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Review of 'The Sacred Town of Sankhu: The Anthropology of Newar Ritual, Religion, and Society in Nepal' by Bal Gopal Shrestha

Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

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...a significant contribution toward climate change adaptation research.

Pasang Yangjee Sherpa on *Climate Change Modeling for Local Adaptation in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region*

environmental dangers are a social construct that are invisible to climate models. Therefore, they argue that having a “professional ear” (p. 69) that listens to the concerns of the local communities that are rarely heard, and the translations that respect their concerns, is necessary as we continue to address climate change vulnerability and adaptation issues. Such works differ in character and approach from climate models and arguably should come ahead of attempts to use model results to propose adaptive responses. The professional ear, they argue, needs the greatest training and application, “learning to listen to and translate what people report into actions that best serve their needs and to which they can contribute intelligently” (p. 69).

The editors of this book point out that their critical assessments and remarks are expected to assist in evaluation and refinement of climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction initiatives and thereby increase effectiveness. They argue that this book summarizes and presents the challenges of applying results from climate change modeling but that it does not present a one-size-fits-all solution that will close the modeling-to-adaptation gap.

The book then concludes that “to achieve the best of both modeling and climate change adaptation requires thoughtful and patient application of modeling, tailored to local needs, conditions, and politics,

with communities engaged around all stages of generating, interpreting, and applying the result” (p. 233).

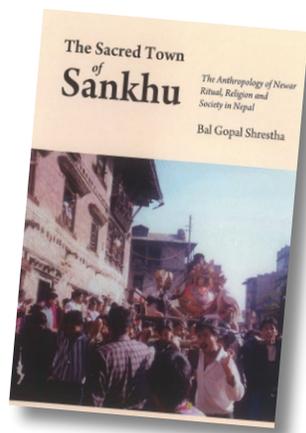
Pasang Yangjee Sherpa is an anthropologist at Penn State University. She studies climate change impact on the Sherpas of the Mt. Everest region in Nepal.

The Sacred Town of Sankhu: The Anthropology of Newar Ritual, Religion, and Society in Nepal.

Bal Gopal Shrestha. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. Xxv, 615 pages. ISBN 9781443837705.

Reviewed by Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz

In *The Sacred Town of Sankhu: The Anthropology of Newar Ritual, Religion, and Society in Nepal*, Bal Gopal Shrestha has undertaken the impressive task of detailing the ritual life of Sankhu, a ‘traditional’ Newar town located eighteen kilometers northeast of Kathmandu. Sankhu boasts a notable history in the Kathmandu Valley as a commercial center on the overland trading route to Tibet. After the construction in the late 1950s of roads that bypassed the town, Sankhu’s political and economic import in the Valley waned. Nevertheless, Sankhu continues to be a culturally and religiously prominent town today on account of its rich Newar heritage, traditions, and festivals, thirty-four of which Shrestha describes at length. Many of these traditions revolve around the goddess Vajrayogini, the patron deity of Sankhu whose main temple resides on the hilltop overlooking the town and who is worshipped widely by Nepal’s Hindus and Buddhists alike.



Specifically, Shrestha aims to demonstrate that Sankhu is a “ritually defined universe in its own right” (p. 10) and, moreover, argues that despite being an urban-oriented society, it is “not defined by socio-economic features but by [its] ritual practice” (p. 9). In this, his work calls to mind Robert Levy’s study of Bhaktapur in his 1990 book *Mesocosm* (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California). Although two other studies have focused on Sankhu (a 2002 report entitled *Ancient Town Sankhu: A Study of History, Culture, Art, and Architecture* submitted to UNESCO and Katherine Rankin’s *The Cultural Politics of Markets: Economic Liberalization and Social Change in Nepal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004)), Shrestha’s is the first published monograph to offer a comprehensive study of the town’s annual cycle of rituals and festivals.

Shrestha’s survey of Sankhu’s ritual and religious life is exhaustive. Over the course of six hundred pages and sixteen chapters, he covers a range of focused topics. He begins with two broader chapters, one on ritual calendars in Nepal and the other on Newar culture and society, which offer context and background for the subsequent foray into the specificities of Sankhu. In the following seven chapters, he covers Sankhu’s mythological and historical accounts, topographical features, socio-economic features, castes and caste-bound duties and religious affiliations, funeral

associations (*si guthis*), the role of socio-religious associations in Sankhu, and Sankhu’s ritual cycle of feasts and festivals. Three of these feasts and festivals, which Shrestha identifies as Sankhu’s most important religious traditions, are highlighted and treated separately: the festival of Svanti; the fast of Madhav Narayana and the legend of Svasthani; and the cult of the goddess Vajrayogini. The discussion of Vajrayogini in fact spans three chapters and covers the central role of the goddess in the daily and yearly ritual cycle of Sankhu locals, the rituals performed at her temple, her annual procession, and the Devi dances associated with her. Shrestha’s in-depth account of Vajrayogini leaves little doubt as to her preeminent position in the local divine hierarchy and ritual calendar.

The Sacred Town of Sankhu succeeds in illustrating the ritually-driven nature of not only Sankhu’s calendar, but its identity and community. Though, Shrestha’s further claim that Sankhu, as a “ritual universe in its own right,” has “ceremonial rather than socio-economically defined features” (p. 523) is less well substantiated. An implicit theme throughout his discussion of the local organizations, rituals, and festivals is the ways in which these traditions have been impacted, often negatively, by shifts in the social and economic fortunes of the town and its inhabitants. What could strengthen his argument would be to engage these socio-economic issues more directly in his analysis

to demonstrate the ways in which certain aspects of local ritual and practice may function outside the realm of worldly concern, while others are nonetheless subject to such mundane realities. Rankin’s work on Sankhu, for instance, illustrates the social, cultural, and political embeddedness of its markets and the “social, emotional, and economic interdependencies,” driven by “networks of obligations” (*ibid.*, p. 195), that similarly inform its ritual universe. Additionally, the bulk of Shrestha’s data is based on a town-wide social survey conducted in 1997 that focused on aspects of the ritual and social lives of locals. Shrestha has been back to Sankhu numerous times in the years since completing his dissertation (upon which this book is based) in 2002; Sankhu is in fact where Shrestha was born and raised. Though he has made an effort to update his work, the updates are uneven and are at times rushed and in want of more detailed consideration. Nepal has experienced great political, social, and economic turmoil in the last two decades in the wake of the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) and the fall of the Nepali monarchy in 2008. While Sankhu was not, to my knowledge, a site of notable Maoist activity, it nevertheless would be relevant to address the local impact experienced as a result of these events; this is especially so after the fall of the monarchy and with regard to those local rituals that historically received royal patronage in some form.

Shrestha... succeeds in illustrating the ritually-driven nature of not only Sankhu's calendar, but its identity and community.

Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz on *The Sacred Town of Sankhu*

Shrestha's *The Sacred Town of Sankhu* nevertheless makes a significant contribution to the study of Nepal's Newars with an updated examination of Newar life and culture that builds on Gopal Singh Nepali's groundbreaking study entitled *The Newars* (Kathmandu: Himalayan Book Sellers, 1965) and Gérard Toffin's *Société et Religion chez les Néwar du Népal* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984). It brings together a wealth of data for scholars who are looking for specific information about different aspects of Newar society, culture, rituals, and festivals, and is particularly of interest for the attention paid to Hindu Newars, who now constitute the majority in Sankhu. Furthermore, this detailed account of Sankhu as a sacred town is a valuable resource that documents the constitution and workings of this ancient town in the modern period. While reading it, I was reminded of the characterization of Sankhu in Daniel Wright's 1877 *History of Nepal Translated from the Parbatiya* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1997): "Sankhu, which was once a place of some importance, but is now only noted for the religious ceremonies performed there" (p. 22). Shrestha demonstrates that Sankhu remains a place of import precisely because of its rich, vibrant religious heritage that is still central the town's identity, culture, and economic practices today. In his conclusion, he suggests "most

inhabitants of Sankhu will continue practicing their traditions despite the growing attraction of modernity and globalization" (p. 528). What will be interesting to see are the ways in which or degree to which modernity and globalization impact or alter the practice and so possibly the meaning or purpose of these traditions.

Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her book manuscript (under contract with Oxford University Press) presents a comprehensive study of the local Nepali goddess Svasthani and the Svasthanivratakatha textual tradition. She is the Reviews Editor for HIMALAYA.

Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas: Experiments and Experiences.

Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram, eds.
New Delhi: Routledge, 2013. 303 pages. ISBN 9780415811996.

Reviewed by Luke Wagner

Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas: Experiments and Experiences is a collection of perspectives on the conditions of democracy in the Himalayas. As the first volume to focus specifically on democracy and democratization across the region, it is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature that insists that the politics of Himalayan states be taken seriously on their own terms and will be useful to any scholar interested in comparative or regional perspectives. As editors Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram point out in their introduction, the volume helps to clarify how democratization –and shared experiences of its unique character in the region– “stitches the independent Himalayan nations and Indian Himalayan states together into a distinctive regional political mosaic” (p. 8).

The volume is divided into two parts and consists of ten chapters, plus an introductory overview of democracy in the region. Four chapters focus on Nepal, three on states in Northeastern India, two on Jammu and Kashmir, and one on Tibetan democracy in exile. Substantively,