

A.W. van den Hoek. 2014[2004]. *Caturmāsa: Celebrations of Death in Kathmandu, Nepal*. Jan Heesterman, Bal Gopal Shrestha, Han F. Vermeulen and Sjoerd M. Zanen, eds. Kathmandu: Vajra Books.

Over the last decades the term *anthropology* has taken on a much broader meaning than it originally had. Today, a wide range of specialists in the Humanities and Social Sciences claim this term for their works even if they have never undertaken any fieldwork. It is not rare to see a leading Indologist, an expert in Sanskrit texts, profess to be an anthropologist or qualify their work as anthropological (e.g., Madeleine Biardeau), even though their field of expertise is limited to inscriptions and ancient ritual texts. Similarly, there is a trend among philosophers (e.g., Paul Ricoeur) and historians (e.g., Jacques le Goff, to mention a well-known name among French historians) to use such a word in order to lend a more global perspective to their work which is purportedly relevant to all humanity, and transcend academic boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

These terminological extensions are questionable and call for some critique. In fact, they nullify the specificity of anthropological work which is grounded in long periods of fieldwork within a specific human community. The nature of the society studied, be that modern or traditional, Western or non-Western, is not an issue here because anthropological research is relevant to any type of society, whether it be European, Oceanic, African, Asian or American. The real issue is the methodology adopted. Strictly speaking,

<sup>1</sup> However, the term anthropology was already in use in a philosophical sense among philosophers in England, France and Germany during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Cf., for instance, Emmanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798).

anthropology calls for direct long-term experience in a contemporary group in which the researcher readily immerses herself. It may require textual and statistical sources, but it should rely mainly on observations, dialogue and interactions with a living group. Otherwise, confusion arises and obscures the original meaning of the label.

A.W. van den Hoek (Bert as he was known to his inner circle) was a *real* social anthropologist. He started his work in the Kathmandu Valley in the early 1980s after several short experiences in South India, Lebanon and Sudan. From then on, he devoted all his time to the study of Newar rituals and culture till his untimely death in 2000 in a road accident in Mumbai, India. He was then 50 years old. He became fascinated by the Newar religion and he attended innumerable ritual and festive performances, especially in the old city of Kathmandu. I met him on some of these occasions as we were both studying the same ceremonial events. He used to work alongside Bal Gopal Shrestha, a Newar from Sankhu. Bal Gopal started as an assistant and soon became an anthropologist in his own right, publishing materials and analyses under his own name. I aver that van den Hoek did achieve outstanding anthropological work in Nepal and greatly contributed to the understanding of Newar living civilization, especially its intricate ritual life.

*Caturmāsa: Celebrations of Death in Kathmandu, Nepal* is van den Hoek's only book on Nepal. The volume was published posthumously in Leiden by his friends and his university tutor (from the Netherlands), the renowned Professor Jan C. Heesterman, whose thoughts have greatly stimulated research in the field of Indology. The book came off the press in 2004 and was then republished (with some revisions and updates) in 2014 by Vajra Books in Kathmandu. It deals with ceremonial events that are performed annually in the old Kathmandu city, from *Gaṭhāmugaḥ* in June to *Daśāī* (*Mvohanī* in Newari) in October. The festive cycle – which is a chain of related ceremonies – includes *Gāijātrā*, *Indrajātrā* and *Pacali Bhairavjātrā* which are three main festive events for Newars in Kathmandu. The whole period falls within the rainy season, from June to October, and is often called *caturmās* (four months) in Nepali, which is a reference to an ancient Indic notion of Vishnu sleeping soundly at the bottom of the ocean. The god Vishnu, the protector, is said to be absent from the world during these four months of the year. The title of the volume derives from this series of seasonal rituals. I myself have contributed an article (2004) on this religious notion of time (which unfortunately is not

quoted in the present book) and a volume (*La fête-spectacle: Théâtre et rite au Népal*, 2010) on the *Indrajātrā* festival of Kathmandu.

The rituals under discussion are about life, death, rain, prosperity, kingship, the eternal fight between gods and demons. They involve processions, animal sacrifices (buffaloes, goats, roosters), swords and masks, divine images, exuberant attires and jewels, giant plain-wheel processional carts, palanquins and religious dances. The immolation of sacrificial victims is central to the events and occurs within the ritual enclosure. The main characters are gods and goddesses, sometimes embodied in human form, descendants or representatives of kings of the medieval Malla period, and priests (mainly Karmacharyas, Rajopadhyayas and Vajracharyas). Yet most Newars living in Kathmandu city, from upper castes to lower castes, both Hindus and Buddhists, take part in these rituals. The book argues that *caturmās* festive events are all related to death and sacrifice. It also shows the close association between these ceremonies and the spatial layout of the old city of Kathmandu, which ought to be seen as a ‘sacrificial arena.’ Particular attention is given to the central place occupied by the former Malla royal palace during all these ritual sequences and to how the urban territory is divided by the Vishnumati River into two moieties (the author uses the term ‘halves’), the upper and the lower, the upstream and the downstream which roughly correspond to the north and the south of Kathmandu.

My research for the most part corroborates van den Hoek’s findings, especially regarding the territorial framework and the rituals that have to be carried out every year during these pageants by different Newar groups and castes. My main point of dissent concerns the extensive use of ancient Hindu ritual models, mostly the sacrificial pattern derived from Vedic texts that he refers to in interpreting the rituals that are still performed year after year. The Newar religion is undeniably rooted in Indic tradition. Its Brahmanical and Mahayana Sanskrit Buddhist components cannot be ignored. Yet one must take into account how Hindu thought has changed over the ages and avoid confusing Vedic conceptions with later medieval Hindu conceptual elaborations. Hinduism has evolved over the centuries; it can no longer be considered an immutable model forever based on Vedic and early Brahmanical texts. In my opinion, it would be a mistake to regard Newar Malla kings (and their divine model Indra) celebrating the *Indrajātrā* festival as sacrificers commemorating their own death. To consider these rituals as self-sacrifices before a supposed consecration does not correspond

to Newar socio-religious realities. During Malla (within Kathmandu Valley) and Gorkhali period, the king was seldom viewed as overseeing all castes by his own power. The sovereign belongs first of all to one *varṇa*, the Kshatriyas, which are according to Sanskrit canonical texts lower in rank to the Brahmans, the impersonators of utmost ultramundane values. In actual fact, Kshatriyas and Brahmans form an inseparable couple.

Furthermore, I would be less categorical than van den Hoek in emphasizing the proper logic of ritual order – a logic supposed to be independent of the social structure and of the agricultural calendar. Let us not forget that the old city of Kathmandu was (and still is partly) the home of Jyapu farmers who lived within the walls of the old city and used to go to the surrounding fields in the daytime. These farmers are in fact the main actors in these festivals. Ritual language is prevalent in Newar society but it is difficult to study its meaning without bearing in mind the social background. In my view, these religious sequences have been manipulated and distorted by the various groups that perform them. Otherwise, they would not be meaningful to them. From a strictly religious angle, I would contend that autochthonous features, beyond the pale of Indic Hinduism and Buddhism, must also be taken into consideration to explain the style of these royal ceremonies. Newars have combined foreign Indic influences in their own way. The purely Indological reading of van den Hoek ignores this basic fact.

This valuable book unravels the complex symbolism of Newar festive events and explains the spatial structure behind Kathmandu's ancient ceremonies. It superbly sheds light on the fundamental role of sacrifice in festive patterns and the centrality of death in the performances concerned (in the same manner as funeral associations, *sana guṭhī*, prevail in Jyapu social organizations) – though this thematic structure does not seem to me exclusive of other meanings. Whatever the case may be, *Indrajātrā*, *Gājījātrā* and *Mvohanī* are rooted in the medieval Malla golden age and can be regarded as jewels of the past. They are part of a living intangible heritage and ought to be classed as such by UNESCO. These pageants evolved during the Rana-Shah periods, taking on new socio-political meaning (which van den Hoek does not take into consideration), but they have kept almost intact their old religious repertoire and grammar. Such persistence is remarkable.

One cannot help being struck by the close association between society, territory and rituals in Kathmandu's sacred space. These three elements form a closely knit whole. No optional link exists: an obligatory force compels

Newars to perform collective rituals according to ancient rules. This force stems from a particularly rigid (though conflicting) social structure that is anchored in religious values and ideas related to kingship. Let me add one last word: these ceremonial events are staged like a theatrical performance and often take a narrative form. This theatrical dimension is a characteristic feature of religion in the Kathmandu Valley though it is not a peculiarity of Newar civilization. The narratives, imbued with religious meaning, come mainly from old Sanskrit epic literature. I underline this theme in my book (2010) about *Indrajātrā*. How much longer will these magnificent rituals be performed by the Newars before they die out and are caught up by the interconnected processes of secularization and folklorization?

## References

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