

RITUAL, POWER AND GENDER

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Explorations in the Ethnography of
Vanuatu, Nepal and Ireland

MICHAEL ALLEN

Sydney Studies in Society and Culture



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*Ritual, Power and Gender: Explorations in the
Ethnography of Vanuatu, Nepal and Ireland*

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PREFACE

When Professor Mukherjee, Visiting Professor of History in the University of Sydney and for many years the doyen of the Sydney Association for the Study of Societies and Cultures, first suggested that I should put together a collection of my papers for publication in the Association's monograph series I declined on the grounds that such a project might interfere unduly with my ambition to publish new material, in particular a monograph based on my more recent research in Ireland. However, when he subsequently assured me that I could include a section on my Irish research I began to see some merit in his suggestion, all the more so in view of the rather obscure publications in which much of my earlier work lies hidden. And now, with the task complete, I am sufficiently pleased with the end result to express my gratitude to Professor Mukherjee.

The greater part of the research on which the five chapters in Part I is based was carried out on Ambae island in north Vanuatu between October 1958 and November 1959, October 1960 and January 1961, July 1961 and January 1962 and in May 1980. The five chapters in Part II are based on research carried out in Kathmandu Valley between January 1960 and January 1961, September 1973 and January 1974 and August 1978 and January 1979. The two chapters in Part III are based on research carried out in Ireland between July 1988 and January 1989, June 1990 and February 1991, September 1992 and January 1993 and September/October 1995.

INTRODUCTION

This collection of papers, spanning the years between 1972 and 1998, reflects both the centrality and continuity of my long interest in the religious dimension of social life. Raised as a Protestant in the almost wholly Catholic Republic of Ireland I had from an early age developed what can perhaps best be described as a somewhat cynical view of the immense import that my fellow citizens seemingly attached to their own religious beliefs and practices whilst at the same time denigrating those of all others. Indeed, my cynicism was such that I had already become a convinced atheist at the age of eighteen when, as a school chapel prefect, I had the duty of preparing the altar for holy communion. A few years earlier, as a candidate for confirmation, I had hoped that when the Archbishop of Dublin placed his hands on my head my growing doubts would vanish when something wondrous happened, such as Christ stepping forth from the chapel's stained glass window. But no such miracle occurred, no sense of wondrous power passed from those holy hands and the last shreds of my 'belief' flew out the window.

But equally, my sense of wonderment at both the content and the strength of such beliefs, not only in Ireland but perhaps universally, grew apace. Furthermore, my childhood desire to shore up shaky belief with an experience of miraculous empowerment has subsequently assumed a focal position in my anthropological understanding of the ubiquitous and complex relationship that universally obtains between religion and the exercise of power. It is precisely an exploration of that relationship that has driven the

greater bulk of my research and is the key concern of the papers brought together in this volume.

At the heart of religious belief, and even more so religious practice, is the presumption that firm commitment, in conjunction with punctilious enactment, will have empowering consequences of great import—that one will enter the kingdom of heaven, consume the body and blood of Christ, communicate with the ancestors, defeat the enemy, overcome evil, prosper in business, have bountiful harvests etc. To the extent that one can persuade others that one has access to such remarkable powers then clearly a solid foundation has been laid for the exercise of coercive power in the daily conduct of social life. In a variety of quite diverse contexts, though most especially in Vanuatu, Nepal and Ireland, I have sought to explore the nature of such beliefs and practices, and in particular to delineate their consequences for the actual exercise of power in the political arena.

Just as some important components of my school-based adolescence laid the foundations for a life-long curiosity concerning the importance that so many accord to religion, so too do I attribute my equally long interest in gender relations to those early formative years in Ireland. Here, the relevant context was not so much either school or home, but rather the contrast between the two. At the tender age of eight I was cast forth from a warm, loving and female-dominated domestic world into a harsh world of punitive boys' boarding schools. For the next ten years my life was then divided into two sharply contrasting environments—eight months of each year in all-male initiatory schools, where I learnt precious little of a scholastic kind though a good deal about hierarchy, bullying, male friendship and camaraderie and in the later years, male homosexuality, and by contrast a blissful four months surrounded by wondrously gentle, nurturing and playful female relatives. Hence, by the time that I emerged as an immature adult I had an acute sense both of the gulf that commonly separated these gender-based worlds and of the exaggerated fantasies that each nurtured of the other.

Many years later, when I became an anthropologist and began my first period of fieldwork in Vanuatu, I was already convinced that in order to understand anything whatsoever about religion, though

most especially the centrality of the key power beliefs, it was first necessary to attain a thorough understanding of gender relations. As I subsequently discovered, the kind of powers sought for in the religious context are almost always represented in gender-specific terms, whether male, female or bisexual. Furthermore, the determination of just who in fact can gain access to such powers is yet again a matter of gender, most commonly restricted to adult men. But perhaps the most intriguing of the many links that obtain between religion, power and gender is the frequency with which the kind of religious powers that men appropriate exclusively to themselves, though overtly represented in ultra-male terms, incorporate elements of an unmistakably female or feminine kind. There is, in other words, a matriarchal myth that lies at the heart of most male cults. Gender considerations are, of course, also highly relevant in seeking some understanding of the frequency with which sexual activity, whether in the form of prescription or proscription, looms so large in religious formulations and ideals.

I have then no doubt that my Irish background in large measure determined not just my anthropological interest in gender, but specifically a movement from an initial interest in all-male cultic activities built around the bizarre idea that men had access to and control over feminine-type powers (as in Vanuatu), to an exploration of various manifestations of the cultural construction of femininity, most especially the worship of female deities (as in Nepal), and finally to the documentation of a predominantly female religious movement within a male-dominated religious hierarchy (as in Ireland). In other words, the primary focus of my research on religion shifted from men to women to gender relations.

The division of the book into three separate sections reflects the fact that I have carried out extensive fieldwork-based research in three quite different kinds of community—the small kinship-based Melanesian population on Ambae island in north Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides), the predominantly urban and caste-structured Newars of Kathmandu Valley, Nepal and the Catholic citizens of the Republic of Ireland. Though particular and contingent circumstances undoubtedly contributed to my choice of these three communities, the primary consideration was that they all shared in

common an exceptional cultural elaboration accorded to religion. In the case of north Vanuatu such elaboration took the form of a proliferation of complex male ritual associations; of the Newars it lay in the rich intermingling of both Buddhist and Hindu elements in a world seemingly full of holy places, persons and events; whilst in Ireland it took the form of the pervasive influence of the Catholic church and its puritanical morality in almost every important dimension of contemporary Irish social life.

There are, I think, some further implications of my movement from Vanuatu to Nepal and finally to Ireland that are worth noting. The first move, which occurred in the mid-1960s, was importantly influenced by two considerations, one quite personal and the other methodological. I had first visited Nepal as early as 1953, some five years before I even knew of the existence of anthropology, and had become so entranced by both the place and the people that if I had had my way I would have conducted my initial research there rather than in Vanuatu. But, in the late 1950s such a field site was not considered appropriate for an Australian trained anthropologist, the choice being mostly restricted either to the Australian Aboriginal field or to neighbouring communities in South-East Asia or the Pacific, especially Melanesia. I chose Vanuatu for two reasons; as an MA student I had become fascinated with the early accounts of the elaborate male ritual associations found there, and the British Administration was prepared to partly fund the research.

There were, of course, other and more intellectually respectable reasons for my subsequent movement in 1967 to Nepal than simply prior entrancement. Of considerable importance was my growing conviction that if anthropology was to survive the rapid absorption of formerly autonomous tribal peoples into emerging nation states, then the skills learned in the study of the former would need to be shown to be equally valuable in the study of the later. Furthermore, I felt that in order to transcend the a-historicism of structural-functionalism it was desirable to be able to locate one's ethnography in a well-documented historical context, a context that might enable one to give substantial time depth to the study of social process and social transformation.

What then led to my second movement from Nepal to Ireland in 1988? In part it was purely negative. Despite the great antiquity of Newar culture, with written texts that date back many hundreds of years and stone inscriptions that go back as early as the fifth century AD, I still found it difficult to give as much historical depth to my analyses of religious phenomena as I wished to do. Linguistic difficulties loomed large for I found myself quite incapable of acquiring the kind of proficiency that I yearned for not only in Newari and Nepali, but also in both Sanskrit and Tibetan. With some relief I decided to leave the field to a new generation of younger and linguistically better equipped anthropologists than I knew I could ever become.

But, perhaps naturally enough, it is the more positive motivation in my move to Ireland that I wish to stress. At a very early stage in my career as an anthropologist, certainly sometime prior to my move from Vanuatu to Nepal, I nurtured the ambition to one day attempt research in Ireland, preferably on a topic that focused simultaneously on religion and gender. But for many years the ambition was put on hold. During this period I vacillated between two not easily reconciled considerations—on the one hand, a recognition of the very real difficulties involved in attempting an in-depth study of one's 'home' community, difficulties that made me repeatedly postpone the task in the hope that as the years passed I might eventually attain a sufficiency of detached objectivity, and on the other, the growing conviction that if anthropology is to prosper in the future it is essential that its practitioners not only demonstrate its capabilities in the study of complex nation states, such as Nepal or Ireland, but that it also demonstrate its ability to study the 'self' as productively as it has traditionally studied the 'other'. And by the 'self' I simply mean the social and cultural world with which the ethnographer most strongly identifies—in other words, his or her 'home' community. It was not until 1988, at the age of 60, that I decided that it was a case of now or never. I felt that the negative consequences of any further advance into old age would render the possible gain in increased detachment quite null and void. Of course, the fact that I had been brought up as a middle-class Protestant, and even more so that I subsequently became an atheist,

ensured that the world of ardent Catholic belief and practice that I wished to investigate was in many important ways such an unfamiliar world that it was almost as much 'other' to me as either Vanuatu or Nepal, at least sufficiently 'other' to ensure that there was precious little that I was in danger of taking for granted.

The papers that I have selected for inclusion in the first two sections, that is, those that focus on Vanuatu and Nepal, have all been previously published, some in journals and others as chapters in edited collections. I would like to thank the relevant editors and publishers for permission to reproduce them in the present volume. In substance, they have remained as originally published, though I found it desirable both to eliminate a small number of unnecessary descriptive replications and to correct a few typographical and factual errors. The final two chapters are based on my recent research in Ireland and have not been previously published.

**I MEN, RITUAL AND POWER IN
NORTH VANUATU**

