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RETHERORIZING RELIGION IN NEPAL

BY GREGORY PRICE GRIEVE

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Pp. xviii + 167, 7 black & white plates, 3 tables, \$65.00. ISBN 978-81-901867-2-8.

REVIEWED BY LINDA ILTIS

This ambitious book explores lived religious worlds and proposes giving voice to subaltern groups by widening our understanding of the nature of everyday religious practice through alternate “mediated strategies” rather than by dominant “scripturalist” approaches. For those willing to read critically between the lines of a predominantly “scripturalist” critique, this is a useful contribution to the field of Himalayan studies. Building on scholarly studies of mandalas in ritual practices of Newars, Grieve uses the construction of a mandala as a model for understanding the constructed worldviews of Hindu and Buddhist Newars. Part I looks at “Tradition, Modernity, and the Challenge of Prosaic Hinduism,” while Part II examines “Prosaic Religion and the Construction of Lived Worlds.” The text is a combination of theoretical discussion woven with very brief, ethnographic vignettes drawn from conversations with Bhaktapur residents that focus on issues of the interplay of modernity and tradition. This work is a revision of Grieve’s Ph.D. dissertation. A few references are missing for citations, on p. 54 for Vajracharya 1976, and footnotes 5 and 6 on p.45 are missing on p.142.

For scholars of Nepal and South Asia expecting much needed and sought after new ethnographic information on religion in Nepal, *Rethorizing Religion in Nepal* is a frustrating read. The work is almost entirely theoretical, though based on research conducted exclusively among Newars in Bhaktapur, a famous city in Kathmandu Valley and focus of extensive scrutiny and research among British, French, German, Italian, Nepalese, and U.S. anthropologists, historians, and geographers since the 1800s. *The Practice of Everyday Religion in Nepal*, the title of Grieve’s Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Chicago, 2002), is more informative than the title of this revised work, which addresses the same topics of the dissertation only with more theoretical overlays and trendy jargon which distances the reader from the thin ethnographic descriptions rather than making them accessible. Has religion in Nepal really been theorized so much that it now needs to be “retheorized”?

In support of his proposed need to “retheorize” religion, Grieve problematizes the study of religion in Nepal by

vaguely asserting that it has been uncritically dominated by “scripturalism,” the study of texts or scriptural study approaches rather than studies of everyday practice. This is a gross exaggeration of the reality, since South Asia textual scholars have tended to completely ignore texts of Nepali origin. If anything, serious textual studies of Nepalese manuscripts and ritual, religious texts are very few in number, while anthropological studies of religious practice and rituals in Nepal are widespread, some of which use historical textual research to complement ethnographic research and to illustrate differences between ideal and real practice. Because the recitation and use of texts is part of the lived religious experience of people in Nepal, particularly Newars, it makes sense to include some textual study as part of ethnographic research, and to understand the role of texts in ritual contexts as more than exclusive tools or property of priests or elite groups.

Grieve further suggests that studies of religious practices are not “mediated” well when they are committed to writing in books that follow a scripturalist tradition in academe (p.19 ff.). Hence, he proposes using a culturally appropriate mandala model to structure his writing in order to mediate the information he has gathered in a more culturally appropriate way. However, he himself quotes “scripture” of Western anthropological theory quite a bit and doesn’t seem to rise far above that which he criticizes. His call for further study of non-textual religious practices is welcome, though in the context of research in Nepal and South Asia he may be preaching to a choir of scholars who already embrace the idea that religion is not rigid or fixed as an artifact but flexible and changing in potentially empowering ways.

One of the most puzzling choices Grieve makes in this book is to refer to “everyday religion” as “prosaic religion,” attributing “prosaic” to Jonathan Smith’s *Imagining Religion* (1992, cited in Grieve, p. xix, no page reference given), and suggesting p.3) that it consists of a “pragmatic ritual repertoire” (according to Todd Lewis, 2000, no page reference given). Since he is overly critical of scriptural and textual studies of religion, why did he choose a literary term to highlight the subject of his study? According to the online Oxford English Dictionary, the definitions of prosaic are: “dull or commonplace, mundane, consisting of or written in prose, unpoetic, unromantic, unexciting, flat.” As in: “Turnips are prosaic, even dowdy . . .” or “The old man . . . had come to India after that for the prosaic job of organizing a service of lorries in Bengal.”

Does a foreign scholar of Nepalese religion really want to characterize the religious practices of the Newars in such unflattering terms? Even though religious action in Newar society is commonplace, I doubt Newars themselves imagine their own ritual practices, artwork, music or mandalas as flat, dull, mundane or unexciting. In fact, by his own account, Grieve’s Newar interlocutors, who have only brief voices in this work, seem to consider these qualities to be the opposite of what they hope they achieve in their finished religious

artwork, music and ritual practices. Especially Gai Jatra, the annual memorial cow ritual described briefly by Grieve, is full of poetic displays and music, filled with play on words, double entendre, outlandish dress and lampooning behavior. "Prosaic" seems to be a malapropism, a bad choice of adjective to juxtapose with any ritual or religious practice, especially this one, be it a daily practice or once-in-thirty-six-year Tantric ritual event.

Grieve attempts to incorporate changes in the mental and physical mandala mapping brought about by recent political changes, changes by local town planners related to tourist attractions, and changes implemented by German projects focused on historical preservation. This is one of the most interesting sections of the book. His descriptions of the town of Bhaktapur in political transition, trying to preserve and yet capitalize on historic monuments for tourist revenues are informative and revealing about local politics and tensions. For readers unfamiliar with the history of the Kathmandu Valley, the Hindu and Buddhist tantric religious culture of Newar people is barely mentioned or described as a context for this work. He could have made reference to *carya* and *nityapuja*, both of which are tantric ritual practices, "to be done" on a "daily" basis, but nonetheless potentially esoteric. The irony in the presentation in this book is that it uses esoteric literary theoretical contortions to label the Newar rituals as prosaic or mundane when they are not.

Grieve presents short vignettes and quotations from Newar people of differing backgrounds reflecting on their experience of and perceptions concerning the ritual activities they undertake, in some cases from within the actual context of doing them, as in his description of Mha puja (self worship), and others not (e.g. one context is while watching professional wrestling on TV p.128). Unfortunately, these vignettes are disproportionately short compared with the interspersed theoretical jargon and Grieve's superficially imposed hybrid mandala map organizational structure for the book. This becomes overly distracting and disruptive to the flow, especially for scholars who know how mandalas function in Newar religious practice and lived experience, and would rather know much more about how the artists he worked with thought about the mandalas and rituals than his invocation of Heidegger or Derrida.

Grieve's translation of some Newar and Nepali terms and concepts is heavy handed in some cases and seems to be guided by what he wants to see rather than accuracy. To translate *nakali* as "forged," for instance is disconcerting. Most Nepalis would translate *nakali* as just fake or lacking quality or substance (*na* prefix indicating without), as compared with *sakali* = real or possessing good quality (*sa* prefix indicating with). "Forged" more often implies something made or brought into existence as in fetish. The context where this comes up is in a description of a supposedly "*nakali*" goat sacrifice, which Grieve says creates a "forged mandala" (Chapter 6). Though a live goat was sacrificed at Suryavinayak, a famous Ganesh temple near Bhaktapur, something I've also witnessed there

on occasion, he leaves the reader hanging and never finally explains why the people described it as *nakali*. To add to the confusion, he suddenly jumps to talking about the cow procession and festival for 10 pages before returning to talk about using a festival and the "forged goat sacrifice" to "forge a mandala" (pp.126-129). It is difficult to understand why Grieve considers ritual adaptations to shifts in lived space to be "forging" (his gloss – faking?) a mandala. Although his informant compared the fakeness of professional wrestling with the *nakali* goat sacrifice, the informant perhaps was only alluding to the fact that this was an innovative, convenience-driven adaptation. Especially in the context of Gai Jatra, when lampooning and humorous parody and critique are possible, the taking of the goat in a ritual procession through Bhaktapur prior to sacrifice could have been just part of having fun or as his informant said "because we feel like it" (p.127).

Likewise, his representation of *samsara* seems awkward. He characterizes *samsara* as a creative goal to be achieved rather than transcended. This doesn't quite fit with everyday Newar ideals. Newars, whether Hindu or Buddhist consider *samsara* to be the transient impermanent lived existence that is replete with suffering and happiness, but not something that you'd want to prolong or arrive at indefinitely. And most Newars would say the Wheel of Life is a model for understanding *samsara*, not a mandala.

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