



Demoting Vishnu: Ritual, Politics, and the Unraveling of Nepal's Hindu Monarchy

Anne T. Mocko

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At the turn of the millennium, Nepal was the world's last remaining Hindu kingdom. Even the most skeptical of observers could hardly imagine that the institution of the monarchy could soon be in jeopardy. In 2001, however, Nepal's popular King Birendra was killed in the royal palace. Though the crown passed to his brother Gyanendra, the monarchy would never fully recover. Nepal witnessed an anti-king uprising in April 2006 and over the course of two years, an interim administration systematically took over all the king's duties and privileges. Most decisively, beginning in the summer of 2007 the government began blocking the king from participating in his many public rituals, sending the prime minister in his place instead.

Demoting Vishnu argues that Nepal's dramatic political transformation from monarchy to republic was contested-and in key ways accomplished-through ritual performance. Mocko theorizes the role of public ritual in producing Nepal's state ideology. She examines how royal ritual once authorized kings to serve as the privileged apex of national governance and shows how in the twenty-first century those rituals stopped serving the king and began instead to authorize rule by a party-based "head of state." By co-opting state ritual, the king's opponents were able to attack the monarchy's social identity at its foundations, enabling the final legal dissolution of kingship in 2008 to take place without physically harming the king himself. All once-royal rituals continue to be performed, but now they are handled by the country's president-a position created in 2008 to take over state ceremonial functions. *Demoting Vishnu* illustrates how upheaval in ritual contexts undermined the institutional logic of the monarchy by demonstrating in very public ways that kingship was contingent, opposable, and ultimately dispensable.

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