

WILEY



A · M · E · R · I · C · A · N  
A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L  
A S S O C I A T I O N

---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Moral Knowing in a Hindu Sacred City: An Exploration of Mind, Emotion, and Self* by Steven M. Parish

Review by: Lawrence Cohen

Source: *American Ethnologist*, Nov., 1998, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Nov., 1998), pp. 761-762

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the American Anthropological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/645876>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Wiley and American Anthropological Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Ethnologist*

appeal not only to those interested in South African vocal music, but also to those concerned with *how* one might approach and comprehend isicathamiya and other expressive practices—especially those practices that might be seen as in some way resistant to a dominant power. One might wonder if isicathamiya ever transcends its role as resistant practice to address issues that predate or extend above or beyond the impact of the dominant order in South Africa. In Shabalala's final words, he speaks of "a power which rises above us all" (p. xx). While there is no question of the hegemonic and "alien" impact of missionization (to which isicathamiya in part owes its harmonic structure) and apartheid upon isicathamiya performers, one might wonder if Zulus and other South Africans have not conceived of power, spirituality, or alienation, for instance, in their own unique terms that exceed Western understandings of the workings of hegemony and domination. Nonetheless, Nightsong is a formidable, thoughtful, and valuable work. Erlmann greatly enhances the ethnomusicological literature, both by recognizing performance as variegated, multifaceted, and contingent, and by revealing the potential of performance as an interactional medium for replicating, contesting, operating within, and overcoming varied symbolic orders.

***Moral Knowing in a Hindu Sacred City: An Exploration of Mind, Emotion, and Self.* STEVEN M. PARISH. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. xii + 342 pp., maps, photographs, notes, glossary, bibliography, index.**

LAWRENCE COHEN  
University of California, Berkeley

Parish's thoughtful and well-written ethnography is a significant contribution both to the literature on personhood in South Asia and more generally to studies of the cultural specificity of moral reasoning. Primarily an engagement with psychological and cognitive anthropology through a study of how Hindu Newars from the sacred town of Bhaktapur in Nepal make and reflect upon a moral world, the study exemplifies the organizing hypothesis of the subdiscipline to which it belongs—namely that moral reasoning is a cultural process. Beyond its challenge to the universalizing presumptions of moral development in the psychology of Piaget, Kohlberg, and their heirs, *Moral Knowing* offers a layered and yet cogent and dynamic approach to an alternative universe of moral discourse and practice.

Not surprisingly, several themes of this challenge—relatedness, holism, and fluidity—are ubiquitous in the non-Western selfhood literature, particularly its South Asian segment. What sets this book apart is, first, the close attention its author pays to hermeneutics, second, the density and precision of Parish's discussion of human relationships, and third, his attention to the importance of local cosmogonies in structuring morally reasonable practice. Fourth and most interesting is his discussion of moral knowledge as an *embodied* process, in his treatment of the "heart-god" *nuga*; and of *lajya* (roughly, shame) as moral affect. Like

Robert Desjarlais, whose *Body and Emotion* covers related themes (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), Parish takes the reader through the difficulties of cross-cultural interpretation rooted in not only cognitive but embodied understanding. As with other recent reengagements of the category of the person, Parish's discussion of the discourse on relationships among Hindu Newar in Bhaktapur challenges the adequacy of the binary pair of individualism and holism, in this case through a nuanced ego psychology leading him to posit a "cultural dialectic—a process in which men and women merge, blend, and unite in 'relatedness,' emerge as 'selves,' then merge again, and re-emerge."

The limits of this engaging work are the limits of its subdiscipline, and although they do not detract from its significant accomplishment as one of the few book-length ethnographies of moral reasoning, they merit mention, particularly in the context of Nepali ethnography more generally. "Culture" in this subdisciplinary frame is all the chronotopic particularity that can be opposed to a universal "psychology"; as such, it is a staunchly integrative and pre-*Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, University of California Press, 1986) entity in which critical distinctions of ideology and hegemony, local and translocal, and popular and mass are collapsed into a static and ahistorical "Hindu Newar" ethos. Despite Parish's turn from Geertz to Raymond Williams in search of a more agentive model of culture, critical distinctions that might and should have informed ethnographic inquiry are missing.

Thus Buddhist Newar ideology and practice, and their complex and shifting historical relationship to Hindu Newar practice, are absent. Newars appear to act and think in a vacuum, few other Nepalis are present, and there is none of the complex internationalism of the Kathmandu valley and its touristic effects upon sites like Bhaktapur. Also absent are film, television, and governmental structures and processes. The impact of all of these historical and contemporary sources of moral world-making upon the moral reasoning of Newars is sidestepped through an ethnosociological method glossing local concepts (*lajya*, karma, *nuga*, *maya jal*, *cipa*, dharma, and so forth) but far removed from many critical sites of moral reasoning in situ. Political economy is present in brief and cogent discussions of caste hierarchy, and in still briefer discussions of the relation of the town to its agricultural hinterland, but by and large it is deferred as posing a different set of questions. Such questions may not be as distant from the province of cultural psychology as its architects imagine.

Nepalis, Vincanne Adams reminds us in reference to Sherpas, are particularly prone to imaginative reconstruction by outsiders (*Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas*, Princeton University Press, 1996). The critical anthropology of development in Nepal suggests that these processes are not limited in their application to Sherpas but characterize bilateral and multilateral efforts to construct Nepal as a beneficiary of development. Although these processes are neither totalizing nor uncontested, the burden for the ethnographer remains that of recognizing Nepal's ecological, political, and

ritual particularities without reifying these into the ubiquitous governmental and touristic narrative of shiny, happy, mountain people.

Parish's rich and layered ethnography is in no way reducible to such processes. Yet the possibility of his ethnographic moment—in which the horizons of a moral world seemed resolutely confined to Hindu Bhaktapur as a sort of Shangri-La of moral discourse, out of time and space—suggests broader forces overdetermining the ground of inquiry.

**Religion and Power in Morocco.** HENRY MUNSON JR. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993. xix + 232 pp., map, note on transliteration, chronology, notes, glossary, bibliographies, index.

ROBERT LAUNAY  
Northwestern University

Ever since the publication of Clifford Geertz's *Islam Observed* (Yale University Press, 1968), Morocco has occupied a special (if rather peculiar) niche in the anthropological imagination. It has become the chosen site for sweeping historical-cum-ethnographic narratives about the nature of Islam, the relationship of Islam to the exercise of princely power, and ultimately the ambivalent confrontation of Islam as a religion and of the putatively Islamic state with "modernity." Ernest Gellner, Elaine Combs-Schilling, and, in the volume under review, Henry Munson Jr. have each scripted very different scenarios for the broad sweep of Moroccan—if not even more grandly of Islamic—history. It is very much to Munson's credit that he does not claim to generalize about Islam on the basis of his experience in only one (or, in Geertz's case, two) Muslim nation. He aptly takes his predecessors to task for their propensity to arrive at the most sweeping conclusions on the basis of insufficient and poorly contextualized evidence. Geertz is his primary target; indeed, Munson's entire book is an extended critique of *Islam Observed*.

Munson begins by systematically taking apart Geertz's portrayal of the 17th-century saint al-Yusi as an exemplar of what Geertz calls the "classical style" (p. 23) of Moroccan Islam, appropriately contending that "[Geertz's] interpretation illustrates the danger of trying to interpret specific events without adequate attention to the conceptual structures and historical contexts in which they are enmeshed" (p. 10). Instead of relying largely on legendary accounts of the saint's confrontation with the reigning sultan, Munson draws attention to a justly famous epistle addressed by al-Yusi to the ruler, taking the latter to task. For Munson, al-Yusi epitomizes not "Moroccan Islam" in general but rather the "archetypal righteous man of God" (p. 25), the holy man who courageously denounces oppression who is unlike the majority of *ulama* (Islamic scholars) who, through pusillanimity or opportunism, support the powers that be.

Munson contends that the ideological background to the oppositional role of these "righteous men of God" is framed by the conflict between two Islamic conceptions of rule, namely the hierocratic

and the contractual. According to the first conception, the hereditary caliph is "God's deputy and shadow on earth" (p. 38); according to the second, the Muslim community, as represented by the *ulama*, has an obligation to designate a just successor. Munson traces this conflict from the Middle Ages to the present, although the lion's share of his work is given explicitly to the modern era. Munson's heroes are those righteous holy men—from Ibn Yasin and Ibn Tumart in the 11th and 12th centuries to al-Kattani and al-<sup>5</sup>Alawi in the 20th—who have, at the peril of their lives, denounced the injustice of rulers in the name of the contractual principle.

Munson's opposing principles of hierocratic and contractual rule bring uncomfortably to mind the Enlightenment controversy between proponents of the divine right of kings and proponents of the social contract (especially Locke). Munson's sense of history is fortunately far too acute to allow him to turn al-Yusi entirely into an epitome of Moroccan liberalism before the letter. Yet Munson's liberal biases surface most clearly in his treatment of the religious dimension of contemporary Moroccan politics. He very justly takes Geertz and Combs-Schilling severely to task for uncritically reproducing government propaganda about the religious legitimacy of Hassan II's rule, and for failing to mention his use of force (and, indeed, terror) to maintain his rule. As a liberal, however, he is equally uncomfortable with the "fundamentalist" opposition to the Sultan. To his credit, he takes great pains to demonstrate how broad the spectrum of "fundamentalism" is in Morocco. Nevertheless, he globally reproaches fundamentalists for their insistence on the essentially political nature of religion—a view inconsistent with Munson's liberal construction of the contractual conception of Islamic rule. Even when a fundamentalist writes a denunciatory epistle to Hassan II, thereby earning three years in a lunatic asylum (a light punishment under the circumstances), Munson is only prepared to admit that this critic "evoke[s] the classical image of the righteous man of God" (p. 178), but not that he embodies it.

Munson is absolutely right to condemn his predecessors for elaborating sweeping historical narratives without bothering to consult the available sources, particularly in Arabic. Yet he marshals all this evidence only to construct an equally sweeping alternative story. In Munson's version, sultans rule as much through brute force as through attempts to impose hierocratic notions of hereditary succession, backed by the mass of religious scholars (who are either too timid or too avid for royal patronage to oppose them), and only exceptionally countered by the indignation of a righteous holy man who thereby captures the popular imagination. At times, Munson can be every bit as anachronistic as the colleagues he criticizes, for example by characterizing al-Yusi as "a brilliant social historian and ethnographer whose reflections on religion, language, society, and politics enable us to understand how seventeenth-century Moroccans saw the world and lived their everyday lives" (p. 184). By privileging the *longue durée* at the expense of the conjuncture, and by divorcing politics from political economy,