

for his effort to unravel the religious contribution of the Untouchables in India. This study can be seen as another proof of the appropriating and dominating aspect of Brahmanic Hinduism.

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## NEPAL

GAENZSLE, MARTIN. *Ancestral Voices: Oral Ritual Texts and their Social Contexts among the Mewahang Rai of East Nepal*. Performances: Intercultural Studies on Ritual, Play and Theatre, vol. 4. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002. xix + 338 pages. Figures, map, drawings, glossary, bibliography, index, b/w photographs. Paper €35.90; ISBN 3-8258-5891-X.

*Ancestral Voices*, with its reorientation of “ritual” toward more specific concepts, including textuality, indexicality, and competence, and its high standard of precision, makes a substantial contribution to the study not only of Himalayan peoples but also of oral literature anywhere. As befits a solid German *Habilitationsschrift*, this book is meticulously detailed, conducting a ponderously exhaustive examination of its precisely delineated topic, certain ritual texts of the Mewahang Rai, a tribal sub-group of perhaps 4000 people living in eastern Nepal. Gaenzsle has previously published a substantial study of Mewahang Rai social organization and mythology (GAENZSLE 1991); in this new work he concentrates on various forms of ritual speech used by them, situating oral text in its performative context. Gaenzsle’s key thesis, convincingly advanced for the material selected, is that Mewahang rituals consist basically of dialogical speech acts, and that these speech acts do not differ in any fundamental way from those used in ordinary life. An exploration of the ways in which ritual language differs from ordinary speech, how it is linked to ritual action, and of the power that it exercises in Mewahang social life form the core of this study. Gaenzsle seeks to balance his ethno-philological study of the relatively fixed qualities of the texts as language with the more dynamic levels of their performative, social, and cultural contexts. The second effort, admirably attempted, is not, however, entirely satisfactory. Despite careful description of their prosody, the “strange experience of a different dimension” that Gaenzsle reports upon first hearing a Mewahang ritual text performed is not shared with the reader. This could have been at least partially remedied, and the ethnographic value of the book significantly improved, had a CD-ROM of the chants been included—LORD (2000) and MARCH (2002) are good examples of a new standard of documentation to which works such as this one should conform. I am also disappointed that the study excludes the recitals of the *makpa* (shamans), but perhaps Gaenzsle’s next work will concentrate on these; even with these limitations, the work remains impressive in its attention to detail.

The main text is divided into two sections. Part I of the book analyzes the texts and situates them in the field of Mewahang social activity. After exploring local perspectives on the roles of ritual speech within the Mewahang cosmology in Chapter 1, Gaenzsle clarifies, in Chapter 2, issues of competence in ritual speech and the transmission of ritual knowledge. Chapter 3 seeks to develop a comprehensive classification of Mewahang ritual speech genres (exclusive of any *makpa* material), showing how they can be placed along a continuum of styles anchored at one end by ordinary language, all characterized by polite, dialogical speech. Differences are primarily matters of style, marked by features such as a pervasive parallelism at various levels ranging from canonical parallelism between verses to binomial parallelism within single nouns. A particularly interesting conclusion of this chapter is that “it is

not the properties of the texts as such which lead to their restriction to initiated priests, but the requirement of a special competence to use the textual tradition in a creative and indexical manner, a competence which is legitimized as 'given' by, and thus makes it possible to continue a dialogue with, the divine" (111).

Organized into "time," "space," "personhood," and "reciprocity," Chapter 4 examines Mewahang cosmology by tracing the symbolism, metaphors, imagery, and conceptual orders that figure in the ritual texts. Rhetorical strategies and the poetics of the texts are analyzed in Chapter 5, where it is argued that ritual speech constructs a discursive universe more encompassing than the everyday world. An expanded discussion of the musical properties of the texts would have strengthened this chapter, and one does not need to understand the Mewahang language to realize that translating as "open up the path" a poetically striking phrase like "*chelam hemma delam hemmai*" is to lose much of the original richness.

The concluding chapter of Part I, "The Power of Ritual Speech," reexamines the efficacy of this tradition and the uses to which it is put in Mewahang social life. As Gaenszle had earlier concluded (56), "the recitation of the *muddum* [the totality of the ancestral oral tradition] is used as an instrument to restore an original order and harmony, not so much through a reenactment of this order as such...but through an enactment of a contact with the ancestral world." The *muddum* is a unique linguistic resource that not only allows one to establish, maintain, and manipulate social relationships and to deal with common existential problems, such as illness and misfortune. A key point is that while an emphasis on textuality infuses ritual speech with ancestral authority, that speech achieves its greatest power when this entextualization "is combined with some degree of indexical reference (contextualization), since this allows for dialogue and negotiation with the divine" (171).

Following the thorough analysis of the first half of the book, Part II documents a disappointingly small corpus of texts. Of the six texts included, the longest is 262 lines long; the shortest a selection of only 19 lines. In fact, the entire work could be characterized as an analysis of 572 lines of material. Of course, a rich appreciation of context is what distinguishes the work and the translations and commentaries are painstaking; nevertheless, of the six texts, one (T. 1) is a staged performance, another (T. 3A) was dictated, and a third (T. 3C, previously published in GAENZSLE 1996) was performed at the author's request, raising some doubts as to how, exactly, the contextualization of these particular texts can be addressed. Since, as Gaenszle observes, "even the most textualized texts are generated within the contingencies of a context and turn out different with every performance," (189), the striking conclusions regarding the necessary creative balance between entextualization and contextualization appear less than fully supported by Part II of the book, but they remain, in the end, persuasive. Consequently, despite its shortcomings, *Ancestral Voices* deserves the careful attention of anyone with interests in the necessarily overlapping fields of linguistic and cultural anthropology.

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### MIDDLE EAST

DUNDES, ALAN. *Fables of the Ancients? Folklore in the Qur'an*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. xiv + 88 pages. Bibliography, index. Paper US\$19.95; ISBN 0-7425-2672-0. Cloth US\$62.00; ISBN 0-7425-2671-2.

This is to my knowledge the first folkloric study of the Qur'an—the holy book of Islam, which was revealed piecemeal by Allah through angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad over a period of twenty three years, that is, until his death in 632. Dundes, who is “neither Islamophile nor Islamophobic” (xi), approaches the Qur'an folklorically to attest its orality by finding traces of oral tradition in it.

Dundes begins with a word on the Qur'an and touches on many big issues, which are impossible to deal with in a brief review. It suffices to mention some, however, which qualify him for the “orientalist-folklorist” epithet. First, he is puzzled by the first word revealed in the Qur'an —“*iqra*” (“Read;” a translation which is more preferable to “recite”), for the Prophet was illiterate. But Allah, the Creator of man, can make him read: “Read! In the Name of your Lord who has created (all that exists). Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous. Who has taught (the writing) by the pen” (96: 1–4). Second, Dundes also mentions Prophet Muhammad's *isra'* (night journey) from Mecca to Jerusalem and his subsequent *mi'raj* (ascension) to Heaven. He thinks that “he [Prophet Muhammad] was *magically* teleported from Mecca to Jerusalem” (6, my emphasis) whereas Allah says in the Qur'an (17: 1) that it is He who did so. Third, though the Qur'an is Allah's word, Dundes states that “(T)he Qur'an as a text could provide only a means of analyzing the personality of its *true author*, that is, *Gabriel or Allah Himself*, not Muhammad” (7, my emphasis). He excludes the Prophet but does not explain how Gabriel who, like the Prophet, could add or subtract nothing from the revelation, could be an author!

Dundes hopes that the findings of his study are not rejected strictly on the basis that he is an orientalist-folklorist. According to him, the two basic questions that should be considered concern the presence of formulas and folktales respectively in the Qur'an. He holds that anyone who evaluates the empirical data neutrally would answer both questions in the affirmative. Laying aside the issue of neutrality, for neutrality is an impossibility, we proceed to examine how Dundes deals with the Qur'an in the light of the oral-formulaic and folktale theories.

Applying Parry-Lord's oral-formulaic theory to an English concordance of the Qur'an based on one translation of its meanings, Dundes claims that the presence of hundreds of oral formulas attests the orality of the Qur'an. He identifies “probable oral formulas” (24) by looking for any repeated utterances and gives many samples. It is noteworthy that Parry's definition of formula applies to poetry, not to the Qur'an. Dundes does not give a definition but seemingly he has Parry's definition in mind when he says that an ideal study of formulas in Arabic should take the Qur'an's poetic features into consideration. Even if repetition is used in the definition of formula, Dundes does not indicate the elements of repetition, be they lex-