

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

by Anne T. Mocko. New York: Oxford University Press. 2016, x+246 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-027522-8, USD 36.95.

Reviewed by Caleb Simmons

In *Demoting Vishnu*, Anne T. Mocko takes as her cue the disestablishment of Nepal's Hindu Monarchy in 2008, which was the culmination of a two-year struggle that started in 2006. She thoroughly and convincingly argues throughout the book that the virtually peaceful transition from kingship to democratic governance was facilitated by the removal of the royal ritual apparatus in the years leading up to King Gyanendra's resignation. Thus, Mocko affirms that Nepali kingship was embodied through the king's role as the political ritual actor *par excellence* or, to put it in her own words: '[i]t 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; see also p. 9 regarding ritual as part of the monarchy's broad system of practices). Over the course of the book, the author examines the royal rituals that were central (or as Mocko puts it 'foundational', p. 13) to the construction and constitution of Nepal royalty and how these practices were both unravelled and reconstituted within the new Nepali government. Overall, Mocko's monograph is a robust, well-argued and novel study of South Asian kingship that should be of interest to anyone who is curious about modern kingship and/or royal rituals.

Mocko bases her study on scholarship on both kingship and ritual studies, incorporating a wide range of materials from the latter. Indeed, pages 15-24 of the 'Introduction' provide a lucid foray into ritual theory that lays the foundations for the entire study. Given my own interest in kingship and issues of sovereignty, I would have liked the same attention to have been paid to discussing the theoretical basis of South Asian kingship and, more broadly, kingship in general. Although there are occasional references to broader ritual trends in South Asian kingship,

for example to Chola kings and to Telugu literature, and a vast array of references in the endnotes to secondary material on royal practice, kingship as a category of scholarly inquiry has for the most part been neglected, save a brief definition of it through a critique of James Frazer, A. M. Hocart, and Louis Dumont and a fleeting mention of Ronald Inden and Clifford Geertz. I hate to critique a book for what has not been included in it, but the author inadvertently raises this issue when she proposes her 'counterfactual thesis' that Gyanendra would have remained king even without any connection to government and palace if he had retained his ritual role (p. 13). Here, I think that a discussion of South/East Asian kingship in Nicholas Dirks, Ronald Inden, Stanley Tambiah, Hermann Kulke, etc. or broader work on the theological/ritual constitution of kingship, like Ernst Kantorowicz's, could have provided a context to make this 'counterfactual thesis' less counterfactual. This critique, however, does not spoil the overall work, and any concern subsides once the author moves beyond the 'Introduction', taking the reader further into the context of Nepal and its complex royal rituals.

All the chapters provide helpful insight into the history and ritual foundations of modern Nepali kingship and its demise (Chapter 2 provides a history of the Shah Dynasty; Chapter 3 rituals of succession; Chapter 4 Bhoto Jatra, the chariot/investiture ceremony) but Chapters 5 and 6, which deal with Kumari worship during Indra Jatra and Dasai/Tika Day respectively, are particularly interesting and discerning. In Chapter 5, the author takes the reader through several years of Indra Jatra to demonstrate the centrality of the king's relationship with the goddess Kumari and how her blessings 'made certain configurations [ie royal authority] of politics legible and available for thought [by the wider public]' (p. 143). In Chapter 6, we see how Dasai transitioned from a royal context to the democratically elected government. Key to the analysis is the role of the domestic ritual of the tika blessing that the familial patriarch conveyed upon junior members of the family. Mocko argues that royal rituals, particularly the tika blessing, united the entire kingdom as one large extended family over which the king was the head, the patriarch of the kingdom. This transitioned to the office of the president – or what Mocko labels 'patriarch-in-chief' – who likewise served/s as the ritual protagonist of the Dasai tika ritual and issued/s these blessings as the new patriarch of the nation.

Demoting Vishnu ends with a short conclusion, a brief Afterword in which the author discusses Nepal and her informants in the wake of the 2015 earthquake, and three appendices that include the 2006 Proclamation which withdrew power from the king, a list of the author's interviews and a glossary of Nepali terms.

To sum up, *Demoting Vishnu* is an excellent work of scholarship, which is certainly worth the read. This book is a great resource for those interested in modern Nepal or its contemporary political situation. Furthermore, anyone working on South Asian kingship or modern and/or contemporary politics and pondering the dissolution of monarchies and the establishment of democratic governments, should consult this work. The book is eminently readable and could readily be used on graduate courses and, even more broadly, in undergraduate surveys.

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