touch on and attempt to answer. In that sense, it fulfills its mission to provide a general statement about Newar Buddhism, thus filling a gap

that has existed for so long in the literature of Buddhist studies. It gives, as far as I know, the most complete description of Newar Buddhism that is now in print. It is essentially a synchronic work, though it uses history in a variety of ways.

Gellner's first chapter is devoted to his aims and methods. In addition to the goals I have alluded to above, the author is interested in showing how Newar Buddhism relates to other kinds of Buddhism, in particular Theravada Buddhism, and to Hinduism, particularly as the latter can be defined in Nepal. His theory and methodology are influenced by the writings of Durkheim, Weber, Evans-Pritchard, and Dumont, on caste and religion and by Sylvain Levi, among many, on Nepal.

In the succeeding chapters, Gellner moves through caste and religious affiliation (chapter 2), the relation of Hinduism and Buddhism (chapter 3), the basic notions of Newar Buddhism (chapter 4), and its basic rituals (chapter 5). He sees as part of his central task the creation of a conceptual framework that is not imposed on his subject from without. Thus, he tells us, his approach is at least in part an emic one, an attempt to include "not just what people do, but what they think they are doing. Since Newars view their religion primarily as a set of practices, it is ritual and custom that hold the centre stage." (p. 3) He also takes pains to