

ethnographic and theoretical building blocks for future generations of Himalayan anthropologists.

***Ancestral Voices: Oral ritual texts and their social contexts among the Mewahang Rai of east Nepal* by Martin Gaenzle**, (Performanzen: Interkulturelle Studien zu Ritual, Spiel und Theater, Band 4). **Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002. ISBN 3-8258-5891-x, 12 figures, 13 photographs, index, 338 pp.**

Reviewed by Mark Turin

This important contribution to Himalayan anthropology and linguistics commences with a personal tale: during his first visit to the Mewahang Rai area of Eastern Nepal, Gaenzle witnessed a festive autumn season ritual. The author was so moved by this “strange expression of a different dimension” (p. 2) that he devotes over 300 pages to describing, analysing and understanding these particular speech acts. *Ancestral voices*, in the author’s own words, “explores the properties of the textual tradition as well as its role in Mewahang social life” (p. 2). In so doing, it embodies the best of European social science: applying rigorous analysis to a wealth of descriptive detail, and reaching careful but weighty conclusions.

Much of the material which informs the present study was collected in the village of Bala in Sankhuwa Sabha district, during the mid-1980s and early 1990s. In the course of his doctoral research on Mewahang Rai kinship and mythology along the western reaches of the Arun Valley, six days walk from the nearest road, the author was exposed to the “rich and living ritual tradition” (p. 21) of the *muddum* which he encountered almost daily. The *muddum*, variously translated by Gaenzle as a “living, entirely oral ‘tribal’ tradition which forms the basis of Mewahang cultural identity” (p. 3) and as a “tradition of speaking, consisting of different kinds of speech events” (p. 4), is performed in a ritual language. Already struggling with colloquial Mewahang, Gaenzle found this important ritual language to be “totally different, archaic and largely untranslatable” (p. 21). It is a credit to Gaenzle’s commitment to learning, analysing and finally disseminating these findings that this monograph should be published some fifteen years after the commencement of his initial research.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One offers a holistic analysis of Mewahang ritual texts by situating them within their social context. The author rightly considers the ritual speech tradition he describes as “a linguistic resource which can be studied as a complex social institution” (p. 20). All too often, descriptive linguists are so wary of accusations of extreme Sapir-Whorfism that they jettison social analysis and eschew engagement with the spoken linguistic narrative. Instead, Gaenszle focuses directly on the oral ritual texts by placing them in their ethnographic context. Part Two of the book is a detailed corpus of ritual texts together with interlinear translations and linguistic and interpretive commentaries, which while impossible to cover thoroughly in this short review article, provide the flesh and bones for the sophisticated analyses which Gaenszle deploys. The separation works well, allowing the texts in the documentary section to speak for themselves while similarly allowing the reader to engage with the “overall significance of the ritual speech tradition” without being submerged by the data (p. 20). The 200 pages of meticulous analysis which characterise the first section are similarly free of dense linguistic explication.

The author contends that among the Mewahang Rai, rituals are essentially speech acts, and these “speech acts do not differ in a fundamental way from those in ordinary life” (p. 2). The differences that do exist are marked by a ritual language distinct from the modern colloquial language. Distinguishing and defining the salient features of ritual speech and understanding their enduring power in Mewahang social life thus become the focus of the study. The strength of Gaenszle’s approach lies in his ability to blend textual and contextual approaches. The nuanced analysis which results shows Mewahang ritual speech to be a resource for both constructing meanings and engaging in social action. Having situated himself within the wider academic discourses on ritual and performance, the author provides a lucid introductory overview to anthropological analyses of ritual and speech, subdividing his discussion with subtitles such as ‘formality’, ‘poetics’, ‘performance’ and ‘competence and authority’. Gaenszle’s cogent presentation of these academic debates will be of particular utility to students and scholars interested in textuality and the anthropology of performance. As Gaenszle rightly concludes in his introduction, “oral texts are no longer viewed exclusively as a symbolical expression of culture (or ideology), but are seen as embedded in social and ritual praxis” (p. 20).

The author is careful to pay homage to András Höfer and Nicholas Allen, both accomplished anthropologists of Nepal known for what Gaenszle terms their ‘ethno-philological’ approaches. While the homage is well-deserved, I would feel more comfortable with the label ‘linguistic anthropology’ or ‘ethno-linguistics’ to describe their work, since the character and aims of Allen and Höfer’s writings directly address the issues driving these under-represented and often misunderstood subdisciplines. As befits a study of this nature, Gaenszle is transparent about his research methodology. When

discussing the dialogue between the ethnographer and his interlocutors, the author shows both sides to have their own perspectives and agendas, “sometimes approaching each other but nevertheless retaining their differences” (p. 22). There are tensions in such an approach, as Gaenzle notes: “the ethnographic representation of a lived reality...is an audacious - some say presumptuous - undertaking” (p. 20), and many Mewahang were initially suspicious of his motives, fearing that he was on an information-gathering mission for the Nepali state with the aim of increasing taxation.

The book comprises six engaging analytical chapters. In Chapter One, Gaenzle addresses the issue of indigenous exegesis and assesses “how the Mewahang view the significance of their oral tradition” (p. 25). Drawing on testimonies provided by local experts and village elders, Gaenzle offers an interpretive analysis by presenting the Mewahang conception of the *muddum*, supplemented with comparative data from neighbouring Kiranti groups. The recitation of the Mewahang *muddum*, we learn, restores social order and harmony by facilitating contact with the ancestral world. The link between the present and the ancestral past is mitigated by ritual language, which is the “proper register of speech for dealing with matters that concern the ancestors” (p. 56).

Chapter Two focuses on issues of transmission and knowledge, and Gaenzle discusses the various ritual experts who are responsible for disseminating *muddum* and outlines the ways in which they do so. What emerges is the importance of *sakhau*, translated as ‘inherited priestly competence’, through which the voices of the ancestors transmit themselves. The continuity of *sakhau* ensures that the tradition remains essentially the same across generations, “even though individual performers have their idiosyncratic styles and the texts are subject to considerable variation” (p. 84). Chapter Three, entitled *Genres of Dialogue*, is central to Gaenzle’s hypothesis. In it, he offers a systematic description of the range of ritual texts discussed in the book and suggests that invocations, recitations and priestly chants may be classed along a “continuum of style”, to borrow a term from Joel Kuipers. Pragmatic as well as formal factors are decisive in determining where speech acts lie in the heterogeneous continuum of ritual speech.

The fourth chapter, aptly entitled *Discursive Universe*, concentrates primarily on the content of the texts and imagery which they contain. Time and space are important leitmotifs, as are the manifold concepts of personhood. Gaenzle enriches his theoretical discussions with illuminating examples and vivid data, bringing alive the “major features of Mewahang cosmology as constituted in the ritual texts” (p. 26). Chapter Five is devoted to a focussed ‘micro-analysis’ of the poetic and rhetorical properties of the texts under discussion. The particular strength of this section is Gaenzle’s concentration on the “linguistic strategies through which speakers relate to their addressees” (p. 26) which include the sophisticated manipulation of

figurative speech and syntactical structures by ritual performers. Issues of 'text' and 'context' are central to Gaenzle's argument, both of which can be "variously emphasized in the speech performance itself" (p. 17). Mewahang spoken texts are as much slotted into their contextual setting by specific performers as they are detached from the contingencies of the 'here and now' in specific performances, and it becomes clear that ritual speech is not a 'homogenous idiom' but is a 'continuum of style' which is characterised by its degree of 'indexicality' or "anchoring within the context" (p. 172). The author concludes that among the Mewahang, the power or authority of ritual speech is linked in part with its degree of 'entextualization' (p. 170) and suggests that words are more than "simply denotative devices, [they] have intrinsic value and substance" (p. 171).

As a writer, Gaenzle is considerate to his readers: in Chapter Six he synthesises his own ethnographic understanding in original ways and demonstrates his skill at re-interpreting and recasting his own analyses on the unique power of Mewahang ritual speech. At the end of his analysis, the ethnographer returns to a central paradox of his work: that his desire to 'scripturalize' and archive Mewahang oral traditions in no way guarantees their continuity and survival. Easy answers to difficult questions are assiduously avoided, and Gaenzle neatly demonstrates that just as there are "highly liturgical elements in oral traditions", so too are there "performer-centred rituals in literate traditions" (p. 199). In short then, *Ancestral voices* is an intricate, advanced work brimming with detail and insight, and is a substantial addition to the growing corpus of performance studies within Himalayan anthropology.

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In the bibliography:

Sakya, G.D. 1987. *Nepalese Ostriches: A trivial myth*. Kathmandu: Mani Pustak Bhandar.

Miller, M.L. 1988. A comprehensive rebuttal of G. Sakya. *Kailash* 6(2): 121-83.

Smith, B.C. 1992. Looking for ostriches. In *Research Methodologies for the Himalayas*, edited by J. Pande, pp. 110-145. Shimla: Mountain Publishers.

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ISSN 0943 8254

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Spring 2003