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Review of 'Voicing Subjects: Public Intimacy and Mediation in Kathmandu' by Laura Kunreuther

Mary Cameron
Florida Atlantic University

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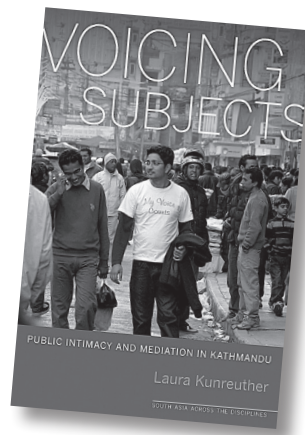


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Book Reviews



Voicing Subjects: Public Intimacy and Mediation in Kathmandu.

Laura Kunreuther. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. xv + 303 pages. ISBN 9780520270701.

Reviewed by Mary Cameron

Laura Kunreuther's study of the social interconnections between distinctly Nepali voices and emergent new reform ones in the Kathmandu Valley was sparked when, following King Birendra's 1990 concession to a multiparty system, her landlord prophetically announced, "finally we can speak." *Voicing Subjects* is a rich analysis of how three ethnographic forms of what Kunreuther calls the figure of the voice—*awaj uthaune* (raising voice/making noise), *bolaune* (calling, hailing), and *mukh herne* (seeing face)—crystallize key political, economic, and media changes during Nepal's recent, defining history. She details the practices, discourses, and technologies giving meaning to these still evolving voices that themselves continue indexing new political and intimate subjectivities of citizen-state, gender, and generational social relations in Nepal. Kunreuther particularly traces the forms of *awaj uthaune* to argue that voicing subjects' pre-democracy intimacies are rendered more public as they (en)tangle with new, liberal public voices post 1990. I recommend this book for its careful application of postmodern theory about voice to a score of ethnographic observations

masterfully assembled from key social, political, and technological moments. Those familiar with Nepali language and culture will note that the voice of interest is not the individual's *swar* (voice; some implications noted below). Still, Kunreuther argues that the connections among political change, citizen subjects, new freedoms and technologies, and intra-family intimacies give rise to "modes of selfhood central to democratic agency" (p. 5).

The book's "Introduction" details Kunreuther's theoretical model for analyzing voice as a set of practices and a category of explaining, in particular, the voice of *awaj uthaune* raised during individual and collective acts of political protest, FM radio talk show participation, and family relational dynamics. The subject voices figured in her study convey qualities of presence, immediacy, and sound (soundscapes, or arguably, *swar*), but they are not always nor necessarily forms of self-expression. Instead, voice is frequently appropriated or legitimated (mediated) by patriarchal authority figures like politicians, fathers, and brothers, and by radio talk show hosts, and the voicing subject is further interpellated by such acts as hailing and 'seeing the face' that subject the person to ideological regimes like nationalism, patriarchy, and neoliberal democracy. This chapter also includes an interesting discussion of the anthropology of vocal sound, and a credible

justification for avoiding the voice of identity politics.

Chapter One, "Intimate Callings and Voices of Reform," takes up subjectivity and voice within the debates around daughters' property *angsa* (inheritance rights) after Nepal was declared a secular state. The voice emoting from intersecting gender and class subjectivities expresses public rights and 'private' intimacies located within *maiti* (natal home) and *ghar* (marital home) symbolism, and national challenges to Hindu hegemony. At stake in the reforms were liberal notions of empowered, propertied daughters' agency and autonomy, against the "nonliberal" form of familiar recognition expressed in *bolaune*, brothers summoning sisters to the *maiti*. Inheritance reform voices—*awaj uthaune*—clashed with voices of gender hierarchical sibling intimacy, marking the "distinctions around liberal and nonliberal subjectivities" (p. 45). Kunreuther's evidence of gender-hierarchical sibling intimacy lies in a debatable, literal translation of *bolaune* as 'causing another to speak' that she claims establishes the brother's ascendant agency over the called sister. Closely tying inheritance reform dynamics to women's autonomy and ideologies of masculinity comports with prior anthropologies of Nepal, up to the point we consider Dalits, for example, who have little to no property but whose men nonetheless still 'call' their married sisters to the *maiti* (and she, like other Nepali wives, frequently hails him to her

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Mary Cameron on *Voicing Subjects: Public Intimacy and Mediation in Kathmandu*.

ghar). An important history of property inheritance in Nepal culminates in the provocative statement that “to inherit *angsa* is to be a full human being” (p. 55).

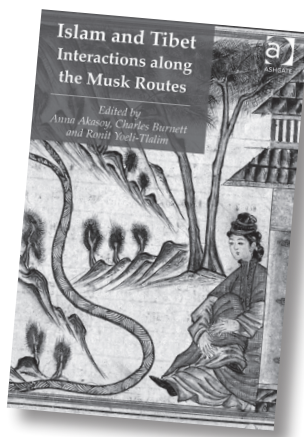
In Chapter Two, “Seeing Face, Hearing Voice,” Kunreuther finds a counterintuitive example of subject voice in the Nepali custom of *mukh herne*, which nonetheless shares with *bolaune* and *awaj uthaune* the qualities of presence, immediacy, and intimacy. Self-present actors might functionally share a “semiotic ideology” (p. 90) in the three practices, however one wonders about delayed *bolaune* hailing done via letters or through an interlocutor (common among rural families). Still, the mediated subjectivity of these three figures of the voice belies a presumed premediated, personhood existence (p. 91). For example, the face, embedded in the moral and material economy of *ijjat* (honor, respect), is always and already “a social sign rather than a sign of a unique individual” (p. 97). In-laws first seeing the daughter-in-law's expressionless face mediate and create her lineage place, just as the shamed faces of inter caste couples are rejected—never seen again—by their families. Kunreuther extends these understandings to explain how the media rupture the assumption of face-to-face interaction as the most basic social form (implications here, too, for ethnographic methodology), and to discuss how (in Western thought) vision is thought to be more distancing and objective than aurali-

ty. Her discussion of the “hegemonic status of seeing in post-Cartesian thought” (p. 94) is well taken by science and technology studies, and would be further enriched by contrasting these Western philosophies with South Asian *Samkhya* philosophy, for example. Kunreuther's final discussion of *darshan* (seeing), royal photographs, and women and nation, are further interesting examples of the face and its intersubjective, public viewing; possibly their tie-in to political subjectivity could have been made clearer.

Chapter Three, “Making Waves,” is the first of three engaging chapters devoted to ‘radio sociality’ made possible through the technology of FM radio. Kunreuther conceptually distinguishes the subject voice of radio hosts and listeners from *bolaune* and *mukh herne*, aligning it more with the political voice of *awaj uthaune*. She situates a complex discussion of how political and intimate voice are “crucial to the formation of an interior self that emerges through such novel forms of media” (p. 128), in Nepal's history of state controlled AM Radio Nepal, development and national political propaganda, private FM radio, and the radio as a commodity of first elite and then general consumer culture. From listeners clubs and English-language conflicts, call-in shows, and the changing uses of other domestic communicative technologies like the telephone, Kunreuther identifies the key moments, genres and technologies that link media

forms to emerging new ‘authentic’ subject voices.

Chapter Four, “*Mero Katha, Mero Git* (My Story, My Song),” discusses the technologies, dialogues, and subjectivities of participants in a popular FM radio show. The show's smooth-talking host, who shares with a listening public the intimacies of suffering (*dukkha*) divulged in letters and recordings, too, authenticates and mediates new subjectivities. Throughout this chapter, one can recognize *swar* as that voice with audible qualities that achieve certain desired ends, like smoothness and legitimacy. How an FM radio program, “Rumpum Connection,” interpellates the Nepali labor diaspora and the listening Nepal-based public into a recognized urban sociality is the subject of Chapter Five, “Diasporic Voices.” The growing remittance economy frames Kunreuther's questions of how telephone and radio voices “become media for producing affect, subjects, and diverse temporalities” (p. 218) centered on Nepalis living abroad but productive of public affective subjects inside Nepal, projecting the experience of diasporas back into the homeland, rather than the more common opposite direction found in long-distance nationalism. The experience of ‘connection’ frequently expressed by diasporic and urban Nepalis during the call-in show indexes yet another form of voiced public intimacy mediated by technology. Indeed, participants' references to technological connections—emails, phone calls,



etc.—are common scripts reinforcing at once authentic immediacy and mediated subject voices. Kunreuther’s example of a typical ‘conversation’ finds participants calling out each other’s kin names, thus interpellating these individuals into given social relationships.

Kunreuther’s final chapter juxtaposes Kathmandu’s figure of the voice against the country’s silence immediately following the 2001 royal massacre. Massive acts of street mourning that followed the media and government censorship were seen as public protest against ongoing government corruption in the figure of the lone surviving Shah brother and hastily crowned King Gyanendra. Widely circulated and quickly censored portraits of the royal family during these mournings showed the face “becoming a medium through which political and intimate attachments were recognized and expressed” (p. 249). Media-driven attempts to account for the massacre failed to provide the idealized and desired transparency of freedom of expression and public voice, revealing “the mediated nature of all social relations” (p. 252). Devayani Rana, Crown Prince Dipendra’s alleged lover, claimed that during a brief phone call between them moments before the massacre, “His voice was slurred” (p. 253). These uncanny words, intended as forensic evidence of his guilt, for Kunreuther more profoundly index a young man’s disintegrating self and stand as a metaphor for the eventual dissolution of the monarchy.

This study makes a major contribution to understanding new subjectivities of liberal democratic Nepal, and should stand as a foundational account of an important period in Nepal’s history.

Mary Cameron, ANHS President, is a Professor of Anthropology at Florida Atlantic University, and is currently studying and writing about medical knowledge, efficacies and power, social inequalities, philosophies of dwelling and perception, and plants in Nepal.

Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes.

Edited by Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim.
Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. 391 pages.
ISBN 9780754669562.

Reviewed by Jacqueline H. Fewkes

Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes, edited by Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, is an exciting new contribution to Himalayan regional studies. The book presents new material on an oft-overlooked topic, the role of Islam in the Himalayan region. It is the product of a conference on “Islam in Tibet” held at the University of London in 2006, and the introductory chapter makes mention of some additional papers from that conference. The introduction also includes a general discussion, providing a much-needed historical background to draw together the diverse sources included in this volume, which range, for example, from Arabic and Persian geographical literature pertaining to Tibet (Akasoy), to archaeological artifacts in Iran (Assadullah Souran Melikian-Chirvani and Arezou Azad), and 19th century love ballads in Ladakh (Georgios T. Halkias). The book contains a broad range of topics and time periods as well—from the 7th century to the present—making it initially seem difficult to review as a whole. There are, however, themes that clearly emerge from the work that draw it together. The main “story” here is one of movement, trade,