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Review of "Demoting Vishnu: Ritual, Politics, and the Unraveling of Nepal’s Hindu Monarchy" by Anne T. Mocko

Michael Baltutis

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Demoting Vishnu: Ritual, Politics, and the Unraveling of Nepal’s Hindu Monarchy.


Reviewed by Michael Baltutis

To say that the Shah dynasty of Nepal had been plagued with difficulties throughout its 240-year history would be an understatement: the family line was strewn with infant rulers due to its strict rule of descent through primogeniture, was divested of its power and kept under virtual palace arrest for more than a century by the upstart Rana family, was nearly eliminated in a bloody palace massacre for more than a century by the upstart Rana family, was nearly eliminated in a bloody palace massacre, and engaged in a decade-long battle with Maoist rebels who sought to eliminate all vestiges of the Hindu monarchy. All forms of power are tenuous, but the elevated status of a single hereditary family whose reliance upon the idioms of Hindu monarchy in the twenty-first century is certainly among the most tenuous of all. And, in fact, the center could not hold; in a process that lasted from 2006 to 2008, the Shah king, Gyanendra, was summarily stripped of all of his rights, responsibilities, and powers as the Hindu King of Nepal, and was replaced by a similarly tenuous series of elected leaders representing parties from across Nepal’s political spectrum.

Anne Mocko, in her book Demoting Vishnu, explores this narrow and contentious time frame: the final years of Gyanendra, of the Shah dynasty, and of the very institution of Hindu kingship in Nepal. The author’s focus on such a short duration allows her to maintain an intense focus throughout the book on its methodological approach to kingship in general and to the person of Gyanendra specifically. Namely, “it was the ongoing practice of royal rituals that at a most basic level underwrote his social identity as ‘king,’ and it was the collapse or discontinuation of those rituals that would enable the institution of kingship to be permanently brought to a halt” (p. 3). Placing her thesis loosely within a framework of classical works on kingship (Sir James Frazer and A.M. Hocart), the author incorporates a variety of sources in her analysis of the monarchy’s unraveling: histories of Nepali kingship, local newspaper accounts detailing Nepali palace intrigue, and interviews with Nepali officers from the government, the palace, and local organizations.

But it is the author’s use of scholarship from within the field of ritual and performance studies that most productively structures her argument regarding the ritual basis of Nepali royalty. Her first chapter introduces the connections between ritual, politics, and kingship, and cites such scholars as Judith Butler, J.Z. Smith, and Roy Rappaport to establish the ways that a ritual—here, a systematic body of royal rituals in twenty-first century Nepal—“grows out of and then contributes to a socially and culturally specific history of practices, embedded in the bodies, experiences, memories, and ideologies of its performers and observers” (p. 16). Following the second chapter in which the author provides a thumbnail sketch of the history of the Shah dynasty—beginning with the Shah invasion of Kathmandu during its 1768 performance of the Indra festival and culminating in the 2008 national election of the Maoist party and the elimination of King Gyanendra—she devotes the next four chapters to the ways that traditional installation, succession, and reinforcement rituals publicly supported the office of kingship and the strategies by which this office could be (and ultimately was) de-constructed through the re-arrangement or elimination of these same rituals.

Chapter Three details one of the darkest days in the history of the Shah dynasty, the palace massacre of June 1, 2001, that eliminated the majority of the royal family and that left Gyanendra, the former king’s brother, as the sole royal fit to rule. In describing the ways that the government handled the investigation into the massacre, coronated the new king (actually, two new kings), and cremated the many royal bodies, the author has recourse to Ronald Grimes’ “ritual infelicity,” a
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*Michael Baltutis on *Demoting Vishnu: Ritual, Politics, and the Unraveling of Nepal’s Hindu Monarchy.*