RETHEORIZING RELIGION IN NEPAL
Religion/Culture/Critique
Series editor: Elizabeth A. Castelli

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For Sarah and Grey,
my old love and my new
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Series Editor’s Preface

RELIGION/CULTURE/CRITIQUE is a series devoted to publishing work that addresses religion’s centrality in a wide range of settings and debates, both contemporary and historical, and that critically engages the category of “religion” itself. This series is conceived as a place where readers will be invited to explore how “religion”—whether embodied in texts, practices, communities, and ideologies—intersects with social and political interests, institutions, and identities.

Greg Grieve’s Retheorizing Religion in Nepal provides a broad critique of the “scripturalism” of religious studies in the Western academy and addresses broad theoretical questions about religion and/as mediation. Focusing on quotidian religious practices—“prosaic religion,” in his formulation—encountered through careful fieldwork observation, Grieve explores the complex layers of lived religion in a particular location (Bhaktapur, Nepal) while engaging large, overarching theoretical problematics that continue to haunt the field as a whole. Using his own unsettledness and misunderstanding as an opening for reconsidering the terms with which he had framed and organized his research, Grieve offers students of religion an elegant model for a different mode of working, staging a sustained and dialectical dialogue between theory and the object of one’s study. Refusing to approach the religion of Nepal “by the book,” Grieve instead suggests how one might engage with religion “beside the book”—through embodied practice and performance, artistic activity, and material mediation. Retheorizing Religion in Nepal contributes both to the fieldwork archive of South Asian religion and to the unfolding theoretical discussion of “religion” as it is produced by both practitioners and scholars around the globe.

Elizabeth A. Castelli
RELIGION/CULTURE/CRITIQUE Series Editor
New York City
January 2006
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If this book were a *mandala*, at its center would be Bhaktapur, Nepal—it is the people of this living city that I owe my ultimate acknowledgement. Just as numerous peaceful and wrathful deities surround the center of a *mandala*, there are, however, a host of persons and institutions that I also owe my gratitude. Close to the center are the many friends and conversants in Bhaktapur who freely gave of their knowledge and time. Chief among these are Madhu Chitrakar and also the family of Tejeswar Babu Gongah, particularly his son Sanjeev Gongah. A third ring would consist of dialogue with other scholars. While they are too numerous to list I would like to especially thank Wendy Doniger, Mark Liechty, and Daya Shakya for their invaluable assistance. My thanks also goes to the faculty of The University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s Department of Religious Studies, particularly Derek Krueger and Charles D. Orzech. I would also like to thank the anonymous readers who gave detailed and illuminating suggestions on the manuscript.

Squaring the circle are the institutions that supported this book. In Nepal I acknowledge the assistance of Bhaktapur’s Municipality, Nepal’s National Museum, Tribhuvan University’s Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) and Nepal’s National Archives. This book would not have been possible without financial assistance from granting institutions. These include a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Research fellowship, a Social Science Research Council Pre-dissertation fellowship, a grant from the Lilly Endowment, as well as a grant from the University of Chicago’s Committee on South Asian Studies. The writing of the book was made possible by a fellowship at the Center for Religion and Media at New York University (Pew Charitable Trusts). This fellowship was supplemented through the generosity of The University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s College of Arts and Sciences.

Finally, just as in the *paubhā* painting, *Yantrakara Khwopa Dey*, in which Madhu Chitrakar painted my wife and me in the lower left hand corner, this book would not have been possible without Sarah Krive at my side.
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The transcriptions presented are not the unmediated voice of my discussants. Their words are as I taped them and as I have transformed them in the act of writing. Whether to have the voices remain anonymous or name the speakers was one of the hardest decisions I had to make. On the one hand, I desired to give full credit to those who contributed so much to this project. On the other hand, I was worried that the information may incriminate people, especially with the change in Nepal’s political climate. My strategy is a mixed one. Bhaktapur is a tightly knit community, and where the people spoken of would be recognized anyway, I have kept the authentic name. I did this because people tended to want credit for their knowledge. In other situations, I have either used appropriate pseudonyms or have not used any name at all. For instance, because of the present political danger in Nepal, when it comes to much of the discussion of politics, I do not use the names of the sources from whom I received the material. Moreover, because of the tantric secret nature of much of the information that was disclosed to me, I was requested not to circulate the knowledge. Rather than divulging information, where possible I have relied on other scholars’ written work.

The following symbols bear these meanings when used in transcribed text:

( . . . ) Material enclosed within parentheses has been placed within the text by the author to clarify meaning.

[ . . . ] Material enclosed within brackets indicates nonverbal signals on tape (e.g., laughing, special tone of voice, etc.).

(( . . . )) Material within double parentheses is unclear on tape; the transcription is only approximate.

, Commas are usually phonological in value, used to separate breath groups.

—Grammatical boundaries most often coincide with breath group, and when they do, only the grammatical boundary is written. Occasionally, a grammatical boundary will occur at a point at which no corresponding phonological boundary occurs; in such cases a long dash is used.

. . . An ellipsis within a text indicates that the speaker interrupted his or her utterance to begin a new utterance.
/ Slash indicates an overlap of different utterances.
ALL CAPS text set in small capital letters indicates words uttered with unusual force.
# A number sign indicates that the word was in English.
When it served no particular purpose to retain them, I have omitted translating repetitions and glossed-over false starts.
Transliteration

Bhaktapur, Nepal, is located in the Kathmandu Valley, a multilingual landscape with the Newar language (Nepal Bhasa), Nepali, English, and a multitude of other tongues intermingling. For instance, the city itself is referred to by three main names: in Nepali, “Bhadgao(n)”; in Newar, “Khwopa”; and in Sanskrit, “Bhaktapur.” As may be obvious by the name(s) of the city itself, the use of language is political. Which language is used, who uses it, and who is allowed to use a language are deeply marbled with power relations. To address these language politics, and at the same time enhance the recognizability of terms amid this linguistic complexity, I have chosen to follow a six-step strategy of translation and transliteration.

1. I translate non-English words when possible. I do this for two reasons. First, because the aim of this study is to articulate Bhaktapur, Nepal’s prosaic religion, I do not want to exoticize the text through an overuse of nontranslated terms. Second, I want to open this work to a wider readership beyond those whose expertise is in South Asia. In some passages, when my translation veers from the standard gloss, I place the original untranslated term in the brackets that follow its first usage in a chapter (e.g., god-image [murti{mürti}]).

2. For proper names, I use a nontransliterated nonitalic form; for instance, I write Nepal for nepāl.

3. In some instances, when a term’s in-context gloss is crucial for the argument, I turn to Nepali. If Nepali does not capture the needed meaning of the term, I turn to Newar—for instance, murti and lohandyah (loha[n]dya:).

4. Words that have already entered the academic lexicon I deliver in their Sanskrit form—for example, mandala and samsara.

5. In pluralizing non-English words when used in the context of an English language sentence, I follow the English pattern by adding an /s/ at the end of the term—for example, mandalas.
(6) As nonspecialists tend to find diacritical marks off-putting (and specialist readers find them unnecessary), I have not employed them except when introducing a word for the first time in each chapter. We—the linguist Daya Shakya, my field assistant Sanjeev Gongah, and I—have based the transliteration of Bhaktapur Newar’s local scribal conventions for recording the dialect in the Devanagari script. These conventions are not always consistent, yet we have attempted to maintain a standard. When possible, Newar phonemes are represented by their approximate Sanskrit equivalents. Spoken Newar lacks the retroflexed consonants of Nepali ($t$, $th$, $d$, $dh$, and $n$), as well as the spirants represented by $s$ and $z$. The written form, however, often retains these letters in loan words from Sanskrit and words of northern Indian origin. Newar also has a short high midvowel “$a$”; a long (breathy) high midvowel “$aː$”; a short low frontal vowel “$a$”; and a long (breathy) low frontal vowel “$aː$.” We have used the macron to indicate the position and the colon (e.g., the Devanagari visarga) for length. Following Levy (1990), to avoid having to double diacritics over vowels that are both long and nasalized, we have followed nasalized vowels by “($n$).” Bhaktapur has a dorsovelar “$n$,” which we have represented with “$ñ$.” Following Malla (1985), sometimes we have transliterated the Devanagari bilabial glide “$v$” with “$w$.” We have also relied on Gutschow, Klöver, and Shresthacarya’s Newar Towns and Buildings: An Illustrated Dictionary (1987), and Sundar Krishna Joshi’s dissertation A Descriptive Study of the Bhaktapur Dialect of Newari (1984).
We are all just making small stories that become the mandala.

—Madhu Krishna Chitrakar
(personal communication, July 29, 1999).

It would mean that historians of religion might redirect their attention from their present equally romantic fixation on multivalent and condensed phenomena, such as symbols, which have more often served as eloquent testimony to the exegetical ingenuity of the researcher than of the community that has bound itself to them, and should rather become concerned with prosaic, expository discourse.

—Smith, Imagining Religion