



**Aditya Malik, *Tales of Justice and Rituals of Divine Embodiment: Oral Narratives from the Central Himalayas***

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WHAT GEOGRAPHERS call the Central Himalayan region, encompassing far western Nepal and the Indian state of Uttarakhand, possesses an extraordinarily rich set of oral and ritual traditions. While the population is massively Hindu, its Hinduism includes its own divinities and sometimes divinized ancient kings and heroes who remain very much part of regional imagination and practice. Throughout the area there are singer-drummers who continually recreate a vast narrative corpus; and there is a variety of ways to interact with the regional gods, often involving some form of embodiment of divine beings in human vehicles, what the West has called possession. A distinctive interlocking of these practices typifies the former kingdom of Kumaon, now the eastern part of Uttarakhand. In Kumaon, as to some degree in Garhwal to its west, narration and possession are bound together: rituals of divine embodiment take place under the guidance of a narrating singer. These complex rituals, most often called *jāgar*, from the verb “to wake” (also “stay awake” or “awaken”), are ways of interacting directly with regional gods, and they are usually called for in cases of misfortune that can be attributed to these gods. Some of them, particularly those involving the extremely popular god Golu Dev (also called Goriya or Goll Jyu), are held in order to correct, and sometimes to reveal, injustice. Golu Dev also has his own temples, and thousands of written petitions requesting justice are to be seen on their walls. *Jāgar* rituals have been described in a number of unpublished doctoral dissertations (e.g., QUAYLE 1981, LEAVITT 1985, BERNÈDE 2004), articles, and book chapters (e.g., GABORIEAU 1975, LEAVITT 1997), and parts of more general books about the folk literature and religion of Uttarakhand (e.g., PĀNDE 1962). There is also a book on Golu Dev’s temples and petitions to him (AGRAWAL 1992). Aditya Malik’s *Tales of Justice and Rituals of Divine Embodiment: Oral Narratives from the Central Himalayas*, however, is the first book to explore the intersection of oral narrative, divine embodiment, and conceptions of justice. MALIK is a specialist on folk narration and ritual, author notably of a transcription and richly contextualized translation of the Devnarayan legend and cult in Rajasthan (2003, 2005). This book is particularly important because, for the most part, the English-language literature on South Asian oral epics and other folk tradi-

tions (e.g., BLACKBURN and RAMANUJAN 1986, BLACKBURN, CLAUS et al. 1989) has left aside this tiny corner of the subcontinent.

I will go briefly through the chapters of the book, then offer some general comments. Since the book covers so many topics, these comments will have to be superficial.

Chapter 1, “The Presence of the Everyday,” is organized upon the model that repeats throughout the book in other chapters: an alternation of presentation of the Kumaoni ethnography with, on the one hand, personal anecdotes, and on the other hand, discussions of broad themes: the nature of justice, the nature of everyday experience, and how to conceptualize possession. The discussions are often illuminating, although the relationship of the anecdotes to the rest is not always evident. The author gives a number of personal anecdotes, all illustrating the unknowability and vulnerability of life in this world, and in some cases, how these anecdotes intersect with the intercession of the god.

Chapter 2, “Temples, Travels, Territories,” introduces the god Golu Dev, his legend, his temples, and stories of his travels to establish his temples. Comparisons are made to stories from other parts of South Asia which, like Golu’s, tell of a queen who is younger than her co-wives, and whose child(ren) is taken away by jealous older queens; the child(ren) return triumphantly and the evil queen(s) is punished. In the Kumaoni case, Golū is today said to be an incarnation of Gaur Bhairav, the servant of the deity Shiva, which ties Golu into the Sanskrit pantheon.

Chapter 3, “Ideas of Justice,” begins with interviews with shopkeepers at one of Golū’s temples, and gives a series of cautionary tales about important justice-givers—British authorities and Indian District Magistrates—who were taught lessons by this or another god. The point here is that this divine justice is based on the immediate context, not on an abstract code.

Chapter 4, “Writing Intimacy,” deals with the petitions left for Golū at his temple, with the discussion of some cases described in the petitions. While the discussion ranges over poetry, *bhakti* (devotion), Borges, and the nature of the everyday, the main point is the immediacy of concrete rather than abstract legality.

Chapter 5, despite its title “Alterity and Modernity,” is chapter about possession. The author very fairly critiques tendencies to explain possession away as a delusion or a trick, while offering an important rethinking of possession as “relinquishment of control accompanied by a loss of self, memory, and identity, and rooted in an uncertainty with regard to agency and authority” (144). He identifies this “mixing of bodies and selves” with non-modern societies, particularly with the “non-duality” of Indian thought. This does not, it seems to me, take into account the epidemics of multiple personality that have periodically struck the modern West; the West, too, is probably less “modern” than it likes to think. The author also offers an argument for the predominance of women as possessed mediums. But there is a well-known difference between possession as an affliction and oracular possession of the kind associated with Golu: while it is most often young women who are possessed by ghosts and demons, oracular mediums can be either women or men, as the examples given in the chapter show.

Chapter 6, “Transformations,” begins with epiphanies of Golu and the Goddess, following which the reader gets the impression that the author is moving toward a description of what actually happens in a *jāgar*. Unfortunately, no such description is offered. We hear, rather, about an auto accident the day after the *jāgar*, and then a discussion of the nature of the self, drawing on neuropsychology, Heidegger, and Advaita

philosophy to argue that the experience of embodiment of the god in the medium is an overcoming of the difference between the experiencing self and the objectified self. What this does not answer, it seems to me, is how practices of embodiment such as those in the *jāgar* are different from, say, classical meditation, which by no means serves to embody a divine or demonic being.

The final chapter, “Dancers Dancing,” gives stories about possessed mediums, and recounts the author’s visit to a Golū Dev temple where a woman was possessed, apparently by the Goddess. The chapter concludes with a beautiful discussion of the nature of possession, raising what is certainly the key question this practice poses: what does it mean to live in a world in which one can “be another” (223)?

The book ends with an epilogue positing the universality of feelings of justice, and particularly, of injustice, arguing that reality emerges through language. As may be obvious from the comments, this reader is not convinced by the practice of jumping from ethnography to personal reminiscence to philosophical disquisition. But this is a stylistic question. There are more important issues that need to be addressed.

First, the language of the author’s interaction with his subjects is not identified. In this part of the world, Hindi is the language of public and much private interaction, but in the rituals themselves, as far as I have been able to observe, the narratives and the gods’ speeches are in Kumaoni. More information on the linguistic status of the author’s observances and interactions would have been welcomed. Second, the book’s references are primarily to Western sources for both ethnography and philosophy. There is nothing wrong with this in itself—indeed, it is standard practice in much writing about non-Western cultures. But there is a rich Hindi-language literature on Kumaoni folk religion that might have been cited. It should be said that the book does include a compelling discussion of the constraints and contradictions that face a non-Western but Western-trained scholar. Finally, the geography of Uttarakhand and its neighboring regions is often cited in the book, and plays an important role in the stories being presented. The reader gets lost among the hills, and the book, perhaps in a future edition, would greatly benefit from some maps.

These are quibbles concerning what is, in the end, a major and a highly welcome contribution to the study of oral traditions and religious practice in general, of South Asia in particular.

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