

INTRODUCTION

Life-cycle rituals in South Asia

South Asia offers an almost unparalleled wealth of textual and ethnographic material on rituals. This extends not only to life-cycle rituals (Skt. *saṃskāra*) but also to other Brahmanic-Sanskritic domestic rituals (*karma*, *kriyā*), sacrifices (*homa*, *yajña*, *iṣṭi*, *bali*), celebrations and festivals (*utsava*), pilgrimages (*tīrthayātrā*), religious services (*pūjā*, *upacāra*, *sevā*), oaths (*vrata*), meditations (*yoga*, *dhyāna*), heroic acts (*vīrya*), esoteric initiations (*dīkṣā*) and much more. Moreover, South Asia has not only a long ritual tradition preserved in normative texts since Vedic times, but also a great diversity of local and regional practices.

However, most of the theories of ritual that have been developed from Indian material – e.g. *inter alia* George Dumézil, Edward B. Tylor, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, Louis Dumont, Max Weber or Arthur M. Hocart – have concentrated on textual sources. Only since the middle of the past century has the perspective on Indian rituals shifted from the macro level of the so-called “Great Tradition” to the micro level of the villages and the small cities. It is fruitful to test and revise the old theories of sacrifice, myth, kingship or ritual with this new material, as has already been done by several scholars e.g. Jan Heesterman (1993), Frits Staal (1979, 1983 and 1989), Bruce Kapferer (1979), Richard Schechner (1988) or Stanley Tambiah (1979), Gloria G. Raheja (1988), or Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994) – to mention just a few.

Life-cycle rituals are often regarded as paradigmatic in ritual theory. This is partly due to Arnold Van Gennep’s (1909) and more particularly Victor Turner’s (1969) pioneering studies. Both scholars have introduced key terms for the discussion of rituals: “rites de passage”, “rites de séparation, marge and agrégation”, or “liminality”, “communitas”, “social drama”, and “anti-structure”. However, life-cycle rituals have mostly been understood as hierophantic events (Mircea Eliade), or as events that help either to overcome life crises (e.g. Bronislaw Malinowski, Sigmund Freud or Erik Erikson), or to strengthen the solidarity of a social group (Emile Durkheim, Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, Ewald Richard Thurnwald).

In our view, such functionalistic theories are not adequate to grasp the specific elements of rituals. Instead we propose to concentrate on the following polyvalent and polythetic aspects and components of rituals.¹

A formal, usually spoken decision is required to carry out the ritual: an oath, vow, or ritual declaration (*saṃkalpa*). Almost any life-cycle ritual and most sub-rites will have no efficacy without a *saṃkalpa* (see Bühnemann 1988: 114, Michaels 2005). Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994: 120) insist that ritual acts are “non-intentional” (even if not “unintentional”). But only the *intentio solemnis* makes an everyday or customary act into a ritual act. It singles out certain segments of acts and evokes awareness of the change, thus also usually bringing about a change in the level of language. In ritual, water becomes ritual water, rice becomes ritual rice, a stone becomes the seat of the gods. All

¹The following is based partly on Michaels 2004: 131ff. (see also Michaels 1999a).

this is usually designated in language. Thus, water is named by the Sanskrit word *jala*, instead of the everyday (Nep.) *pāni*; *mīṭhai* (“sweets”) becomes *naivedya*, *phul* (“flowers”) becomes *puṣpa*, *bati* (“light”) becomes *dīpa*, and *camal* (“rice”) becomes *akṣata*.

Ritual acts are mostly also a) formal, stereotypical, and repetitive (therefore imitable); b) public; and c) irrevocable; in many cases they are also d) liminal (see below). So they may not be spontaneous, private, revocable, singular or optional for everyone. Ritual acts are not deliberately rational, they cannot simply be revised to achieve a better or more economical goal. Therefore, formalism constitutes a central criterion in most definitions of ritual (see, however, Michaels/Buss forthc.). Rituals cannot be private functions; they can be imitated. Publicity in the sense of inter-subjectivity – even if it concerns only a small secret circle of initiated specialists – is thus another formal criterion. Moreover, especially life-cycle rituals are effective independent of their meaning: *ex opere operato* (see Michaels 2000). This means that they cannot be reverted, for that requires a new ritual.

Along with these three strict, formal criteria, many rituals also contain another that Victor Turner has described as “liminality” (from the Latin, *limen*, “threshold”). In this he refers to the non-everyday and yet reversible, paradoxical, sometimes absurd and playful parts of rituals (see Michaels 2004c), especially in life-cycle threshold situations.

Almost every ritual act also takes place in an everyday context. But whether the act of “pouring water” is performed to clean or to consecrate a statue cannot be decided solely on the basis of these external, formal criteria, but also depends on “internal” criteria regarding intentions, which can relate to social aspects (solidarity, hierarchy, control, or establishment of norms), psychological and more individual aspects like alleviating anxiety, experiences or enthusiasm, desire,

or transcendental aspects concerning the other, higher, sacred world. In this last case, everyday acts acquire sublimity and the immutable, non-individual, non-everyday is staged. Although this criterion is particularly controversial, because it links religion with ritual, we hold that the majority at least of life-cycle rituals cannot do without it. Thus, we follow Emile Durkheim’s (1912: 50) dictum that “the ritual can be defined only after defining the belief”.

Finally, life-cycle rituals involve temporal or spatial changes, they refer to biological, physical, or age-related alterations or changes. Thus, a tangible change takes place through the ritual. For example, the participants in the ritual must acquire an ability they did not previously have, or a new social status with new social consequences: the initiate becomes a marriageable Twice-Born, the deceased a “departed one” (*preta*) or a forefather (*pitṛ*).

Life-cycle rituals in South Asia have mostly been studied by indologists: see, for instance, Bhattacharya 1968, Kane 1968ff., Pandey 1969, Gonda 1980, Gonda 1965, Olivelle 1993. What, however, is lacking are studies which include the actual practice of such rituals with its combination of texts and contexts. A positive exception to this is to be found in the study of Vedic rituals (see, for example, Gonda 1980, Staal 1983, Tachikawa 1993, Einoo 1996) or the Hindu service (*pūjā*, e.g., Bühnemann 1988, Einoo 1996, Tachikawa 1983, Tripathi 2004).

Similarly, death and ancestor rituals have also mostly been studied from a textual perspective, as for instance by Caland 1893, Abegg 1921, Shastri 1963, Kane 1991/IV, Knipe 1976, Huntington/Metcalf 1979, Müller 1992, or Oberhammer 1995. The practice of such rituals, however, has only rarely or marginally been touched on (e.g., Stevenson 1920, Parry 1985, Evison 1989, Filippi 1996, Saindon 2000). Basically, the same holds true

for Nepal: for a short and somehow superficial description of Hindu death rites in Nepal see Ghimire/Ghimire 1998; for Hindu Newar death rituals see Nepali 1965, Kölver 1977, Toffin 1979, 1984: 117-182 and 1987, Lewis 1984, Levy 1990; for Buddhist Newar death rituals see Lienhard 1986, Pradhan 1986, Gellner 1992, Ishii 1996.*

Hindu death and ancestor rituals

Hindu rituals of dying and death do not basically differ from what can also be found in the death ceremonies of other cultures: although death is feared, the dying person should accept death, should not resist, and should be ritually prepared. Often there is a special path of death for the corpse, almost a kind of secret path, so that the deceased cannot find his way back; the path of the dead after cremation is uncertain and dangerous; the deceased is dependent on the help and nourishment provided by the survivors; there are thus provisions for his journey, accompanied by prayers and blessings, laying out, a kind of wake, a funeral procession, special clothing for the dead and for the survivors, a gathering for the dead, death knells, a funeral meal, and a period of mourning.

However, the differences between the Brahmanical-Sanskritic death ritual and Christian blessings are also clear: the former entail no confession, no written obituaries (only recently has this appeared among the urban middle class), no charitable acts (donations to the needy), no funeral meals immediately after the burial, no dirges, and no ceremony like the Eucharist with a funeral sermon and an eulogy on the deceased. Generally there is no grave, no memorial ritual, no votives. The deceased disappear from the field of vision as individual persons: almost no picture, no tombstone is left to recall them. And yet they are constantly present as

forefathers and ancestors. It is these distinctions which deserve special attention because they explain why descent and ancestor worship in South Asia have such a great significance for ideas of salvation and thus for Hindu religions in general.

Death in Hindu religions is not a sudden event, but a process and a transformation which has to be prepared for. The deceased must be ritually immortalized. Thus the deceased become ancestors, forefathers, heroes, ghosts, or demons, but not dead, not without “life”. What they become depends on the manner of death, the relationship between the deceased and the survivors, as well as on kinship and the temporal and spatial distance to the deceased. But the dead do not “live” forever; their memory fades, they die through the *damnatio memoriae* of the living. Yet they are kept living by a number of death and ancestor rituals.

Death and ancestor rituals can be classified into two groups:

Firstly, rituals for the deceased person, i.e. rituals of dying, death rituals and ancestor worship. The death rituals (*antyeṣṭi*, *śākrīyā*), which are performed during the first ten to thirteen days, the individual death offering (*ekoddiṣṭāśrāddha*) on the eleventh day or so after the death, and the death transformation ritual (*sapīṇḍīkaraṇa*) on the thirteenth or forty-fifth day, or one year after the death, which transforms the deceased into a forefather. To this group also belong memorial rituals (*pārvaṇaśrāddha*, *aṣṭakāśrāddha*) carried out monthly and above all annually on the anniversary of the death of the father or mother. These rituals are directed to the fate of a known and named deceased individual. During most of these rituals, the Sacred Thread is worn on the right shoulder and the water (*tarpaṇa*) is offered from the palm of the hand by letting it flow to the right from the thumb.

Secondly, ancestor rituals for the forefathers and foremothers in general – i.e.

* See also van den Hoek 2004, which, unfortunately, was published after our manuscript's completion only.

rituals of periodic (daily, monthly or yearly – etc.) ancestor worship for those who died in the preceding year(s), usually the three forebears on the father's side (and sometimes on the mother's side) – are mostly offered by the male offspring, especially in the domestic rituals, particularly on joyful occasions such as marriages or the birth of a son, or on determined junction days (the *parvans*), such as the new or full moon (e.g. Mātātīrtha aūsi, Gokarṇa aūsi), or on the occasion of an eclipse or on certain calendric days. These rituals constitute the worship of a specific, named group of deceased persons or ancestors (e.g. *dugudyaḥpūjā*, *pitṛpakṣa* or *soraśrāddha*, i.e. the New Moon of the month of Bhādrapāda, Sāpāru/Gājātrā). To this group may be added calendric rituals of death and renewal performed for all ancestors or demons, such as Bālācahre/Bālācaturdaśī, Pasacahre/Piśācaturdaśī or Mvaḥni/Dasaī. These are collective rituals or festivals for a generalized, “anonymous” class of ancestors, the *viśvedevāḥ* and other gods or semi-gods or demons (*bhūta*, *preta*, *piśāca* etc.).

The course of Hindu death rituals

To be sure, there is great regional variation in the practice of life-cycle rituals in South Asia. Even within the small territory of Kathmandu Valley rituals differ considerably depending on the city, the caste, the priests and the religion. However, some aspects are common to most death and ancestor rituals throughout South Asia. In the following we present an outline of such rites before we turn to specific death rites among the Newars of Bhaktapur.

Ceremonies of dying

During the days preceding an anticipated death, the dying person is laid down on the

floor and cared for. Often oil lamps are lit and a priest is called to perform ceremonies of expiation (*prāyaścitta*). A local physician (Nep. *ghāṭe vaidya*) may also be called in order to determine the approximate time of death. Occasionally gifts (*dāna*) are given to Brahmins or poor people. The gift of a cow (*godāna*) may also be made, although nowadays this rite is usually substituted by the gift of money to a Brahmin. This sub-rite is also called *vaitaraṇīdāna* on account of the river Vaitaraṇī that the deceased has to cross on his way to the realm of Yama (*yamaloka*). It is believed that the departed will hold on to the tail of the cow which will help him to cross the river.

After death, Ganges water or other substances are sprinkled into the mouth of the dead before he or she is washed, anointed and decorated, and his clothes and bedding are taken out and either given away or thrown into the river, where certain castes have the right to take possession of them. The dead body is wrapped in cloths made of white unsewn cotton and yellow silk, sometimes with the name “Rāma” printed on it. Additionally, the thumbs and toes of the corpse are tied together. News of the death circulates quickly, and a first set of sacrificial balls (*pinḍa*) are offered. The deceased (Skt. *preta*, literally: “the one who is gone away”) is mostly seen as a restless soul that has to be freed from its liminal state in order to reach the world of heaven. Thus, many death rituals are a kind of death convoy. Offerings are given which support the deceased in the next world. The corpse, immediately placed on the floor which is coated with cow dung, should be weighted with a black stone or ammonite (*śālagrāma*) or a weapon, e.g. a knife, so that the deceased will not rise again and the soul will not fly away before he or she is ritually prepared for the journey and can defend his – or herself against the evil spirits.

Funeral Procession

After a while the procession sets off to the cremation grounds, accompanied by recitations at the house or during the procession itself. The corpse is carried out of the house feet first. The procession should be headed by the firstborn carrying the domestic fire, followed by the corpse and the (*sapinda*) relatives. It should comprise an odd number of people wearing neither headdress nor shoes. Sometimes the procession is led by musicians playing instruments in a special tuning. Often women do not join the procession or, at least, the cremation. At the cremation ground, the feet of the corpse are placed in the river, often on a special platform called *brahmanāla*. The domestic fire is often relit. A leaf from the *tulsī* plant is kept in the dead person's mouth in order to prevent the messengers of Yama (*yamadūta*) from dragging the departed to hell.

Rites at the cremation grounds

The dead person is generally placed on a green bamboo bier and carried to the cremation grounds along a special death path through special city gates, usually in the south. Among the Newars, funeral associations (Nev. *siguthī*) carry out all the necessary work at the cremation grounds. There the corpse is put with his feet in the water, which is considered to be Ganges water and thus liberating. The corpse is burned on the same day on a pyre made of wood without any thorns. The number of timbers should be odd; it is believed that odd numbers are incomplete and thus a reminder to the bereaved to continue the death rites. The fire is lit by the chief mourner, who then wears the Sacred Thread on his right shoulder instead of the left. The corpse must burn completely, except the few bones which are afterwards collected. Generally dry hay and straw are used to in-

tensify the fire. The ashes should be swept into the water. Sometimes an effigy is made from the ashes representing the deceased, which is then cast into the river. Some parts of the ashes and bones may be kept aside in earthenware vessels. These may then be taken to places of pilgrimage such as Gayā or Benares, or hung on long bamboo poles at the cremation grounds. The individual soul must be cared for by offerings of jugs filled with food or water. Clay jugs are a recurring ritual element in the death cult; sometimes they are shattered like the skull, even though they are understood as the location of the deceased; and sometimes they are set out on the ground, filled with water, and then hung up for the support of the deceased.

The dead person is a sacrifice to the fire (*agni*) and the god Agni, who – according to a widespread notion – burns impurities and carries him (as with all offerings) off to heaven and the world of the forefathers (*pitṛloka*) in the smoke. The funeral pyre is circumambulated by the chief mourner and other mourners, sometimes bearing a pierced water pot which is then smashed. Ritually speaking, cracking or smashing the skull is the most important moment of death. Once the skull has cracked or shattered, the thumb-sized individual soul (*puruṣa*) can escape the body. Escape is effected through a place along the hairline (*śikhā*) on the fontanel, the so-called “Brahmā hole” (*brahmarandhra*), which also has a central significance in the initiation of a Twice-Born as a sign of the paternal line and the father-son-identification. In popular belief, it is held that the soul of bad people escapes through other bodily orifices, such as the anus.

The chief mourner performs ablutions in the river and sometimes his hair is shaved. Other members of the patrilineage may do the same, but mostly they purify themselves by taking a bath – more or less symbolically – and offering water (*pitṛtarpana*) to the de-



*Vārāṃasī, pipal tree above
Brahmaghāt.
The pots receive water, dedi-
cated to the deceased, during
the first ten days after death.
In completion of the ritual the
chief mourner smashes the
pot under the direction of the
Mahābrahmaṇa, an act called
pitrvisarjana.
Photo 25th February 2000*

ceased. Other, additional forms of mourning are chewing *nimba* leaves, ingesting five substances from a cow (*pañcagavya*), and taking an oil bath. Mostly a stone or other object representing the deceased is worshipped, and food is given to dogs, crows or cows. The funeral party leaves the cremation grounds without looking back, silently and without any music.

Should the dead person's body be missing a puppet representing the dead person can be burnt in its place, along with the natal horoscope. Some ascetics, very young children, and people who have died from a snake bite are buried. Since 1920 widow burning is legally forbidden in Nepal (see Michaels 1993). In case of an untimely death a special rite (*nārāyaṇabali*) is performed, mostly on the eleventh day.

Rites on the first ten (to twelve days)
after death

During the first ten to twelve days, food and more *piṇḍas* are offered in order to restitute

the body of the deceased. Food and personal possessions of the deceased are given to Brahmins, funerary priests or barbers. Thirteen days is the legal period of mourning in Nepal. During this period the chief mourner (Nep. *kriyāputra*) often lives separate from the rest of the family, sleeps on the ground, cooks his own food, eats only once a day and uses no salt. During the first ten days (*daśakriyā*) after death, the chief mourner is supposed to go to the river and offer rice balls (*piṇḍa*) in order to create a new body for the deceased, who is then sometimes represented by a small mound of clay or sand. These balls are frequently offered shortly before the ritual of joining the ancestors (*sapiṇḍīkaraṇa*: see below). There should also be an offering of monthly *piṇḍas* as food for the one year journey of the deceased (*māsikapīṇḍa*, *pañcadaśapiṇḍadāna*[*śrāddha*]).

Additionally, the family might arrange for a recitation of the *Garuḍapurāṇa* during this period or the first month after death. On the eleventh day, a bull is to be released and branded with the *triśūla* weapon of Śiva, but this rite is seldom practised.

Joining the ancestors (*sapiṇḍīkaraṇa*,
Nep. *latyā*)

Between the tenth and thirteenth day, mostly on the twelfth day but sometimes on the 45th after the death, *piṇḍas* are again offered to celebrate the deceased's joining with his (or her) forefathers (*pitarah*). It is believed that the messengers of Yama will lead the deceased on his one-year-long journey. During this he will receive no water or food, so the mourners have to supply him with it. Along with this rite a bed (*śayyadāna*), water (*jaladāna*), cooking utensils, and food are offered to a Brahmin, after which the chief mourner and other mourners bathe and are ritually purified. On the thirteenth day relatives, members of the sub-caste and neigh-



hours are invited and fed to mark the conclusion of the intensive period of impurity. New clothes or simply a new cap are given to the chief mourner after one year.

Memorial and mourning rites

The chief mourner arranges further rites (*śrāddha*) during the first year after death and on the anniversary of death, which mostly include making gifts to Brahmins. The mourner has to wear white clothes, shoes and cap, and should avoid wearing leather and the colour red. He should also not attend festivals. Sometimes he will abstain from garlic or onions. Marriages or initiations may not take

place for one year. It is believed that after one year the deceased reaches the court of Yama where Citragupta, Yama's scribe, opens the book in which every good and bad deed is recorded. On the basis of this, Yama decides whether the deceased will go to heaven or one of several hells from where he or she will be reborn.

Cremation of a member of a sub-caste of butchers (Nāy) along the ring-road on the periphery of Deopatan. Photo 3rd December 2002