The Nectar of Translation:
conversion, mimesis, and cultural
translation in Krishna Consciousness

Malcolm Haddon B.A. (Hons)
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Abstract

A Note on Transliteration and Naming

## INTRODUCTION

**REPRESENTING ISKCON: SPREADING THE MESSAGE OF KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS**

- “Cultural anthropology, *ki jaya*!”: the *Gita* lesson
- Surrendering to a higher authority: disclaimer on representation
- Conversion acts: the performativity of belief
- Spreading the message (1): *sankirtana*
- Spreading the message (2): scholarly devotion
- Spreading the message (3): the sacred in translation

## CHAPTER ONE

**“EASY JOURNEY” TO ANOTHER PLANET: FIELDWORK, CULTURE CONVERSION, AND THE LOCATION OF THE SPIRITUAL**

- Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha Mandir, “Embassy of the Spiritual World”
- The nectar of ethnography; or, “You can’t taste the honey by licking the outside of the jar”
- Cult and culture: anthropological metaphors and the methodology of distance in the sociology of new religious movements (‘NRMs’)
- Fieldwork, culture conversion, and the *yoga* of phenomenology
- Culture conversion as mimetic excess

## CHAPTER TWO

**A TASTE FOR KRISHNA: AESTHETIC THEOLOGY AND THE TRANSUBSTANTIATION OF CULTURE**

- Lunch in Vrindavana: an ethnographic entrée
- The Sunday Feast
CHAPTER SIX  THE NECTAR OF TRANSLATION: MANTRA, TEXT, AND THE ‘YOGA OF SCRIPTURAL TRANSMISSION’  

The Bhagavatam class  

Mantra, performativity, and translation effects  

CONCLUSION  CONVERSION, MIMESIS, TRANSLATION: SELF-REALISATION AND THE OTHER IN KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS  

Essence, difference, transcendence: extracting the rasa in ISKCON  

REFERENCES
# Table of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Picture</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Murti</em> of Srila Prabhupada</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Pujari</em> performing <em>arati</em></td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Sunday Feast</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kitchen religion: Prabhupada chopping tomatoes</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Mayapur <em>gurukula</em></td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Inside Gurukula Maharaja's hut</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The Sri Mandir Society of NSW</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Prabhupada’s Disappearance Day at ISKCON Cessnock</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Srila Prabhupada’s passport</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Jaladuta</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Prabhupada ascending the gangplank of the <em>Jaladuta</em></td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First of all to Sarah, font of my life: thank you, for this would have been neither possible nor worthwhile without you. Thanks especially to Ian Bedford – supervisor, editor, sounding-board, mentor – for his unfailing enthusiasm, encouragement, attention to detail, and sheer intellectual charge. Thanks to the ‘old school’ of anthropology postgrads at Macquarie – Jennifer Deger, Rosemary Wiss, Fiona Boxall, and Jovan Maud (the life of my font, who gets special mention for all his invaluable technical support) – for sharing so empathically in the ‘postgraduate condition’ (Boxall 2003), and for their shared sense of promise and possibility in thinking anthropologically. Thanks to Jennifer Biddle for first bringing the postgrads together and introducing me to collegiality and challenging theory, and also for acting so proficiently as supervisor during Ian’s absence. Thanks to Kalpana Ram for keeping me on my critical toes during early presentations of my argument, and to Andrew Lattas for teaching me that criticism should always be tempered by a sympathetic regard for the real lives we study. Thanks of course to Mum and Dad for their continual support of my project, and also to Elaine for the writer’s retreat. And thanks finally to the Vaisnavas of North Sydney, for giving me my first taste of the spiritual…
Abstract

This is a cultural anthropological study of The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), or the Hare Krishna movement. Data for this research derive primarily from ethnographic participant-observation, and include tape-recorded interviews with Hare Krishna informants as well as ISKCON literature collected during fieldwork.

Analysis focuses on Hare Krishna techniques (saddhana, or yoga) of religious transformation, including physical, aesthetic, and discursive practices involved in the pursuit of spiritual realisation in ISKCON. Conversion, mimesis, and translation are the three key conceptual themes which inform a critical analysis of the production and effect of cultural difference in Hare Krishna spiritual practice. Ethnicity and conversion emerge as parallel concerns as the involvement of diasporic Indian and Indo-Fijian Hindus at the congregational level of ISKCON’s ministry in Sydney, Australia, is examined for its effect on Western converts’ experiences of Krishna Consciousness. A new conceptual approach to the meaning of ‘conversion’ to ISKCON is developed from this account.

Recent sectarian developments in ISKCON’s relationship with the Indian tradition of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism are also examined within a comparative theological framework. Hagiographic practices surrounding ISKCON’s Bengali founder, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), and textual practices surrounding the founder’s translations of Vaisnavite scripture, are both analysed as core features of Hare Krishna spirituality. The theological significance of these practices is directly correlated with recent sectarian tensions between ISKCON and the Indian tradition.
A Note on Transliteration and Naming

Sanskrit terms used in the following thesis have been italicised only, without the use of diacritics even where these appear in cited originals. As this is not a technical thesis on Sanskrit language or phonetics, diacritics are not essential to the understanding of Sanskrit terms in this context.

Pseudonyms have been employed for the names of all informants except Narayana Maharaja, who is a figure of prominence and who has been referred to under this name in reference material cited in the thesis. Names of ISKCON devotees who are also authors of cited works have been retained, as have those of devotees referred to in cited literature.
This is to certify that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. All work contained within this document is original and my own, unless otherwise acknowledged.

Malcolm Haddon