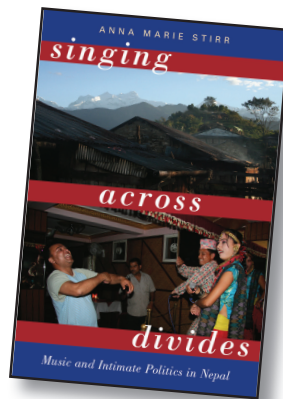


is considered a prized possession amongst global backpackers).

From my own disciplinary perspective, anthropology has had a long-standing interest in individual and collective imaginations, even though these are quite difficult to gather empirical data on. *Far Out* keeps the focus squarely on Kathmandu and the tourist encounter, and it situates the encounter within wider global influences, but the focus on Nepal is effective for not privileging the West's perspective without problematizing it. By presenting a historicised geography of individual and collective narratives, *Far Out* is a valuable resource for scholars and enthusiasts of tourism history and Nepal studies and provides a cornerstone for further research on contemporary tourism in South Asia.

Jolynna Sinanan is a research fellow in Automated Decision-Making and Global Contexts in the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society and the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. Her current research focuses on digital media infrastructures and practices in work and the tourist encounter in the Everest tourism industry.



Singing Across Divides: Music and Intimate Politics in Nepal.

Anna Marie Stirr. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 288 pages. ISBN 9780190631987.

Reviewed by Mason Brown

Ethnomusicologist Anna Stirr is a minor celebrity in Nepal. She is known for her mastery of *dohori*—“dialogic, conversational sung poetry” in the Nepali language (p. 3), usually between a man and a woman, which is associated with courtship, flirtation, and competition. As a performer who has worked for over a decade with, and is highly respected by, some of the main players in the “*dohori* field” (p. 9), Stirr enjoys a kind of honorary “insider status.” That, combined with her immersion in various strands of scholarship and theory, makes for a beautiful book that threads deft theoretical synthesis through lovingly written ethnographic vignettes and big-picture historical and cultural framing. The book also won the Bernard H. Cohen prize from the Association for Asian Studies.

Dohori is part of a larger array of traditions across the Himalayas in which young men and women improvise rhyming couplets in response to each other. It is particularly associated with *janajāti*

(indigenous) groups like Gurung, Rai, and Magar that traditionally live in the middle hills of rural Nepal. As originally practiced, it was a way for teenagers to spend lightly supervised time together. Singers would compete to see who could go one further in improvising couplets. If a contest was framed as binding, the boy could win the girl's hand in marriage, or the girl could win labor or in-kind payment from the boy. Stirr lays out how this rural, ethnically specific practice came to be appropriated by high-cast Hindus and used to represent a unified Nepali culture in urban spaces and mass media, inadvertently sneaking-in its transgressive potentials to mainstream discourse.

Those transgressive potentials bear on what Stirr theorizes as “intimate politics.” Starting with a Rancièrian view of politics as actions that oppose obscurantist logics that mask inequality, she fleshes out a Nepali idea of closeness (*ghaniṣṭha*), with reference to writings on intimacy by social theorists like Martin Stokes, Lauren Berlant, Michael Herzfeld, and Alexander Kiossev, and posits that “intimate publics” are created to unite strangers in the same emotional world. *Dohori*, she says, poses a challenge “to fictions of harmoniously coexisting social differences: it exposes the lines not to be crossed, and delights in their crossing” (p. 14). She brings in and expands on numerous other strands of scholarship, such as work on music and the rural/urban divide by Thomas Turino, Christine Reiko Yano, Aaron Fox and Alexander Dent, which she complicates by de-linearizing the narrative, with respect to South Asia especially: “Rural performance settings survive not only in a nostalgic imagination, but also in everyday life, in villages integrated into a complex set of relations with

“...a beautiful book that threads deft theoretical synthesis through lovingly written ethnographic vignettes and big-picture historical and cultural framing.”

Brown on *Singing Across Divides: Music and Intimate Politics in Nepal*

urban areas in India [and Nepal] and the rest of the world” (p. 18).

Stirr compares informal and village settings, such as the older *rodhi ghar* and other songfests, with voice tests and song competitions in the mass media, which did not develop until the Panchayat period (1960–1990). It was especially during this “partyless democracy” that King Mahendra’s government sought to direct modernization and development through nation-building, promoting a narrative of a unified Nepali culture based on high-caste Hindu values, dress, and language. Radio Nepal was created, and charged with delineating a national sound. They did this with two genres of music: *adhunik git* (modern song), which combines Hindustani musical elements with Western harmony and instruments to form a sophisticated and high-status art music; and *lok git* (folk song), including *dohori*, which is drawn largely from the rhythmic, melodic, and poetic traditions of non-Hindu ethnic groups. *Lok git*’s sound—of the *bansuri* flute, *madal* drum, and *sārangī* fiddle, accompanying idyllic melodies and texts that evoke village life, “came to be embraced by the state as embodying culturally intimate national essence, marginalized yet central to a state-supported musical national imaginary” (p. 30). Stirr shows how voice tests—basically auditions for Radio Nepal; song competitions—the winners of which would often be allowed to record for Radio Nepal; and Radio Nepal itself—which was the only radio

station in Nepal for decades, formed a cycle of cultural production distinct from, and yet intimately dependent on, the music practiced by ordinary people. The contradictions inherent in using *janajāti* forms and aesthetics to represent caste-Hindu values are apparent in Stirr’s finding that *dohori* is often viewed as “belonging to both a rural, eroticized other—the ‘beautiful ladies’ planting rice in the fields—and to pure Nepali essence” (p. 39). The fact of its intimate nature and ability to create spaces where social norms can be transgressed makes it, in spite of being an official symbol of the nation, a “culturally intimate guilty pleasure” for many Nepalis (p. 51). Stirr’s chapter (pp. 29–53) on music in the Panchayat era would be an excellent reading for any seminar on modern South Asian history, or musical nationalism.

Stirr draws on Appadurai’s concept of “regimes of value,” especially as expanded by Mark Liechty and Fred Myers, to show how professional *dohori* is “challenging interpretations of honor rooted in logics of patronage and capitalist exchange” (p. 140) and, consequently, goes against the grain of the neoliberal values seen to be sweeping South Asia elsewhere. She traces how the social relationships and values of the rural songfest still strongly influence the professional, proscenium stage performances of the *dohori* restaurant and the song competition, even as they introduce different concepts of patronage and different forms of exchange (p. 144). In a line-by-line analysis

of a song from a 2006 competition, Stirr fascinatingly illustrates how song contest judges, sponsoring organizations, and audiences are like patrons, whom the performers are required to please through the proper gendered behavior, poetic skill, and politeness (pp. 148–156). Stirr masterfully conveys how ideas of prestigious cultural heritage, and the illicit tinge of female professional performers being associated with courtesans, come to the fore in the contexts of *dohori* restaurants, with their “simultaneous presence of both patronage and capitalist exchange” (p. 160), and in the recording industry, where performers often choose to sing less sexually suggestive lyrics in an effort to preserve honor, which mediates “social exchange, love, and commerce” (p. 138). The chapter on professional *dohori* (pp. 140–173) is a great reading both for how to apply a Marxian analysis, with a keen eye toward gender, to a multifaceted cultural field, as well as an in-depth lesson in Nepali poetic conventions.

Stirr’s book concludes with a moving chapter on “Violence, Storytelling, and Song,” in which she engages with work on storytelling by Hannah Arendt, Erving Goffman, Michael Jackson, and Carole McGranahan, to show how *dohori* can be used, by employing universalizing tropes, to contest such dichotomies as *sūkha-dukha* (pleasure/pain), and the natal home versus the home of the husband. She provides extensive translations of couplets

sung between two close friends at a gathering in a private home, which show how a singer can co-create “a more welcoming space for herself within the public intimacies of songfest exchange,” by retelling her story through dohori songs that “affirm the importance of social ties while simultaneously exposing the injustices that underlie expectations about those bonds” (p. 239). In this chapter, as throughout the book,

there are musical examples that give the melody as well as the madal beat, which will be of interest to musicians interested in the workings of *jhyāure*, *khyāli*, and other Nepali lok rhythmic genres. While dense and scholarly, Stirr’s book is a pleasure to read, especially when it highlights the poignancy and longing of many folk lyrics. It is highly recommended to any teacher of anthropology, ethnomusicology, poetry, and oral

literature, or to anyone interested in the intimate politics that forge connection and change below the surface of our lives.

Mason Brown is a guest assistant professor at Kathmandu University and a visiting scholar at the University of Colorado Boulder. He is also a Reviews and Reports Editor for HIMALAYA Journal.