

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

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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

