
Reviewed by András Höfer

Considering that as an event of general renewal, tantamount to a symbolic refounding of the realm, Dasai 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 Salliyan, Argha, and Gulmi in Western Nepal; Gorkha, Tanah, 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 Dasai 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 Dasai 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, Dasai can in part be traced back to the ancient Brahmanic rājabhisēka, rājasūya, or asvamedha. Its general theological background draws mainly on Puranic sources; its symbolism is influenced by Tantricism; and both its basic scheduling and ‘casting’ are referred back to the great epics. Dasai 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 Dasai 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 rapprochements 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 Dasai in Patan (Toffin), illustrates the extent to which the multiple ‘thushness’ 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 Dasai 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 Daśāharā or Durgāpūja, Dasai 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 (ghanā) on the first day; is invoked into the bel tree on the sixth day; is made ‘present’ in the phulpāti, a bunch of flowers and plants, on the seventh day, and in arms and weapons on the eighth and ninth days, to be exulted 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 dasai ghar as temporary...
Even more revealing is the role expounded as elaboration of the different close association with the ruling dynasty. Carom 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 by dint of the Goddess's

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 tikā 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 Dasnami sect's manner of observing Dasai (members personally kill sacrificial animals; rituals are performed by Newar Brahmins who give tikā 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 Kāmphāṭa 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 Phalābāng (Sailyan), 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 sakti, namely weapons and territory. The reader is tempted to see in this configuration, lucidly presented by Krauskopf, 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 terrifying, 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 geni lioct) of the territory of the realm. Bhairava, who is associated with both elemental, untamed nature and the worldly power of the kṣatriya, is above all master of the originally uninhabited site of Dasai, that is, the centre (fortress, kot) 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 Pārvati, 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 purānas—lies in the wilderness (vana, aranya), outside the cultivated and inhabited area (kṣetra). (It might be recalled that reflections of this idea in contemporary cultures 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 (hani) 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 subba'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 doctrin
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 prestation and the ceremonies of tikā-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 regional traditions of Dasai by the centralizing Shah and Rana administrations was part within the framework of specific presentations and the ceremonies of which, quite logically, true of namely the tenurial systems 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 tikā-giving; the traditional, strictly hierarchic pattern of tikā-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 patronal 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 (ṣajāmana) on behalf of the realm as a whole and that of the Brahman as the king’s pleni-potentiary 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 Durgapuji, but also Durgotsava. Although, in their Introduction, the editors rightly stress that Dasai does possess the characteristics of a festival (uitava) 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 laaymen, 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
The analysis of the theological foundations of Dasai may lack the penetrating (albeit somewhat synthetic, omniscience-claiming) argumentation and verbal virtuosity of Østör 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 Kasperer 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 *bhūla* denotes a male or a female water buffalo (*rāgo* versus *bhaśi*), and can only make a guess that what is being called *bhūlō* ("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 *śarāṭ* or *śarāyā*, also given as *śarāți*, certainly has nothing to do with the intransitive verb *śarūn*, 'to move' (p.227); rather, the word seems to be a regional variant of *śarāti* or *śarānī*, 'praising', 'extolling', and is in any case etymologically akin to *śarānu", 'to praise' (cf. also Hindi *śarāha*, *śarāhan*, 'praise', 'eulogy'). If this highly important publication has any major deficiency at all, it is the lack of an index.

**Reviews**


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.