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Review of 'Getting Married: Hindu and Buddhist Marriage Rituals Among the Newars of Bhaktapur and Patan, Nepal' by Niels Gutschow and Axel Michaels

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Getting Married: Hindu and Buddhist Marriage Rituals Among the Newars of Bhaktapur and Patan, Nepal.


Reviewed by Michael Baltutis

Getting Married constitutes the twelfth entry in the German publisher Harrassowitz Verlag’s series “Ethno-Indology: Heidelberg Studies in South Asian Rituals.” (A thirteenth volume by Üte Husken and Axel Michaels was published in 2013.) It is also the third and final contribution by Niels Gutschow and Axel Michaels to a three-volume jointly authored series on the life-cycle rituals of the Newar populations of Bhaktapur and Patan, Nepal; their previous two offerings covered the rituals of death and the ancestors (Handling Death [2005]) and those of the initiation of boys and girls (Growing Up [2008]).

These three volumes have retained a similar format throughout: a hardcover volume lavishly illustrated with hundreds of full-color photographs and maps capturing specific moments in these local rituals and precisely locating them in the neighborhoods where they occurred. Furthermore, these volumes include transcriptions of local ritual manuals transcribed and translated from the original Newar. The authors also include several appendices containing the Sanskrit mantras employed throughout the marriage rituals and two useful glossaries of Newar and Sanskrit ritual terms as well as a general index to the entire three-volume series. Finally, an hour-long DVD documents the marriage of Mahesh Bhaju and Benela Joshi that comprises the bulk of the text of this volume.

The authors of Getting Married, as they do in the other two volumes, apply an inductive methodology in which they consider ritual performances as they are performed in the cities of the Kathmandu Valley as the starting point of their study. In the Foreword to this volume, they emphasize the authenticity of local practices and reject any attempt to consider them as “corrupt” texts: “What happens in situ is not for us a more or less accurate realisation or enactment of what is textually prescribed, but a ritual performance in its own right” (p. 2).

The volume is essentially divided into two sections: Parts I-III handle the marriage arrangements, the marriage rituals, and a concluding analysis of some of the main gestures, objects, and relationships displayed throughout the wedding ritual (164 pages); and Parts IV-V include all of the texts and appendices mentioned above (245 pages). Though much of the volume concerns the wedding of Mahesh and Benela, the authors meticulously detail, display, and compare several weddings throughout the first section, thus exemplifying the methodology they introduced in the Foreword. (Their descriptions, photographs, and video of the pastries produced and used for the ceremony – pastries in the shape of doves, fishes, and frogs – is an especially nice touch (pp. 43-46)).

Additional sub-sections detail the practical economics behind and the ritual use of flowers, jewelry, and wedding parties, with a longer subsection by two contributing authors on the use of wedding bands in the Kathmandu Valley.

Though the authors are careful to assert that there is no such thing as “the Newar marriage” (p. 141), they are clear, especially throughout the second section entitled “The Rituals,” to establish certain trends within and unique aspects of Newar, as opposed to Indo-Parbatiya, marriages. Several examples will highlight this difference. First, the occupational role of caste is important in the distribution of the labor of the wedding; a married couple from the lower Gatha caste is employed to carry ritual items in the wedding procession, including the flowers that the Gatha regularly harvest and sell throughout the year in the cities of the Valley. Second, though containing “no straightforward symbolic association” and referring to no specific deity or virtue, the betel nut is ubiquitous throughout the wedding rites at every stage as its exchange is used to mark the changing relationships of the married woman as she shifts her alliances from her natal to her married home.
The audience for Getting Married might practically be small, due to the narrowness of its ethnographic range and the cost of the volume, but it should be required reading (and viewing) for graduate students and scholars interested in the changing rituals of Hindu and Buddhist South Asia.

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


Reviewed by Steve Folmer

This book is a welcome offering by one of the premier medical anthropologists working in Nepal, Ian Harper, in which he synthesizes over 20 years of medical anthropological fieldwork, primarily in Palpa and Kathmandu. The main theme running through Development and Public Health in the Himalaya is the progressive medicalization and pharmaceuticalization of “life in the hills of Nepal” (p. 136). It brings together rich ethnographic and public health data presented against the backdrop of Harper’s professional training and experience. Three major health initiatives serve to illustrate the increasing medicalization of Nepal: TB (tuberculosis), vitamin A deficiency and mental health. The experiences of patients, healers, and institutions are also examined.

Harper explains that his book is about a “discursive gulf between tradition and modernity,” (p. 3) and the attempts to introduce and stabilize a “particular order,” a medical discourse of development, its relationship to social change, and how this gulf can be bridged in public health practices. The process of medicalization of [The authors] emphasize the authenticity of local practices and reject any attempt to consider them as “corrupt” texts.

Michael Baltutis on Getting Married: Hindu and Buddhist Marriage Rituals Among the Newars of Bhaktapur and Patan, Nepal