

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Anthropology Faculty Publications and
Presentations

Anthropology

Winter 2009

Book Review of, Diane P. Mines. *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village*

Michele Ruth Gamburd
Portland State University, b5mg@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anth_fac



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Gamburd, M. (2009). Diane P. Mines. *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village*. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4(2): 238-241.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

unknowable in an absolute sense. Instead, it is our capacity that is inadequate. We should not worry about them, because it would be pointless to do so.

Reporting Guicciardini's sentiment, Maggi chooses to cite only the statement's first half, the half that would lead us to think that Guicciardini, like others in his premodern cohort, believed in demons and supernatural beings. And it is certainly true that Guicciardini lived in a world in which the existence of spiritual beings was an assumed norm, so deeply believed that it did not need to be articulated. But it is just as clear from the work of Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park, and Walter Stephens, among others, that there was a long early modern conversation going on about the limits to the order of nature, a conversation that lasted from the fifteenth to approximately the middle eighteenth century.³ At one end of that long period, most intellectuals believed in the existence of spiritual beings, even if some, like Guicciardini, contributed to the demise of such beliefs by disallowing them from the realm of everyday discourse. At the other end, intellectuals had ceased to believe in the existence of spiritual beings, as post-Cartesian mechanism took hold and the question of the existence of supernatural beings simply ceased to be asked in a serious way. Things changed, in other words. If Maggi's important book does not help discern how that change occurred, it does offer fundamental insight into an early modern mentality shared by farmers and lawyers, laborers and university professors, country-dwelling villagers and cosmopolitan urbanites. It is a book well worth reading.

CHRISTOPHER S. CELENZA
Johns Hopkins University

DIANE P. MINES. *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. Pp. xi + 247.

In this engaging and eminently readable ethnography, talented storyteller Diane P. Mines draws her audience into everyday life in the South Indian village of Yanaimangalam. Lively characters from diverse groups within the village create a compelling, multiperspective account of caste, religion, and

3. See Daston, "Preternatural Philosophy," in *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. Daston (Chicago, 2000), 15–41; Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150–1750* (New York, 1998); and Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago, 2002).

village conflict. Consistent voices include Mines's elderly Brahmin neighbor who talks nostalgically about how things "used to be," Mines's low caste research associate who laments that painful caste inequalities never change, a member of the dominant Thevar caste who speaks of village improvements, and a passionate leader from the Scheduled Caste (Untouchable) hamlet on the periphery of the main village. Mines's own voice combines humble tales of awkward encounters with the confident authority of twenty years of cross-cultural expertise, highlighting the learning process in ethnographic fieldwork. Overall, this tightly woven, superbly crafted volume draws the reader gently into the heart of life in Tamil Nadu. The book heralds a renaissance of village anthropology, presenting a sophisticated examination of caste and religious practice against a background of Tamil concepts of self, village, and the wider world.

The first half of the book describes dynamics of village inclusion and exclusion acted out in everyday interpersonal encounters and in more formal temple festivals and life-crisis rituals. Mines begins with a vignette about the turmoil incited when a Scheduled Caste man takes a pinch of ash from the shrine of the village goddess. Four chapters carefully unpack for the reader the multiple social structures that bear on the case, examining national, regional, and historic caste relations, cross-caste interdependence and patronage in Yanaimangalam, and Tamil theories of individual qualities and habits. Exquisitely detailed ethnographic material illustrates how social interactions make and remake distinctions in rank and define group boundaries of caste, age, and gender. Refuting older views of caste, Mines argues that hierarchies are not fixed, timeless, or clear cut, but are instead ceaselessly produced and reproduced. She also shows that identities are irrevocably relational and based on social action.

The four chapters in the second half of the book focus on ritual activities. Mines describes a religious pantheon with beneficent, calm Brahmanical gods linked to the "great" tradition of Indian civilization; village goddesses responsible for the fertility of soil, humans, and animals; and unpredictable, peripheral "fierce" gods who are in turn protective and cruel. Temple associations organize events for village goddesses and fierce gods in Yanaimangalam. Densely crowded, elaborate activities illustrate the unity and popularity of the associations and the generosity and wealth of the individuals involved, enhancing their reputations. Mines argues that temple festivals (particularly processions) publicly display organizers' view of social relations within the whole village. Of each festival, Mines asks who forms part of the "whole" and what territory counts as "the village." She examines how festivals are

staged in competitive conversation with each other, presenting alternative concepts of village and belonging.

The annual goddess festival generally reinforces the status of the dominant castes in the village. Mines shows how festivals for village goddesses display social order (of lineages, castes, temple associations, and villages) and can reinforce relations of dominance and subordination. But in Yanaimangalam after the ash theft incident, the Scheduled Castes in the community boycotted the established goddess festival and set up their own, independent event. By removing themselves from the peripheries of the dominant castes' ceremonial activities, the Scheduled Caste community refused to participate in events that reproduced their social marginalization and exclusion.

The worship of chaotic, peripheral, fierce gods can also revalue and reposition people within the village community. Mines shows how festivals for fierce gods provide symbolic discourses with transformative power to subvert existing power structures. She relates the "same" story from multiple caste perspectives to illustrate how historical narratives, memories, and origin myths frame temple activities and claim relationships between individuals, families, castes, and particular gods. In addition, the routes of religious processions can appropriate space to define and redefine boundaries of the village, thus including and excluding neighborhoods and their residents.

Religious narratives ("the talk") and the use of space during processions ("the walk") reflect village economic and political struggles. But Mines deftly shows that village religious activities also take place in conversation with extravillage events, symbols, and figures. She provides examples of how villagers reference regional political parties, Hindu nationalist endeavors in Ayodhya, and the Dalit hero Ambedkar. This village ethnography illustrates the localization of regional and national dynamics.

While making the strange familiar to readers not already acquainted with South Asia, Mines also engages area specialists in a series of ongoing debates. With analytic sophistication, she delicately positions her work within the South Asian literature on the nature of caste and intercaste relationships, explicitly discussing, for example, Dirks's work on colonial history and Raheja's study of mutuality, centrality, and inauspiciousness in North India. Mines also joins the anthropological conversation on agency and resistance, fruitfully asking what South Asian concepts of self, family, caste, and habit can contribute to theoretical understandings of personhood and social action. In addition, she makes a significant contribution to the anthropology of place, examining how people and places co-construct each other within wider social contexts. Finally, Mines engages the literature on religious ceremony and possession. She writes, "the gods are real powers contiguous with humans,

powers that make humans into powerful agents with the capacity to potentially restructure the system of conventional rankings” (p. 144). She argues that religion does much more than reflect and justify social hierarchies; gods and goddesses empower their devotees by possessing the human hosts and allowing them to voice calls for social justice.

Mines’s gripping prose keeps the pages turning. I highly recommend this book for adoption in undergraduate classes. It will provide a keystone in discussions of South Asia, particularly contributing to the examination of caste identity. It will also fit well in courses on Religious Studies by elucidating the relationship between Hinduism and caste structure and between devotees and deities. Anthropologists interested in the study of place and the cultural construction of power will also find this a fantastic resource.

MICHELE RUTH GAMBURD

Portland State University

DON C. SKEMER. *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. Pp. viii + 327.

Textual amulets were among the most common magical devices employed in the medieval period. As Skemer defines them, they were “generally brief apotropaic texts, handwritten or mechanically printed on separate sheets, rolls, and scraps of parchment, paper, or other flexible writing supports of varying dimensions” (p. 1). Always short, they could range in length from just a few words (e.g., the very common amulet consisting of the names of the three kings of the gospel nativity story, thought to be effective against epilepsy) to a text that might fill most of a folio page (then folded repeatedly for portability). They were cheap and easy to produce. Skemer usefully distinguishes them from talismans, which he defines as being more expensive, elite items, typically engraved jewelry, gems, or metal disks that often bore decidedly learned astrological symbols and images, rather than holy names or snippets of sacred texts. The terminology Skemer employs is modern, but it seems clear that some distinction between these two levels of powerful, portable items, each bearing writing or signification of some kind, existed in the Middle Ages.

Since textual amulets were such a widespread form of magic in the medieval period, it is unsurprising that their development tends to mirror aspects of the history of medieval magic generally. Amulets were used throughout the Middle Ages, as they had been in antiquity. Protective inscriptions are