

*Célébrer le Pouvoir: Dasāi, une fête royale au Népal* edited by Gisèle Krauskopff and Marie Lecomte-Tilouine. Paris: CNRS Editions, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme de Paris, 1996. ISBN 2-271-05321-8, ISBN 2-7351-0701-9. 367 pages, 48 black & white and colour plates, 15 figures (tables, maps, plans). English and French summaries.

Reviewed by András Höfer

Considering that as an event of general renewal, tantamount to a symbolic refounding of the realm, Dasāi constitutes not only the largest, but also the most political festival of the year in the kingdom of Nepal, a comprehensive study like this publication was long overdue. It is the first of its kind to appear in a European language. Eight of the nine contributions on particular areas—including Sallyan, Argha, and Gulmi in Western Nepal; Gorkha, Tanahu, and Patan in the central part of the country; Ilam in East Nepal; and the Nepalese community of Lhasa—benefit from the authors' thorough acquaintance with the local contexts, while the ninth is a synopsis of sporadic reports in the government daily *The Rising Nepal* on the main events in Kathmandu. Apart from the fact that far western Nepal is not dealt with in the book, the selection may be regarded as fairly representative, especially since some of the religious groups and ethnic minorities are given equal consideration. Its scope, and the wealth in new data and new insights it offers (to which this review can hardly do justice) concerning not only the Dasāi ritual as such, but also local social structures and regional history, make this book an indispensable source. It is admirably framed by the editors' Introduction which—concise and exhaustive at the same time—provides a systematic perspective on what is expounded in greater detail, but, of necessity, with less emphasis on the general context, in the individual contributions.

What the book as a whole demonstrates above all is that Dasāi is a multifaceted and utterly complex event, not least because its present forms have resulted from the selective integration of a variety of historically older, local, and pan-Indian elements which have been rooted in, or have grown around, an essentially Vedic core. As a royal ritual in particular, Dasāi can in part be traced back to the ancient Brahmanic *rājabhīṣeka*, *rājasūya*, or *āsvamedha*. Its general theological background draws mainly on Puranic sources; its symbology is influenced by Tantricism; and both its basic scheduling and 'casting' are referred back to the great epics. Dasāi also embraces local, in part pre-Brahmanic or pre-Hinduistic, cults, as is illustrated for example by the special relationship between the King and Pachali Bhairava. In addition, all these components include and instrumentalize certain universal patterns of symbolism, such as the *axis mundi* and other indications of a characteristically cosmocentric spatial orientation of the site of performance, the motif of hierogamy, the idea of reversal in liminal and order-out-of-chaos sequencings, or the equally

familiar passages and transfers between 'inside' and 'outside' spheres, etc.

Even though traditional Dasāi culminates in the cyclical renewal of the divinely sanctioned authority of the patrimonial ruler as supreme landlord, defender of *dharma*, protector of his subjects, and potential conqueror, it is centred less around the King than around the Goddess, as Toffin points out. One may add that this is also statistically evident, for it is the Goddess, rather than the King, whom the mass of the population worships within a period of 10 or even 14 days in a series of rituals addressed to those of her various aspects or forms which, as special tutelaries, local manifestations, etc., have some particular, vital relevance to the individual, his family, kin group, ethnic or local community. The authors do their best to unravel the multifarious ties and rapprochments among these aspects by demonstrating how apparent diversities come to be bundled into a certain unity, and how an apparent oneness can be interpreted as being diversified into a spectrum of components, as emerges from the different names of the Goddess alone or from the positional identity she may assume at a given time or in a given place. It is impossible to establish one-to-one equations among the variously named manifestations, nor can 'the eight mother goddesses', 'the nine *durgās*', or 'the seven sisters', etc. be simply 'reduced' to the Goddess. Often, all one can state is the fact of their having been set into relationship with one another through a certain sequence of ritual acts. The relationship can find its expression in terms of complementary opposition, such as, for instance, the opposition between the warlike virgin aspect of the Goddess controlling the periphery and her peaceful mother aspect protecting the centre of the realm. That three goddesses of quite different provenance—namely (a) Maneshvari, a tutelary of the ancient Licchavi kings, (b) Taleju, a tutelary of the mediaeval Malla kings, later adopted by the Shah kings, and (c) Bhagavati (Durga Bhavani), a tutelary of the Shah kings—have been accommodated cumulatively, without losing their names and separate functional identities, into the royal ritual of Dasāi in Patan (Toffin), illustrates the extent to which the multiple 'thusness' of the Goddess can also be conditioned by political interest in establishing continuity for the sake of legitimation.

Several authors contribute substantially to a discussion, from a comparative point of view, of the structural coherence of the liturgy of Dasāi as a whole. The editors even seem to aim to visualize the series of ritual events as some sort of Maussian *fait social total* that involves virtually all units of society and polity through manifold references to a more or less consistent corpus of traditional knowledge relating to cosmology, mythology, history, environment, agricultural cycle, etc. It is demonstrated in detail that, not unlike the Indian *Dasaharā* or *Durgāpūjā*, Dasāi in Nepal is focused, above all, on achieving the 'presence' of the Goddess. She 'descends' and is caused to take up her abode in the water jar (*ghaṭa*) on the first day; is invoked into the *bel* tree on the sixth day; is made 'present' in the *phūlpātī*, a bunch of flowers and plants, on the seventh day, and in arms and weapons on the eighth and ninth days, to be extolled and then dismissed on the tenth day. And, not unlike what we have in India, the first six days are devoted to 'private' rituals in the 'inside' or domestic sphere, such as the establishment of the *dasāi ghar* as temporary

chapels with the *ghaṭa*, or the worship of kin group tutelaries, etc., which also serve as preliminaries to what follows. It is on the seventh day that the public phase and the festival proper begin with the arrival of the *phūlpātī* carried in a procession from the periphery into the capital; it represents the Goddess as the 'bride', who through 'union' with the King imbues the latter with divine 'energy', *śakti*. The eighth and ninth days (Aṣṭamī and Navamī), spent with animal sacrifices and the worshipping of arms and tools, culminate in the nocturnal-liminal hecatomb of Kālarātrī, alluding to the struggle of the Goddess with the forces of evil. The tenth day, Vijayādaśamī, commemorating the Goddess's victory over the buffalo demon (or Rama's victory over the demons of Lanka), serves to reaffirm the bonds that exist between King and subjects, superior and subordinate, patron and client, landlord and tenant, senior and junior, male and female kin, etc.; the King receives the blessing of the Goddess from the Brahman and conveys it, *pars pro toto* or symbolically, in the *ṭikā* mark to all of his subjects, who in return express their allegiance through prestations and specific gestures of reverence. (The Introduction also contains some clarifying remarks on the famous *pajani*, the annual screening and appointment of officials during the Rana period.)

The book offers a great deal of new information on the conditions and modal variants of participation, in the central rituals, of those groups that are in a sense 'outside' or 'beyond' Hindu caste society. Muslim bangle-makers, whom traditional legislation classified as a special category within the impure (though not untouchable) castes, participate only as political subjects and as tenants of the King's local representative, but refuse to receive the *ṭikā* from the latter as a token of their denial of anything which tends to establish the Hindu ruler's authority as sacred (Gaborieau). More complex is the case of the ascetics whose attitude depends on their sect's individual relationship to the Goddess and/or to the ruler. Ideally, as holders of inalienable titles to land and revenue they are not tenants, and as renouncers not subjects either. Yet the Dasnāmī sect's manner of observing Dasai (members personally kill sacrificial animals; rituals are performed by Newar Brahmans who give *ṭikā* to the abbot, etc.) reveals that their monasteries are considered to be part of the symbolic unity of the kingdom (Bouillier).

Even more revealing is the role of the Kānphaṭā sect, whose military tradition in India and close association with the ruling dynasty in Nepal are well known. As priests attending the local manifestation of Bhairava in Phalābāṅg (Sallyan), the yogis are also the guardians of the ancient weapons. Without their mediation these symbols of royal authority cannot be transferred by the Brahman priest to the Goddess or 'activated' by the latter for the duration of the main ritual. This is paralleled by local myth and belief which identifies Bhairava and Ratannāth as the providers of that which is indispensable to the king's rule by dint of the Goddess's *śakti*, namely weapons and territory. The reader is tempted to see in this configuration, lucidly presented by Krauskopff, not only a local or a sect-specific elaboration of the different levels of Śiva's identity at work in the act of renewal through the 'union' of the male and female principles, but also partial evidence for what Heesterman expounded as the conundrum of the Indian king's authority. Both Bhairava, the terrify-

ing, bloodthirsty form or aspect of Śiva, and Ratannāth, the non-violent divine Śaiva yogi, appear as the supreme landlords (said to be 'the ancient kings' and treated as *genii loci*) of the territory of the realm. Bhairava, who is associated with both elemental, untamed nature and the worldly power of the *ṣatriya*, is above all master of the originally uninhabited site of Dasai, that is, the centre (fortress, *koṭ*) from which authority is being exerted over the kingdom. Ratannāth, in contrast, acting by virtue of superhuman 'ascetic energy' (*tapas*), bestows the territory on the future king in the forest—or, more precisely, in an enclave that is free of the violence inherent in politics and civilization, namely in the forest of a 'utopian kingdom', as Malamoud dubbed the topos of the woods where sages peacefully coexist with a flourishing nature that remains undisturbed by cultivation and domestication. Significantly, the forest in which Ratannāth meditates is situated on the summit of a mountain, just like the abode of Śiva and Pārvatī, and the future king is a princely hunter whose arrow becomes sublimated, through contact with the yogi's body, into an attribute of Śiva and the Goddess. The myth doubtless takes up the classic Indian idea which asserts that the ultimate source of the king's power—and also the source of *dharma*, according to one of the *purāṇas*—lies in the wilderness (*vana*, *araṇya*), outside the cultivated and inhabited area (*kṣetra*). (It might be recalled that reflections of this idea in contemporary cults in Maharashtra have been the subject of sound studies by G.D. Sontheimer and R. Jansen.)

For the Yakthumba (Limbu) ethnic group too, the authority of the chief (*hāṅg*) once derived from the wilderness and was acquired, through the ordeal of a ritual hunt, from a mountain goddess. While at that time, in the tribal past, divine life-force and legitimation for rule could be obtained only by the bravest among the heads of the households in a competition of social equals, now, in the peasant present, the *subbā*'s office is a hereditary monopoly held by his lineal descendants and sanctioned through appointment by the Nepalese state. Sagant's stylistically captivating essay analyzes this qualitative change as representative of ethnic groups undergoing a gradual process of detribalization resulting from their integration into a centralistic polity dominated by ethnic and cultural high-caste 'others'. (It remains unclear, however, how far the author is presenting a *reconstruction* of the tribal past, which supposedly knew neither social heteronomy nor alienation of the individual, and how far he is discussing its *construction* by his informants. In any case, his argumentation betrays a rather deductive *façon de penser*, notwithstanding his profound ethnographic competence.) The degree to which the Yakthumbas have been adopting the Dasai of these 'others' is convincingly shown to be closely interrelated with the degree to which kinship and other tribal institutions have been 'hollowed out' and/or functionally converted under the long-term pressure of external economic and political factors since the Shah conquest of Eastern Nepal. And the way in which these adoptions have come to be woven into the context(s) of traditional Yakthumba ritual attests to continuous efforts at rendering the results of transformation coherently meaningful, both to one's own group and the others, as part of an ethno-specific configuration of practice and belief. It is, therefore, not enough to state, as Jest does in his otherwise informative contribution, that certain ethnic groups, for instance the Tamangs and Tamus (Gurungs), ignore the doctri-



nal meaning that Dasai has for the Hindus and observe it only in a rudimentary manner, simply 'following custom'.

Since Nepalese Dasai was not part of South Asian colonial 'discourse formation', Western accounts of its history are scarce. We learn that the earliest evidence for the celebration of Dasai stems from fourteenth-century Jumla, but that there is reason to presume that it existed as early as the Licchavi period. Gorkha, in the 17th century, contributed much to the development of those components which constitute the political core of Dasai and are centred around the Shah King and his family, above all the symbolic renewal of allegiance within the framework of specific prestations and the ceremonies of *tika*-giving, which, with certain local deviations, were performed until recently almost nationwide, and not only among Hindus. As the editors emphasize, the integration of the various older, local, or regional traditions of Dasai by the centralizing Shah and Rana administrations was part of the political integration of the country. One may add that what was imposed on the population in this process was not the ritual as such, but rather what gave it meaning, namely the tenurial system established after 1769 and controlled by what M.C. Regmi called the 'centralized agrarian bureaucracy' of the Nepalese state. This is particularly true of certain ethnic and religious minorities, many of which had no original tradition of Dasai of their own, and whose members, as new tenants, were required to supply animals for sacrifice and contribute various material accessories to rituals executed either by the landlord, or by headmen and revenue collectors as local agents of the state. And it appears quite logical that the transformations we can now observe in patterns of liturgy and participation set in with the abolition of precisely that tenurial system in the 1950s and 1960s. Since not only the land reforms, but also the transition to election-based political participation have gradually undermined the position of local dignitaries, the resulting status insecurity may well have led to simplifications or even confusion in the public ceremony of *tika*-giving; the traditional, strictly hierarchic pattern of *tika*-giving survives only where traditional authority is still recognized, namely among one's own kin. The growing importance of the domestic dimension of Dasai—to the detriment of the public or state ritual proper—is such that in the end, the Goddess is likely to keep her *devotees* but lose her *subjects*, to paraphrase Ramirez (p.237).

One of the most significant developments highlighted in the book is the gradual 'de-royalization' of the ritual. Even in Kathmandu, the King's central position has become somewhat eclipsed by the fact that he is no longer the patrimonial ruler who once personally appointed the officials and assigned revenue. In the capitals of former kingdoms, such as Patan, Arghakot, Isma (Gulmi), or Phalabang, the change is more perceptible. Notwithstanding the remarkable continuity the local schedule of Dasai has otherwise preserved in these places, the absence of the king's person since the late 18th century has resulted in a blurring of the traditionally radical distinction between the role of the warrior ruler as the patron, donor, and executor of sacrifice (*yajamāna*) on behalf of the realm as a whole and that of the Brahman as the king's plenipotentiary sacerdotal expert who gives effect to the act of sacrifice. In Arghakot, for example, descendants of the former local

dynasty still cooperate, but have ceased to assume the king's function as a mediator between his subjects and the Goddess (Ramirez). In Isma, the Brahman has succeeded in usurping the ancient king's sword, with the result that it is now treated in the ritual as a divinity, rather than as a symbol of royal authority and weapon of conquest (Lecomte-Tilouine).

Over the last decades, especially since the fall of the Panchayat system, Dasai has also become an issue in the struggle for political and cultural emancipation, characterized by demonstrations of traditionalism, confessional divergence, or open ideological opposition. While, apart from some minor later 'additions' imposed by the Shah administration, the Newars of Patan, Hindus and Buddhists alike, adhere to their own liturgy of Dasai as it was established under Malla rule in the 17th century and thus emphasize their identity as a separate cultural group living on the territory of their former kingdom (Toffin), the Buddhist Sherpas of Khumbu observe a period of fasting to offset the sin they think the Hindus commit by killing innumerable animals during the festive days (Jest), and radical revivalists among some other non-Hindu ethnic minorities in the hills now plead for an abandonment of the celebration of Dasai, on the grounds that it is a mere pageant which cements 'Hindu supremacy' (the book contains little information on the latter movement).

Will Dasai survive, endure the instability entailed by on-going socio-economic change, and resist missionary activity, political agitation, or disenchantment? Considering both the remarkable continuity and the flexibility in its development hitherto, which are so cogently demonstrated in this book, the reader cannot but conclude that it most probably will.

*Célébrer le Pouvoir* is a particularly fine piece of analytic regional ethnography that rightly takes into account the relevance of diachrony and the larger Indian context as a comparative background. Its methodically pragmatic orientation allows for unbiased, meticulous documentation and leaves little room for generalization above the level of intracultural interpretation. With the exception of Unbescheid's brief reflections on the formation of local traditions and on the dimension of time in ritual, none of the authors broaches the question of the theoretical issues involved or takes notice of the recent literature on ritual. In two respects, the book fails to live up fully to its own programme. First, it tends to overlook the fact that Dasai is not only *Durgapūjā*, but also *Durgotsava*. Although, in their Introduction, the editors rightly stress that Dasai does possess the characteristics of a festival (*utsava*) which goes hand in hand with opulence and mirth, in fact all the contributions concentrate on the ritual proper as executed and interpreted by the specialists; they circumvent the sociologically important issue of 'popular participation' in its religious and profane manifestations, including deviations from the official 'libretto'. One would like to know a little more about the recruitment, among laymen, of both active and passive participants in the festivities, and about the way they organize, finance, and experience the latter. Second, not all of the contributors heed the editors' claim which contends that Dasai is more than just a plain symbolic enactment of power relationships for the sake of their legitimation, and that, instead, one should regard the actor-participants as agents

creating the ritual and creating their own roles, which in turn do have a direct impact on the real relationships of power and authority. Rather than elaborating on the question of what degree of autonomy the ritual may possess as an intrinsic factor, the authors have a tendency to treat the ritual as a reflection of existing or former political and social configurations—even though one of the lessons the reader can draw from their own descriptions is that the ‘ritual of politics’ and the ‘politics of ritual’ are often inseparable from one another, and that (as recently stressed by Catherine Bell) ritual is part of those negotiated appropriations, distancings, and conflictual interpretations that make up a given system of sociopolitical relationships.

The analysis of the theological foundations of *Dasai* may lack the penetrating (albeit somewhat synthetic, omniscience-claiming) argumentation and verbal virtuosity of Östör in his *The Play of the Gods* (Chicago, 1980), yet *Célébrer le Pouvoir* remains convincing precisely because of its openness in confronting problems of interpretation. That some of the authors occasionally show a slight tendency to over-interpretation is no wonder in view of the complexity of the data available. One must concede that, in certain instances at least, when efforts at classifying, deriving, or connecting the facts observed run into difficulty, it proves hard indeed for the student to decide whether he should place the blame on an inherent ambiguity or ‘polythetic’ coherence of the phenomena, on the momentary inadequacy of the evidence at hand, or simply on the inadequacy of his own method. And if the ambiguities turn out to be inherent, it may be equally hard to determine to what extent they result from conscious *intention* (‘invention of tradition’) or are the *effect* of an accumulation, side by side, of historically and ideologically different legacies, and whether, in the latter case, the effect is merely contingent or should be imputed to what Kapferer once tried to isolate as the self-structuring of ritual. The issue seems to be closely connected with that of the efficacy of ritual and feast. In any case, it must be borne in mind that the participants themselves, even the specialists among them, have to put up with a number of indeterminacies and disputed alternatives in the meaning of what they are doing, and that this is so does not weaken their motivation in the least.

Apart from some misprints and defective transliterations (a few of them appear repeatedly, such as ‘Kālī Yuga’, instead of Kali Yuga), the typographical presentation is good. With regard to certain important details, here and there a little more precision would have been welcome. For example, given the relevance of the age and sex of animals as criteria for their eligibility for sacrifice, the reader is left wondering whether *buffle* denotes a male or a female water buffalo (*rāgo* versus *bhaisī*), and can only make a guess that what is being called *bufflon* (‘buffalo calf’, ‘young buffalo’) may in fact be a young, but sexually mature male buffalo. (As a rule, the male buffaloes one sights in the hills of Nepal are not kept for more than three to four years and thus tend to be smaller in size than fully grown buffalo cows.) The name of the procession or ‘war dance’, which, on the tenth or eleventh day, celebrates the victory over the demons, namely *sarāē* or *sarāya*, also given as *sarāi*, certainly has nothing to do with the intransitive verb *sarnu*, ‘to move’ (p.227); rather, the word seems to be a regional variant of *sarāi* or *sarāni*, ‘praising’, ‘extolling’, and is in any

case etymologically akin to *sarāunu*, ‘to praise’ (cf. also Hindi *sarāha*, *sarāhan*, ‘praise’, ‘eulogy’). If this highly important publication has any major deficiency at all, it is the lack of an index.

*On the Edge of the Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal* by Mary Cameron. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 314 pp.

Reviewed by Ben Campbell

The Untouchable communities of Nepal have received comparatively little anthropological attention, and this book puts them centre stage. Focusing on a number of ‘artisan’ castes living in Bajhang District in the far west of the country, Cameron mixes an accessible ethnographic style with a provocative theoretical examination of caste and gender hierarchies.

Cameron argues that, for Hindu women, gender and caste have separable strategic effects that can produce different kinds of boundaries. Rather than seeing gender as another manifestation of a hierarchizing principle emanating from distinctions between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’, she disentangles gender from caste. In order to do this, however, she claims that gender difference is constructed in a way that does correspond to perceptions of castes—but in terms of *jāt* rather than *varṇa*, i.e. as characteristic social types that need not emphasize ritual inequality. She insists most strongly that low-caste women do not share the ideological and practical motivations of high-caste women, in the ways that gender merges with caste in the dowry-circulating processes of domestic cultural prestige among Bahun, Thakuri, and Chetri. The low castes’ practices of bride-price and cross-cousin marriage avoid the high castes’ obsession with affinal hierarchies and the status implications of the gift of a virgin-bride.

The book then pays particular attention to the ways in which low-caste women’s agency can be discerned in arenas of autonomous social practice, which include economic diversification through wage work, freedom to remarry, and even comparative ‘marital satisfaction’. Cameron’s analysis of intercaste relations explicitly highlights everyday rather than ritual concerns, and offers a significant contrast to approaches which have stressed the hierarchical meanings of gifts that remove auspiciousness down the social scale. She sides with Quigley, Appadurai, and others in arguing that forms of dominance rest in the control of people and resources, not in ritual purity. The title of the book is thus an argument against the privileging of auspiciousness as an explanatory basis for the logic of caste inequality, and yet the low castes’ condition of marginality, characterized by both autonomy and subservience, is one that occasionally invokes the auspiciousness of events—weddings, for example—as a counter to the high castes’ esteem for textual knowledge.