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GETTING MARRIED

Hindu and Buddhist Marriage Rituals
Among the Newars of Bhaktapur and Patan, Nepal

With a film on DVD

2012

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The rite of *kanyādāna* on the occasion of the marriage of Rupesh and Sajani Bajracharya in Bhaktapur, 18 November 2005

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DVD Getting Married – The Wedding of Mahesh and Benela

FOREWORD

Marriage is certainly the most important life-cycle ritual in the life of both a man and a woman. But more than simply bringing two individuals together, it also brings together two families and two clans; it is not only a private but also a communal event that concerns the relationship between groups or clans, the question of descent and kinship, social and caste status, the power, prestige and hierarchy of individuals and families within the society, and their social and religious identities. No wonder that the organisation and effort involved outstrips that of all other life-cycle rituals, sometimes with an overwhelming impact as a result of the costs of the wedding and the dowry.

Since, viewed traditionally, only a married Hindu can set up his own household, light the sacred fire, and produce legitimate children, only marriage makes a person “complete” in a ritual sense: a young man becomes a husband and householder (*grhastha*) and a young woman a wife. Although love marriage has become an issue in South Asia, it is through a traditional marriage ritual that a love relationship between two people is fully accepted and recognized by society.

Such a ritual is full of symbolic connotations and meanings which act out and demonstrate the new roles of the bride and groom. The focus is on rites of separation as well as aggregation: the girl is given to another household where she is then integrated. However, even though the marriage culminates in the wedding ceremony, it is a process of integration with a number of rituals in both households stretching over a long period of time, and connected with an extensive exchange of gifts and visits.

Core elements include the confirmation of the marriage by the groom’s family, the circumambulation of the domestic fire, holding hands (*pānigrahaṇa*), the “gift of the girl” (*kanyādāna*), the “seven steps” (*saptapadī*), the exchange of ornaments, and sharing the same meal.

Newar marriage, which is at the focus of the present book, is mostly performed in accordance with these Brahmanical-Sanskritic rituals, but it shows some peculiar features. In the ritual practice one does not necessarily find, for instance, the sacrificial fire (*homa*), the seven-step-rite (*saptapadī*), or – most notably – the gift of the girl (*kanyādāna*), although they appear as elements in the Daśakarmavidhis. This relates to the fact that the marriage to a man is the third marriage in the life of a Newar girl. Before that she had been married in the Ihi ritual to the bel-fruit, considered to be Viṣṇu, Buddha, or some other god (Gutschow/Michaels 2008: 93-172), and in the Girl’s Seclusion (Bāhrā tayegu, *ibid.*: 173-187) to the Sun god. The above-mentioned subrituals have already been performed during these rituals.

Outline of the Book

The present account of marriage rituals is the third and final volume in an attempt to provide a comprehensive study of life-cycle rituals among the Newars of Bhaktapur. While *Handling Death*, the first volume, focussed on the dynamics of death and ancestor rituals among the Newars of the ancient city of Bhaktapur in Nepal, particularly on the (Nev.) *latyā* or (Skt.) *sapīṇḍikaraṇa* rituals, and *Growing Up*, the second volume, focussed

on the rituals of childhood, adolescence and youth, especially the male and female initiation rituals such as the Kaytāpūjā or Ihi marriage, the present volume deals with a number of rituals related to marriage (Skt. *vivāha*, Nev. *ihipā*, colloquially also called *paynam* or *biyā chwayegu*, lit. “to send for having sex”, or *hvākegu*, “to let (the couple) join”).

The introduction of the present volume contains an overview of studies on marriage rituals in Nepal. In the first part we shall look at some basic marriage rules of the Hindu and Buddhist Newars, especially of Bhaktapur, the social topography and hierarchy, the families of the marriage partners, the problems of endogamy and exogamy in Bhaktapur, the marriage economy and the role of marriage bands. In the second part we shall give a more detailed description of Hindu and Buddhist marriage rituals among Newars. These rituals are partly documented on the DVD included in this book. In the third part, we will arrive at certain conclusions about life-cycle rituals in general and the place marriage rituals occupy in Newar society. In the fourth part we have again edited and translated the texts used by Brahmin (Rājopādhyāya) and Buddhist (Bajrācārya) priests during these rituals. And in the fifth part (Appendices) we have listed elements of Newar rituals and mantras that complement the list we published in *Growing Up*, as well as a mantra and general index to all three volumes.

Actors and Places

In this book, we shall continue our practice of naming the actors and places involved. In the foreword to *Handling Death* we argued that ethnographic research has tended to anonymise places and persons, purportedly out of respect for those who were involved and whose actions were documented to sup-

port a more general analysis. We, however, feel that the observed rituals are examples *par excellence* in time and space. As with most rituals, Newar rituals follow their own dynamics, and are as Don Handelman terms it “rituals in their own right” (see the introduction to Handelman 1998, and 2004) because they depend on situational factors. The dynamics of ritual are therefore discussed from the perspective of an identified case, the prescriptions of the Brahmins, and the textbooks of the high culture. Rituals, then, show their “individuality”, their uniqueness through a specific event – despite the fact that they belong to categories and genres.

So once again our method is to focus on individual rituals and then try to understand them by using the priests’ texts and the locally used or distributed texts of the so-called Great Tradition. This method is inductive rather than deductive. Our starting point is – as we must repeat – the actual ritual practice, we do not consider these rituals or so-called “corrupt” texts as deviant, but as authentic. What happens *in situ* is not for us a more or less accurate realisation or enactment of what is textually prescribed, but a ritual performance in its own right.

At the same time we do not feel prey to the confusion that arises when it is mooted that there is a realm of privacy that should be left untouched. The families concerned agreed to be filmed, and close-up photographs were only ever taken after an affirmative gesture was given. We will also often introduce the family background to a described ritual in order to bring out the peculiarities and sometimes problems relating to the family or clan involved. We feel that the identification of an actor and his or her place in time, space and society is an open expression of respect. The actors have been freed of the veil of anonymity in order to underline that they are not simply objects of research and victims of theory, but subjects, agents, often even ritual artists.



The marriage of Sajani and Subin Chitrakar. Having exchanged garlands and jewellery, the groom smears vermilion into the parting of the bride while with both hands she holds the mirror, resting on a piece of

cloth. Marking the parting is one of the more essential act in the process of getting married and the mirror seems to be placed in between the new couple as a witness. Photograph 7 December 2008

Spelling and Transcription Rules

If not otherwise indicated or evident from the context, all terms and place names given here are based on Nevārī (Nev.) or Nevāḥ as spoken by farmers (Jyāpu) in Bhaktapur or Bajrācārya in Patan. The majority of these terms are also listed in the glossary. Some more common names and terms have been spelt in their anglicised form, i.e. without diacritics.

We are aware that there is neither a standard Nevārī language nor a standard spelling (cf. Gellner 1992: xxi-xxii and 35-38). Variations are commonly found among the different communities and especially between the urban and rural dialects of Kathmandu Valley. This variety is also reflected in the way rituals are performed. Some of the problems of spelling and transcription stem from the language itself, others from the various techniques for rendering the language in writing, irrespective of whether in Devanāgarī or Roman script, whether old or new.

Few of these issues were solved for the *Dictionary of Architectural Terms*, presented in 1987 by Niels Gutschow, Bernhard Kölver and Ishwaranand Shresthacarya. For example, the question of the high vowels, the *i/e/ya-* and the *u/o/va-* series: alternations within the series are characteristic of Classical Nevārī manuscripts and persist to the present day. More worrying, because indubitably cutting across a phonemic opposition, are alterations between the low front and the low back vowels *ā/a* and *a/a*. In most cases we prefer to transliterate the closed *a*-vowel by *va*, pronounced *o*, e.g. *tvāḥ = toḥ*.

Sometimes spelling is a matter of preference, and depends on the importance given to a term. Thus, since there are no retroflex sounds in Nevārī, loan words from Sanskrit or Nepālī can be regarded as foreign words or as incorporated words. In the first case one would, for example, write (Nep.) *tikā* or

(Skt.) *tilaka*, in the second (Nev.) *tikā*. We have mostly opted for the Nevārī version when it refers to a ritual context and to the Sanskrit version when the term appears in a textual context.

In addition to this are the effects resulting from the loss of certain consonants in the word-final position, which lead to compensatory lengthening – a process that some words appear to have undergone repeatedly, producing chains such as *cākala-* (obl.): *cākaḥ, cāka, cāḥ*, all of them renderings of Skt. *cakra*. Rules have yet to be discovered as to which stem to select in compounds.

With regard to terms that have been recorded from an oral context, every single one was pronounced several times by native speakers. Sanskrit or Sanskritic (Skt.) terms and names have been transcribed according to the standard conventions. However, at times it is a matter of personal choice and meaning whether one regards a term as a *tatsama* (loan word from Sanskrit to be written in the standard form) or as a *tadbhāva* (loan word from Sanskrit that changes its spelling and meaning). Thus, (Nev.) *mandah* is not always the same as (Skt.) *maṇḍala*, but sometimes it is. It is almost impossible to establish coherent rules for such cases. Moreover, the inherent *a* in names of deities has mostly been spelt, although in spoken language it might not be heard (e.g. Gaṇeś versus Gaṇeśa). As for Nepālī (Nep.), mostly the transcription follows the *Bṛhad Nepālī Śabdakoṣa* or Ralph L. Turner's Dictionary.

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The marriage of Ishvar Joshi and Sahan Sila Maskey, both from Bhaktapur.

The bride's paternal uncle's wife guided her hand while sharing food with the groom.

30 November 1998



Sangita Shahi in November 2008, Subin and Sajani Chitrakar in December 2008 Dilaram Duval and Sumitra Kvaju in February 2009, Mahesh Bhaju and Benela Joshi in November 2010, Kailash Dhaubanjari and Monika Shrestha in November 2011 – all in Bhaktapur – as well as Naresh and Rashmi Shakya in November 2010 in Patan. We are also again very grateful to the priests, especially to Mahendra Sharma from Khaumā, Lava Kusha and Hari Sharan Sharma from Lalāchē, Shiva Raj Subedi from Harisiddhi, and Dipak Bajracharya from Patan for their patience in sharing their priestly knowledge with us. It is to them and their priestly wisdom and ritual knowledge that we once again dedicate this book.

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It was again our great pleasure and a challenging experience to collaborate with Christian Bau in shooting the film "Getting Married – The Wedding of Mahesh and Benela" that is included in the present volume. It comprises the visual case study of a Hindu marriage described in more detail in this book. We regard a film as a genre in its own right that focuses on the visual and aesthetic aspects. Despite enduring problems with the long and many power cuts in Nepal, we were able in Bhaktapur to jointly preselect about 70 minutes from the approximately sixteen hours of film material. The final editing was done by Maria Hemmleb. Bikal Banepali, the professional filmmaker of the Bhaju family, kindly provided some footage of the ritual when the bride's party visits the bride in her new environment (*khvāḥ sva vanegu*, Nep. *mukh herne*). All participants in the wedding ritual consented to the filmed scenes.

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However, it goes without saying that we alone are responsible for any mistakes that may arise in the present volume.

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