

FOREWORD

The genesis of this book

This account of death rituals in Bhaktapur brings together an architectural historian who essentially localizes households and events, defines spatial entities, and maps movements in space, and an indologist who knows the canonical texts which prescribe the ritual involved.

The architectural historian, Niels Gutschow, commenced his initial research in Bhaktapur in 1971 and by spring 1974 had established a social topography of the city (Gutschow/Kölver 1975), followed by a network of death processions. The first death ritual (*dākilā*), performed by Gaṇeś Mān Bāsukala on Gokarṇa aūsī, was observed in October 1983, one year after the death of Bāsukala's father. In spring 1986, all of the *chvāsah* stones (which absorb the polluting qualities of ritual waste in cases of death) were mapped with the help of Chandranāth Kusle and Gaṇeś Mān Bāsukala. Interviews with purity and ritual specialists such as Cālā (torch bearers), Nau (barbers), Jugī, Danyā (tailors), Nāy (butchers) and Pvaḥ (untouchables) in spring 1987 gave for the first time an overview of how unclean castes participate in death rituals. On 10th April 1987 the offering on the 7th day after the death of Langtugu Bāsukala was observed in detail.

Under the auspices of the *Sonderforschungsbereich* (Collaborative Research Centre) 619 "Dynamics of Ritual" of the German Research Council, these studies were resumed in July 2002 with a specific emphasis on death rituals and ancestor worship in Bhaktapur. The rituals performed for Rabi Svāgamikha, who died on 9th July 2002,

formed an important basis for the research presented here. *Latyā* (or *sapinḍikarāṇa*), performed on the 45th day after his death on 22nd August was documented by Christian Bau with a video camera and is presented as an appendix to this publication.

Parallel to these rituals, the monthly water offerings (*jaladāna*) by Bikhu Bahadur Suvāl (Bijay Bāsukala's *pāju*, i.e. mother's brother) in memory of his deceased father were likewise recorded, as was the offering of a cow (*godāna*) on the occasion of Bisketjātrā on 23rd August and the offering of grains across the holy field (*kṣetra*) of Paśupatināth on the occasion of Bālacaturdaśī on 10th December 2002.

In early May 1987, 129 lineage gods (*du-gudyah*) were mapped for the first time – a survey that was substantially enlarged in May 2003. The ritual of worshipping the lineage god was documented on 22nd April 1999 for the Bāsukala *phukī* headed by Rām Bāsukala (the great-uncle of Bijay Bāsukala), whose cremation could be witnessed on 21st October 2003.

The indologist Axel Michaels started to work in Nepal as the Director of the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP) and the Nepal Research Centre. His research was focussed on the history and rituals of the Paśupatinātha temple and its vicinity (Michaels 1994), which involved studies of the cremation grounds and the Bālacaturdaśī festival (Michaels 1999). He also observed several death and ancestor rituals (e.g. *nhenumhā*, *latyā*, *du byēkegu*) in Bhaktapur in 2003/04.

Outline of the book

The present volume deals with death rituals among the farmer community of the Newars of Bhaktapur. It starts with an introduction to the study of South Asian, especially Hindu life-cycle rituals in general, and more specifically death rituals and ancestor rituals in Nepal, based on textual and ethnographic material from various sources. It can be seen that death rituals mostly concern impurity among the closer relatives, embodiment of the “soul” of the deceased, its deification and pacification, memory and mourning. These notions, which are however widely discussed in studies on Hindu death rituals, are by no means adequate for grasping the death and ancestor rituals in a specific social and regional setting.

The first part of the book, therefore, shifts to such a specific setting, to the ancient city of Bhaktapur in Nepal and more particularly to the farmer Newars who have shaped a specific urban culture over the past two thousand years. A short introduction to the urban fabric and spatial conditions as well as to the places of the spirits of Bhaktapur is followed by descriptions of the specialists involved in the death and ancestor rituals. It can be seen that the duties of the Brahmin are assisted by a great number of members of other sub-castes.

The description of the various death and ancestor rituals – many of them have previously never been described – is divided into two categories: calendric rituals of death and renewal, in which mostly a generalized group of ancestors or ghosts is worshipped, and personal death and ancestor rituals which are more or less directly related to the deceased and his family.

In the second part we present as a model a more detailed description of one of the most important death rituals: the union of the deceased with the forefathers (*latiyā*, Skt.

sapinḍikaraṇa), which is also documented on the DVD included in this book. Moreover, we have edited and translated the texts used by the Brahmin priest during this particular ritual. This combination of textual and contextual approaches – which we call the ethno-indological method – has been theoretically elaborated elsewhere (Michaels 2004a and 2005a). We try to show that the used texts are not liturgical and normative texts that restrict action, but that on the contrary they leave space for many variations and alterations or even ad hoc inventions which make for the dynamics of the ritual.

From the indological point of view, special attention has been paid to local handbooks and manuals of the following categories:

Personal handbooks belonging to priests, normally not published, but occasionally microfilmed by the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project; such texts are written in a mixture of Sanskrit, Nevārī and Nepālī.

Printed manuals in Sanskrit, often published with a commentary or translation in Nepālī; such texts are used by many *pūjārīs* during their rituals.

Elaborate ritual texts in Sanskrit, written by learned scholars of renown and published locally by the Mahendra-Saṃskṛta-Viśvavidyālaya, Tribhuvan Viśvavidyālaya, Nepāla Rājakiya Prajñā-Pratiṣṭhāna, or private publishers.

Ritual texts in Sanskrit belonging to the great tradition, with a pan-Indian distribution.

Documents from private persons or from the Guṭhī Saṃsthāna related to the rituals performed.

Grey literature (pamphlets etc.) from ritual organisations.

However, the main intention is to try to understand both the agency in rituals and the function of the texts in contexts. We hold that the agency is not only with the priest (*pūjārī*) but also with the sacrificer (*yajamāna*) and



Khulā: ritual “six months” after the death of Jagat Mān Suvāl, 21st July 2002 in Taha-mala (Talakva), Bhaktapur. The Brahmin, Prajal Śarmā, prepares the ritual ground on ground floor level (chēḍi), to his left the lamp sukunḍā, to his right the container for vermilion, sinhamhu.

his family, the spectators of the ritual, and even trans-human agents. From this point of view, we find rituals as well as ritual texts much less formal than they appear *prima facie* to be.

By way of conclusion we try in the third part to strengthen our point that death and ancestor rituals, if not rituals in general, have to be seen in a new light, because they offer much more freedom than has been generally accepted. Although it is true that such rituals are formalized, they are by no means strict, stereotypical and unchangeable. Moreover, Newar death and ancestor rituals follow their own dynamics, they are – in Don Handelman’s term, “rituals in their own right” (see the introduction to the 2nd edition of Handelman 1998 and 2004). We have tried to develop similar ideas by focussing on aspects of pollution and purification, continuity and change, modernity and anti-ritualism.

This book is intended as the first part of a trilogy of studies on life-cycle rituals in Nepal. It will, hopefully, be supplemented by a volume on child and youth rituals as well as one on marriage rituals. In addition, the research on the ageing rituals of the Newars in Kathmandu and Patan – which has been undertaken by Alexander von Rospatt (Berkeley) in close cooperation with the authors and within the research project “The Dynamics of Rituals” – will present additional material for the study of the ritual passages of life.

Actors and places

Death rituals are enacted not by “somebody”, “somewhere” at “any time”. A range of actors come to the fore: family members, and ritual specialists whose services are based on a long time relationship with the clients, the *jajmān*. In any single action one comes across a predefined group. The chief mourner is assisted by a married daughter, sister or aunt, the *mhaymacā*, and her husband, the *jicā-bhāju*. It is clear from the beginning who will be polluted within the patrilineage and which funeral association will assist at the pyre. Moreover, the processional path of the bier is predefined, as are the place of cremation and the place of the ensuing death rituals for twelve months to come.

This uniqueness of the actors, places and time has prompted us to name the places involved in town and on its periphery. Almost every action is exactly dated and the actor named. The actors relate to a deceased member of the family. His or her name is repeated by the Brahmin after being uttered by the client. On the occasion of *soraśrāddha* after the full moon in September the naming extends beyond the usual three generations and may include over a hundred names, including the names of friends, kings and saints. It might be argued that a deceased enters an any-

mous world of *pitr*. The naming of those in whose name a death ritual is enacted would individualize the dead in an unjustified manner. But there are also places dedicated to the deceased among the fields surrounding Bhaktapur. Their names are remembered for at least two generations before their places come to be known anonymously as haunted by spirits that need to be pacified.

Ethnographic research has tended to anonymize places and persons, allegedly out of respect for the people who were involved and whose actions were documented to support a more general analysis. In our case the observed ritual stands in its own right. It is the example *par excellence* in time and space, which in the second part of the book is compared with written documents of various origin. The dynamics of ritual are discussed from the perspective of this identified case, the prescriptions of the Brahmins, and the textbooks of the high culture.

Methodologically, we thus focus on a unique ritual and then try to understand it by using the texts of the priests and locally used or distributed texts of the so-called great tradition. Our method is therefore inductive rather than deductive. Our starting point is the ritual practice, and we do not consider the actual rituals or “corrupt” texts as deviant, but as authentic. What happens *in situ* is for us not a more or less apt realization or enactment of what is textually prescribed, but a ritual performance in its own right. This also means that we do not regard the ritual texts as secondary or corrupt categories of material simply because their Sanskrit or Nevārī does not follow certain rules of spelling and grammar.

At the same time we do not feel we are prying into 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. Niels Gutschow has main-

tained a long-standing relationship with the families whose cases are documented in this volume. He feels that the identification of an actor and his or her place in time, space and society is an overt expression of respect. The actors have actively to be freed from a veil of anonymity in order to underline that they are not simply objects of research and victims of theory, but subjects and agents.

Spelling and transcription rules

If not otherwise indicated or evident from the context, all terms and place names presented throughout the first and in much of the third part of the book are based on Nevārī (Nev.) spoken by farmers (Jyāpu) in Byāsi, from whose community most of our informants came. The majority of these terms are also listed in the glossary.

We are aware that there is no standard Nevārī language. Varieties are commonly found among the different communities and especially in the dialects of the towns and villages of Kathmandu Valley. This variety is also reflected in the way rituals are performed. Some of the problems of spelling and transcription are grounded in the language itself, others stem from the various techniques for reducing the language to writing, whether 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 a characteristic of Classical Nevārī manuscripts and persist to the present day. More worrying, because inevitably cutting across a phonemic opposition, are alterations between the low front and the low back vowels *ā/a/* and *a/a*. Additionally come the

effects resulting from the loss of certain consonants at the ends of words, which leads to compensatory lengthening – a process which apparently some words underwent repeatedly, producing chains such as *cākala-* (obl.): *cākaḥ*, *cāka*, *cāḥ*, all of them the renderings of Skt. *cakra*. Rules about which stem to select in compounds have yet to be discovered.

Sanskrit (Skt.) terms are transcribed according to the standard conventions. However, the Sanskrit text given infra is often “corrupt.” Since it was written for the personal use of the priest and not meant for publication or translation, we have left the text “uncorrected”.

As for Nepālī (Nep.), the transcription mostly follows the *Bṛhad Nepālī Śabdakoṣa* or Turner’s Dictionary.

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