

# Introduction: Divine Kingship in the Western Himalayas<sup>1</sup>

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The idea of "divine kingship" has a long history in South Asia. According to classical Hindu thought, kings are divine because they physically incorporate part of the divine substance of Vishnu – 6.25%, to be precise.<sup>2</sup> And as Pollock notes, the epics confirm that "(t)he king is functionally a god because like a god he saves and protects; he is existentially or ontologically a god because he incorporates the divine essence" (1991: 47). Classical Indian kings were clearly human, but at the same time they were substantially identified with their lineage gods (Inden 1990; Patnaik 1972) and goddesses (Fuller 1992: 119; Schnepel 1995). Indeed, the king and the god were, in effect, "alter-egos" of each other, and the system as Fuller describes it looks remarkably like those described in this special issue of the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*.

As Fuller puts it,

At one level, therefore, the state deity-cum-king was displayed as a sovereign unity, so that the human king participated in the deity's royal divinity. At another level and simultaneously, the state deity was displayed as the supreme ruler who had delegated authority to his separate, inferior regent, the human king. The court assemblies therefore provided an exemplary illustration of the king's double relationship with the state deity, whereby he was both a form of the deity and the latter's human representative on earth (1992: 127).

In the Western and Central Himalayas, such divine kingship is alive and well. Kings typically serve as the "managers" of ruling gods, and gods in their temples are often regarded as kings. Royal figures in their palanquins – gods and goddesses, kings and queens – process, circumambulate, visit each other, or receive visitors, and these movements create, maintain (and sometimes challenge) political relationships amongst the territorial units so defined. In short, politico-religious relationships are inscribed in the landscape by means of ritual.

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<sup>2</sup> Manusmṛiti 7.5; Ṛgveda 4.42.8-9; Atharvaveda 6.86.3; Mahābhārata 12.68.37-59 and 12.65.29. See Gonda (1969) and Pollock (1991: 15-54) for valuable discussions of the topic.

The most obvious example is the famous Dashera festival in Kullu, discussed by both Berti and Luchesi in this issue. But there are other rituals as well, in particular the great sacrificial rituals (*jag* and *sānt*) mentioned in several contributions (especially Sutherland), which follow a similar logic of inscribing relations of territorial subordination and superordination in the landscape by means of processions and other rituals.

How are we to understand this politico-religious system? In the literature on "divine kingship" and politics in South Asia, one can discern two positions, the proponents of which have engaged in a long debate over the years. On the one hand are Dumont, Stein, and others who have defended the conceptual and empirical separation of religion from politics in the classical polities of South Asia, and who have tended to underplay the importance of ritual; on the other hand are those who insist on the inseparability of religion and politics, and who tend to assert the political efficacy of ritual.

In Stein's view (1977, 1980, 1985), medieval South Indian localities were administered by leading lineages. The power of these lineages was based on their extensive kinship networks, as well as on their political and economic dominance. But the localities in which these leading lineages held the reins of power were in turn organized into larger states (Stein's leading case here is the Chola empire), over which kings ruled in a system of "ritual kingship". According to Stein, "real" power lay at the level of the locality or *nādu* rather than the superordinate level, so that, for example, local tax collection was more thorough and "practical," while at the level of the kingdom it took a "ritual" and tributary form. Moreover, effective military units were concentrated at the local level, and attenuated at the level of the kingdom.

Inden has criticized this model of "dual sovereignty" for implying that the king's royal sovereignty at the higher level is "merely" a matter of ritual, and therefore less real than the pragmatic, lower-level, clan-and-territory-based chieftanship (1990: 209).<sup>3</sup> A similar point is implicit in Dirks' historical analysis of the South Indian "little kingdom" of Pudukottai. He asserts that in pre-colonial times, proximity to the king (articulated primarily through various forms of ritualized exchange) was the crucial guarantor of rank.<sup>4</sup> Dirks acknowledges that in such a system,

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<sup>3</sup> "It is as though there were gods worshipped and rites performed only at the royal capital and that these were all symbolically unifying, while political calculation and economic accumulation took place only at the local level, and that perceptions of self or communal interest brought about real coalitions there" (Inden 1990: 209).

<sup>4</sup> "Acting on behalf of one's lord thus does not constitute the realization of a relationship rationally structured by bureaucratic form and normative

"religion" and "politics" are two sides of the same coin, yet for some reason he retains the dichotomy (1987: 4-5; see also 106-107, 129).

Dirks's argument is explicitly directed against Dumont, for whom caste rank was determined by relative purity, while politics was "encompassed" by religion.<sup>5</sup> Dumont argued that India distinguished religion and politics centuries before the West, and that this distinction manifested itself in a form of kingship that was more purely "political" than the forms of divine kingship found in the West. His argument was based upon a dichotomy of "spiritual" vs. "temporal": he wished to show that the politico-economic domain "necessarily emerges in opposition to and separation from the all-embracing domain of religion and ultimate values, and that the basis of such a development is the recognition of the individual" (1962: 75). The Brahman is spiritually superior, but materially dependent and hence inferior to the king; indeed this "dependence of the Brahman in relation to royal power or, one would almost say, to mere force, accompanies the fact that his preeminence is located on a different plane" (ibid: 51-52). But despite his attempt to theorize the emergence of "secular" from "magico-religious" kingship, Dumont was compelled to postulate a radical ontological discontinuity, a level of "popular mentality" below the "orthodox brahmanical level," where the King retained "elementary notions of a magico-religious nature which have not been 'usurped' by the Brahman" (ibid: 61). And all of this is related, of course, to his well-known theory of caste, according to which it is generated by the opposition of the pure and the impure, which repeats itself at every level of the system, thus generating a hierarchy ranging from the most pure Brahman to the least pure "untouchable".

This model has been criticized by Raheja and Dirks, who argue for a model based on centrality and peripherality rather than hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> Rather than a "spiritually" superior Brahman who ranks higher than the king, but is nevertheless materially dependent on him, the centre-periphery model places the king at the centre of a system of exchanges or transactions, in which other actors derive their power and rank mainly

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prescription. Rather, it is a relationship established by the actual, though always partial, sharing of the substance [citing the work of Marriott, Inden, Daniel] of sovereignty by the sovereign lord: substance which comes in the form of titles, emblems, land, and sometimes even pre-eaten rice. All these gifts partake of the same transactional logic" (1987: 103). See pp. 283-84 for a useful summary of the position.

<sup>5</sup> According to Dirks, the elevation of the Brahman, and of a system of caste rank based upon what Dumont calls the "religious" opposition of purity and impurity, came about only during the colonial period.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tambiah 1976.

through transactions with him. According to this model, rank in the system of castes is not determined in once-and-for-all fashion by an immutable structure based on purity and impurity, but is rather the outcome of human actions and transactions. Rank is contingent, negotiable, and impermanent – adjectives that are far better descriptors of social reality than a notion of transcendent structure. Such a model invites us to look specifically at ritual transactions, and examine to what degree they create and/or transform political and social identities and power relationships.

That is precisely what the contributors to this special issue have done. Berti, Conzelmann, and Luchesi have shown how closely the rank and powers of the king are related to the state deity (and how much the state deity depends on the king). Sutherland writes of the "ritual t(r)opes, by means of which cosmological and theological conceptions of power are politically articulated" in these West Himalayan polities. Sax and Vidal write of the ritual practices of local warriors which integrate them into these divine kingdoms. In short, the contributors to this volume show us that, *pace* Stein and Dumont, religion and politics are thoroughly intertwined in the Kingdoms of the Western Himalaya, and that ritual has powerful social and political effects.

In a series of articles in the 1980s, Galey (1983, 1984, 1986, 1990) showed that kingship continues to inform the culture of the neighbouring Himalayan kingdom of Garhwal, despite the king's absence,<sup>7</sup> and that prior to Indian independence the Garhwali king and the state deity, Badrinath were in many respects alter-egos of each other. Most importantly for our purposes, Galey showed that "territorial control finds, more often than not, its legitimacy in relation to sanctuaries and to units of cult which define social space ritually" (1990:133). Such rituals are the focus of this special issue. What are they, and how do they define social and political space?

The cases discussed are from Western Himalayan kingdoms as well as the smaller territorial units that comprise them. The kingdoms of Mandi (Conzelmann) and Kullu (Berti, and Luchesi) are each ruled by a human king who acts as the "manager" (*devan*, *kārdār*) of the sovereign state deity: Madhorao in the case of Mandi, and Raghunath-ji in the case of Kullu. These kingdoms are in turn composed of smaller territories down to the level of the village, most of which are "ruled" by their own deities. In periodic ritual assemblies, the gods of these subordinate territories

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<sup>7</sup> "In short, kingship has survived the eviction of the king and the disappearance of the dynasty. In spite of the fact that it has been officially removed and its palatial headquarters abandoned, its importance as an operating agency has remained almost unaffected" (1990: 130).

process to the capital city and pay court to king and state deity. Sutherland concentrates on the sub-territorial units that made up the former kingdom of Bushahr, where once again, relations of superordination and subordination are created and maintained primarily by means of ritual processions. Here however the processions are understood neither in terms of subordination to a human king, nor to a human king paired with a State deity (as in the case of Mandi and Kullu), but rather in terms of subordination to Mahasu, the "king of gods." The ritual processions create and define territory over which the deity rules, and these territories are strongly associated with the rural assemblies called *khūnd*, the "militias" or warriors of the god. Sax focuses even more closely on these warrior-clans, arguing that their clan-based, territorial rituals are also integral to the constitution of the "divine kingdom." In the final essay, Vidal discusses how the most violent of these warriors' practices – ritualized headhunting – was given up under modern pressures.

Taken together, the contributions illustrate the importance of processional rituals in creating and defining territorial units, and regulating the relations among them and their (human and divine) rulers. They also show how the rituals of these "divine kingdoms" changed over the centuries, as well as the degree to which much has remained the same. Conzelmann argues that the English intentionally diminished the divinity of the ruler of Mandi by making changes in the processional order of the central state ritual of Shivaratri. Sax and Vidal show how the rituals of the warlike *khūnd* have either adapted to modern conditions, or simply (in the case of headhunting) died out because they were no longer acceptable. But as Galey already observed in the 1980s, kingship with its associated ritual forms is far from dead. This is shown by Berti's discussion of the "modern" political uses to which the *Rājā* of Kullu puts his identification with Raghunath-ji, by Sutherland and Sax's emphasis on the continuing cultural and political importance of local "royal" gods and their rituals, and by Luchesi's amusing example of contemporary "urban renewal" in Old Manali and Vashist, under the direction of a local deity on his palanquin.

Can one then speak of a distinctive Western Himalayan "system" of divine kingship? The essays certainly point in that direction. Sax's description of a form of political organization in which the deity rules with the support of his minister (*vazīr*) and warriors (*khūnd*) has remarkable similarities to Sutherland's account, where king-like gods rule over territories which are defined in terms of the *khūnd* or "regional assemblies," and are served by *vazīrs*. Sutherland hypothesizes that the local "system" derives from a pre-colonial Kanait polity. Conzelmann's

historical materials clearly point in the same direction; that is, toward a form of political organization preceding the kingdom, made up of territorial units called *waziris*. She refers to evidence for such a form of political organization during the medieval period in Kullu as well. Thus the idea that the rituals discussed in this volume derive from an earlier, more widespread form of "divine kingship" is tantalizing; but still unconfirmed. What the essays do show, clearly and unambiguously, is the importance of rituals in constituting the traditional polities of the Western Himalaya.

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