

Part III

Conclusion – The Dynamics of Newer Death Rituals

Textuality and Contextuality

Seen from a textual perspective, especially from the Sanskrit point of view, Hindu death rituals appear to be rather static, prescribing a fixed order of actions and using more or less fixed ritual elements (e.g. Vedic recitations, *mantras*, *maṇḍalas*) as well as ritual objects. Thus they are often contrasted with the great range of local, regional, and historical variations (see, for instance, Evison 1989). However, on closer inspection it becomes evident that even within a narrow contextual framework, death rituals and rituals in general offer possibilities of change and variation that have mostly been overseen by scholars of (domestic) rituals (in South Asia). It is this aspect of the dynamics of Hindu death rituals that we wish to elaborate on in the following conclusions by concentrating on notions of textuality and contextuality, impurity, pollution and purification, tactility and embodiment, deification and pacification, memory and mourning, continuity and change. We shall try to see the Newar death rituals, especially the *latyā* or *sapiṇḍikaraṇa* ritual, “in their own right”, i.e. from all the aspects that come together at a specific point of time and place and that do not easily allow deductions and generalizations. However, we assume that the conclusions we draw also hold true for similar cases, although all theorising on death is obviously limited by the uncertainty of death.

As we have shown elsewhere (Michaels/Buss forthc.), the great formal variety within both ritual practice and ritual texts concerns the fact that, as we see it, ritual action must be understood as a kind of grammar which allows a creative use of its basic elements and structures. The idea of studying rituals in terms of linguistic models has already been proposed by Franz Boas and has been brought up since then by several scholars, e.g. Susanne Langer (1963), Edmund Leach

(1968), Staal (1989), and Lawson/McCauley (1990). However, most of these writers emphasise that rituals are composed of ritual sequences that can be understood as the smallest units of rituals. Staal alone developed a kind of ritual syntax in which special modes of action such as repetitions, breaks, rhetorical questions, ritual abbreviations etc., as well as pragmatical aspects such as expressivity, performativity, and habituality would have to be considered. It remains an open question then whether a kind of universal logic of ritual, a “sense of ritual” (Bell 1992), or a kind of “interrituality” (Gladigow 2004) could be developed.

As for the *latyā* ritual of the Newars, we pin-pointed eight methods for creating variation, which are: (1) substitution; (2) alteration (i.e. alternatives or options are explicitly mentioned, which gives the priest the option to modify the ritual according to the situation); (3) shifting, postponement, or interpolation; (4) omission; (5) fusion and merging; (6) reduction or abbreviation; (7) re-duplication and repetition; (8) invention of new ritual elements or sub-rites (Michaels/Buss 2005).

All of these forms of variance are means for adapting ritual liturgy to the actual situation, depending on the macro-, meso- or micro-level of comparison. Adaption of rituals and thus variability rather than strict formality has always been accepted by the Dharmaśāstrins, priests, and theologians, because rituals often had to be reduced and modified in times of distress (Skt. *āpad*) or adapted to the specific circumstances of the region and the time (Skt. *deśakālānucāra*).

However, there is a limit to the variability of rituals because their core elements can almost never be exchanged or substituted. They make up the particular character of the ritual. Thus *saṃkalpa*, *piṇḍa*, *pūjā*, *dāna* or *homa* appear in all of the *sapiṇḍikaraṇa* rituals. Among these, only the *piṇḍas* are specific to death rituals, whereas *saṃkalpa*, *pūjā*, *dāna*

and *homa* are also found in other rituals. Yet not even the *piṇḍas* and other core elements are prepared or used in a fixed and homogeneous way.

In addition, the agency of the priest in rituals seems to be much greater than is generally assumed. This becomes clear in the surprising substitution of the (prescribed) son of the deceased by his father during the ritual of 22nd of August 2002. Here it is the father of the deceased who performs the death ritual, even though the deceased had himself a son – too young to already have ritual capacity himself. During the ritual, when the father kneads the *piṇḍas*, the priest says: “It is (still) not allowed to raise the *piṇḍa* from the ground.... Is there a son (born from the dead person)? [The father confirms this]... However, if he has a son, it is not necessary to make (mix) all (the *piṇḍas*) into one. If he had not had a son, all (the *piṇḍas*) would be made one... Don’t worry if it (the *piṇḍa*) gets broken... Now turn it round this way... Make (it) a little thinner at the top. Now fold it like this. Now, turn it round again. Keep pressing it this way [demonstrates]. (Be careful) it is going to break. It is not allowed to break the *piṇḍa*.”

To be sure, the son mentioned by the *yajamāna* was born shortly before his own son died. Consequently he was too young to perform the death rituals. In most if not all texts²⁵³, it is explicitly forbidden for a father to perform the *antyeṣṭi* and *śrāddha* rituals for his son since that would imply that the succession of the ancestors had broken down. However, the agency of the priest in the ritual is remarkable. He can alter the presumptive rules according to the situation, even though the ritual succession of father and son is firmly established since Vedic times.

Neither symbolism nor meaning can explain these possibilities of variation in rituals. Clearly, there is a relation between a core action or the plot of a ritual (*pradhāna*), and the sub-rituals (*aṅga*), but the formality is not



fixed by a limited and restricted procedure and protocol or liturgy, but by using more or less deliberately a known set of ritual elements and decorum from various sources. This can be seen in Hindu Newar death rituals – and most likely in other life-cycle rituals as well – on several levels. However, for many domestic rituals in non-Brahmanic communities of South Asia it now becomes clear that the varieties and the possibilities for change are far greater than the restrictions, established rules, and limitations. In other words, ritual formality refers to a kind of floating inventory of ritual actions and decorum that has to be bound and mixed by several agents to produce more or less meaningful action. Thus, it is not the formality but the variability in the use of forms that explains the dynamics of rituals. From this point of view, priests and other ritual specialists for domestic rituals in South Asia should be regarded as ritual artists rather than as ritual administrators. Ritual is indeed a form of art!

New moon in September (Gokarṇaaṁsī). Gaṇeś Bahādur Jati from Bhvalachē, 83-years-old, at the worship of the forefathers (śrāddha).

Photo 14th September 2004

²⁵³ See Kane 1991/IV: 257, GPS 11.19.



Hands of Gaṇeś Bahādur Jati with black sesame seeds on a small dish.
Photo 14th September 2004

Pollution and Purification²⁵⁴

Death means a certain period of impurity (*aśauca*, *mṛtakasūtaka*, *sūtaka*; Nep. *juṭho*) for the survivors. This generally lasts between ten and thirteen days for the close relatives, requires various purification measures, and is “contagious”. According to the Brahmanical legal texts, only a few persons cannot be polluted or will only be polluted for a short time; these include ascetics, Brahmins who maintain a sacrificial fire, and occasionally the king. The chief mourner, however, remains impure for at least ten to eleven days, during which he is not to shave, cut his nails, comb his hair, and must sleep only on the floor, avoid sexual intercourse, and wear neither shoes nor sewn garments. He is to cook his food himself on a separate fire. On the tenth or eleventh day he bathes, is shaved, and he receives a new Sacred Thread.

On several occasions, especially after the *latyā/sapiṇḍikaraṇa*, Brahmins must be

given presents and entertained again (*brāhmaṇabhojana*), even though they accept the offered meal with reluctance. Relatives and neighbours are also invited to meals which form the conclusion of the death rituals and the especially impure period; this demonstrates the reintegration of the mourning family into the community, even though many observances have to be followed during the subsequent year.

The degree of impurity for the survivors depends mainly on their class and caste as well as their kinship. Usually it is the patrilineal relatives who perform the death rites, in most cases the first-born son, or the brother or husband. During this time, the chief mourner – in Nevārī he is called the “giver of the fire” (*mitamhā*) – is treated almost as an Untouchable, clearly separated from his relatives. Widows smash their bracelets, remove their jewellery, and no longer wear stripes of vermilion in their parting. Brothers living in the household and all male relatives of the male line are also affected, and even distant relatives often perform a brief ritual purification upon receiving news of the death. At any rate, impurity is to be understood ritually in the death ritual. It has little to do with the emotional relation to the deceased.

Periods of death pollution

In Bhaktapur the periods, categories and degrees of pollution that reflect the nature of the relation of the relatives to the chief mourner can be summarized as follows: in all cases the activity involves *byēkegu*, the process of regaining purity.

One-day impurity:

least-affected distant relatives

Distant male and female relatives, collectively called *yākā pāhā* – literally “single guests” – are marginally affected. These

²⁵⁴ In the following section we have deliberately taken passages from Michaels 2004: 131ff.

are the daughters of great-uncles and great-great-uncles of male ancestors whose male descendants are either close agnates up to the third generation (*phukī*), or distant agnates up to the fifth generation. These distant agnates remember that a generation ago their fathers were members of the same lineage. Even granddaughters of great-great-aunts classify as *yākā pāhā*. In the case of the death of Jagat Mān Suvāl (to whom we frequently refer in our study), only five females were classified as such.

Many more, altogether 56 male and female *yākā pāhā*, were affected from the in-laws: from the wife of the deceased, his mother, his grandmother, his daughter-in-law, and his two granddaughters-in-law. Their nieces and the daughters of their nephews, their grand-nephews and the sons and daughters as well as grandsons and granddaughters of their uncles also qualify as *yākā pāhā*.

All of these relatives are polluted by the death, but a simple *byēkegu* procedure allows them to regain purity: pulverized oil cake (*khau*) from mustard seeds (produced by Sāymi) is used as a cleansing agent while taking a bath the morning after the death and cremation of a distant relative. On the 13th (*teradin*) or 45th day (*latyā*) after death, as well as on the 180th, 360th and 720th day, all these individually named persons are invited to join the feast marking the restoration of the purity of the chief mourner's house, a process called *suddha vākegu* – “having attained purity”.

Impurity for four days: near relatives

Near relatives called *bhvaḥ pāhā* – literally “family guests”, implying that all members of the family concerned – are invited to join the feast on the 13th or 45th day (*sapiṇḍikaraṇa*) after death.

These consist of the married daughters of the chief mourner, his sisters, male and

female children of his brothers and sisters, his married female cousins, and the married daughters of his uncles. Distant agnates from the great- and even great-great-grandfather are also involved as they are closer to the lineage. Then the non-agnates; in the case of Jagat Mān Suvāl 19 such households were identified.

From the in-laws, 35 households were involved: brothers, their sons and daughters, male cousins, father, uncles and grandnephews.

All of them undergo the *byēkegu* process on the day after death.

Impurity for four days: distant relatives

Among the *bhvaḥ pāhā* there are a few exceptions: the husband of the daughter of the deceased or the husband of the sister, a category termed *jicābhāju*, will already have his hair trimmed and toenails pared on the 4th day as part of the *byēkegu* process, because his services are needed during the eight days to come. The *pāju*, the brother of the mother of the deceased (or his sons in case he is not alive), may also undergo purification on the 4th day, but this is now rarely done. The third group of potential relatives for *byēkegu* on the 4th day comes from distant agnates, up to six generations, i.e. the descendants of the great- or great-great-grandfather. They no longer belong to the lineage of the chief mourner, and in many cases they can not clearly define their relationship, but they cherish a faint idea of relationship. What they wish to express by this is respect to the common ancestors and probably solidarity with the mourners. In the case of Jagat Mān Suvāl, three great-grandsons of his great-grandfather underwent the purificatory ritual on the 4th day.

Overview of periods of mourning and pollution of diminishing intensity.

Overt mourning is expressed in wailing during the first 10 days, on the occasion of *Sāpāru*, and on the 361st day. While distant agnates undergo purification on the 4th day, lineage members do so on the 10th day and complete the purification of the households on the 12th day.

Lineage members have to observe a restricted diet until the 45th day, the chief mourner wears white clothes, follows mild dietary restrictions until the 360th day, and receives vermilion and oil for the first time again on the 361st day.

Mourning and Pollution: Stages of Purification

Day	Performance	Ritual (Nev.)
1 st day:	distant male and female relatives undergo purification	byēkegu
4 th day:	distant agnates (up to six generations) undergo purification	laksa: byēkegu
10 th day:	close agnates (<i>phukī</i> , up to three generations) undergo purification, chief mourner receives white clothes for women of the household period of wailing ends	du byēkegu
12 th day:	close agnates, female members and household undergo purification through fire ritual	lhā panegu
45 th day:	chief mourner undergoes purification (<i>byēkegu</i>) a day in advance; he receives a cap as a token of reintegration; close and distant relatives join feast	latyā (<i>sapiṇḍikaraṇa</i>)
180 th day:	chief mourner undergoes purification (<i>byēkegu</i>) a day in advance; close and distant relatives join feast	khulā: byēkegu
the day after full moon in August	offering of a cow (<i>godāna</i>) to the deceased (<i>preta</i>) women of the mourning household are wailing	Sapāru (<i>Gājātrā</i>)
360 th day: 12 months	chief mourner undergoes purification (<i>byēkegu</i>) a day in advance; he takes off white clothes; close and distant relatives join feast	dākilā: byēkegu
361 st day:	in an act of final purification close relatives (<i>phukī</i>) apply oil to their hair; women are wailing for the last time; the chief mourner receives vermilion	cikā taygu
720 th day:	chief mourner undergoes purification (<i>byēkegu</i>) a day in advance; close and distant relatives join the feast	nedatithi: byēkegu

period of overt mourning: wailing impurity of the body (*mihā*)

period of ritual constraints restricted diet

chief mourner in white clothes, mild restriction of diet (ritual constraints in case of death of the elder of the *phukī*)

Impurity for ten days:
members of the lineage (*phukī*)

The *phukī* are close agnatic relatives with links up to the third generation. This is a small group, because usually it only comprises descendants of the same great-grandfather of the deceased. The tracing of three generations reflects the making of *piṇḍas* for three generations: father, grandfather and great-grandfather.

The chief mourner rarely remembers his great-great-grandfather, but not all descendants of this distant forefather are members of the same lineage. After three generations new *phukī* are set up, which perform their annual ancestor worship (*duḡudyahpūjā*) separately. However distant the relations may be, in case of death the great-granduncles express their respect by joining the *phukī* concerned on the 4th day.

Members of the lineage, the brothers, uncles, nephews and sons of the deceased perform *du byēkegu*. The term “*du*”, expresses the notion of impurity that adheres to the body (*mhā*). All lineage members are *dumhā* for a period of ten days. The *byēkegu* activity on the 10th day after death includes having one’s hair trimmed and toenails pared by a barber, a bath in the river, using not only *khau* (pulverized oilcake) as do all near and far relatives on the first day after death, but also a mixture of *āmvaḥ-hāmvaḥ*, that is dry myrobalan and black sesame.

Although *āmvaḥ* (or Nep. *amalā*) is said to have a detergent quality, its significance reaches far beyond. The small green fruit is extremely sour and used to make pickles. It is a prominent offering to Śiva and represents the celestial world in general. The tree that bears these fruits is considered to be the primordial tree, the first ever to grow in the world. Black sesame is of no less importance. Considered to represent the sweat of Viṣṇu, it is used to cover the *piṇḍas* and, mixed with

barley, it also represents purificatory qualities.

In the case of Jagat Mān Suvāl, his only son, the chief mourner, and two grandsons, as well as his nephew and the nephew’s two sons were considered to be *dumhā*, “impure bodies”.

The chief mourner and his brothers will receive new, white clothes from the hands of the Brahmin. In a concluding act they will look into a mirror of brass (*javālānhāykā*) which is first exposed to the sun. The *dumhā* were not supposed to see their face for a period of ten days – all the mirrors in the house were veiled to avoid an improper confrontation. Once this confinement is overcome, the body reaches a preliminary stage of purity. Although the mirror is brought by the barber, who also has command over the other tools which bring about purity, it is the Brahmin who holds the mirror. As an agent of purity, he enables the reintegration of the *dumhā*.

Impurity for twelve days: the house

A further stage of purity is finally achieved on the 12th day after the sacred fire has cleansed the household and the hands of the affected persons, both male and female: a process called *suddha vākegu* – to attain purity. *Lhā panegu* – literally “the hands exposed above a fire” which is fed by an auxiliary priest from the sub-caste of Tinī, whose status is somewhat lower than a Brahmin. The offering of *samay*, a dish which includes egg, meat and fish, is meant to purify the house. All participants also receive this dish to end the period of restricted diet.

Impurity for one year: the chief mourner

For the chief mourner, the process of purification extends over 361 days and is experienced in steps. Through death it is immediately clear who will be the chief mourner;



Purificatory ritual on the 10th day after death (*du byēkegu*): all 38 members of the lineage group of Yakami (sub-caste of farmers) get shaved.

Photo December 2003

i.e. who will give fire to the pyre and as such is called *mitamhā*. Like the members of his patrilineal lineage group, he is also classified as a *dumhā*, a “polluted body”.

The purificatory ritual of the 10th day when they have their hair trimmed, their toenails pared, and put on white clothes frees the chief mourner as well as other lineage members from the *dumhā* status. Two more purificatory rituals are needed to arrive at a status of purity (*suddha vākegu*) that allows him once again to prepare food and enter temples.

At the end of the 13th or 45th day ritual, which aims at unifying the spirit of the deceased (*preta*) with the ancestors, the *pitṛ*, the chief mourner receives a colourful cap which indicates the end of mourning as it were. The cap is not actually worn because white clothes are mandatory. It is a peculiarity of death rituals among the Newars that the deceased joins the ancestors early on. Brahmanical traditions place this event at the end of a 12 month-long journey to Yamaloka, the realm of the Lord of Death. For practical

reasons the Newars have given priority to the union with the ancestors before the outset of the journey or, strictly speaking, after having already embarked upon it. Immediately after having been unified with the ancestors, the *pitṛ* of the deceased receives the offering of a bed (*śayyādāna*) which signifies his arrival in Sauripura after having crossed the mythic river Puṣpabhadra. At the same time two offerings of water (*jaladāna*) are performed, dedicated to the 30th and 45th day of the journey. To add another “inconsistency”, 360 small pots are filled with water, one for each day of the 12 lunar months of 30 days.

Until the 13th or 45th day the diet is extremely restricted, and until the first anniversary of death (*dākilā*) the chief mourner is not supposed to eat curds in case his father died, and milk in case his mother died. He should also not sit on chairs or sleep in beds – “modern” furniture that rests on four legs. It is said that the ancestors, the *pitṛ*, would be embarrassed to see the chief mourner behave in an “unusual” way that was strange to them. He is also neither allowed to entertain guests in his house on the occasion of annual festivals, nor can he join others. On five occasions, the household is supplied with festive food by the married sisters (or their sons) and daughters of the chief mourner. The household remains polluted to such an extent that no other life-cycle ritual can be performed during this first year. Whatever has been planned – regardless how long in advance – has to be postponed.

The ritual after 12 months includes the making of three *pinḍas* and the offering of cloth and a miniature bed to the deceased, who in that moment has reached the 15th city located in the topography of death. In a final act, the Brahmin hands over new clothes to the chief mourner and once again a colourful cap, which this time he immediately puts on, heralding the end of a long period of mourning and marginal impurity.

Only after having received vermilion for the mark on the forehead and oil for the hair on the 361st day has the body returned to the state of purity. On that same day the women of the household wail for the last time, thus withdrawing from overt mourning and bidding farewell to the deceased.

Removing impurity

To a large extent, the Brahmin ritual of death and dying is a gradual removal of impurity and mortality, as well as the creation of a new body in the next world (see below). For a certain period, the deceased still has a vital energy, which again will result in death. Thus he needs a body and a place to live so that – according to the traditional belief – he can be reborn after temporarily being in heaven(s) or hell(s). If he had no vital energy – like an ascetic – he would not have to be reborn and therefore not die again. But he also leaves behind or transmits this death – bringing negative energy to the survivors, who must protect themselves and the deceased mainly by the purifying forces of water and fire, especially the cremation fire, but also by other means such as gifts, oil, vermilion, new clothes, or the *āmvaḥ* (or Nep. *amalā*) fruit. Moreover, special forces (e.g. Brahmin, *kuśa* grass, basil, gold, fire offerings, Veda recitations) are seen as eternal, immortal and indestructible and as therefore capable of neutralizing and filtering out the death and bringing vital energy. But despite all ritual cautionary measures, they cannot completely dissolve or remove death. The deceased also retains a remnant of it, which lets him become the almost deified ancestor, but also leads to his rebirth.

Ideally, Brahmins are to digest the impurity of death (see Parry 1980). But it is not only they who remove the evil of the deceased. Other “para-priests” (Levy 1990: 363) and ritual care-takers such as Jugi, Bhā, or Nau are said to take or even consume the

favourite food or parts of the brain as well as the impure clothes of the deceased. Moreover, the barber cuts the mourners’ nails and hair, thus also removing impurity. But they only do all this with reluctance and with constant demands for money and gifts, for the impurity is considered by them hard to digest and thus stigmatising. This reluctance causes severe changes in Hindu death rituals (see below) even though it is part of an ancient Brahmanical notion: the evil – which is conceived of as a kind of negative subtle material – and likewise the evil of a gift cannot be extinguished but only removed, transferred or chased away (cf. Michaels 2004: 197-200 and 2003 for further references).

Pollution thus represents a constant threat that calls for techniques to overcome a problematic situation in order to return to the state of purity. Food enters the state of impurity (*cipa*) if it is either touched or simply left over: such food has to be discarded, for it cannot be eaten by others. In case an individual is impure (Skt. *āsuddha*), it is the physical body (*mhā*) that has to attain purity again, in most cases by taking a bath. He or she washes the feet, then hands, rinses the mouth, washes the face and on rare occasions washes the entire body by finally submerging it in the river.

There are a number of annual and life-cycle rituals that cause minor pollution. In all cases the procedure of purification is called *byēkegu*, a Nevārī verb which Robert Levy (1990: 391) literally translates as “to cause to become untied”. It is a process that frees the body or an environment (the household) from restrictions imposed by an extraordinary occurrence that has to be brought under control. Ritual provides the mechanism for returning to the state of purity.

However, there are only four cases that make the process of *byēkegu* absolutely mandatory. All of these have been classified by Levy as “major purifications”.

Women undergo such purification on two occasions. On the 5th day after giving birth (*macabu byēkegu*), on the occasion of cutting the umbilical cord, when the mother has to take a bath and the Naunī, the wife of a barber, has to come to pare her toenails (1). And on the occasion of the menarche ritual (*bārḥā taygu*), when girls leave their dark room unseen in the early morning of the 12th and last day of the ritual to take a bath, and a Naunī comes to pare her toenails (2).

Besides birth and the occasion that signals the potential of giving birth, it is death that necessitates major purificatory rituals. Every *śrāddha* dedicated to the deceased father or mother (3) is preceded by *byēkegu*, which makes not only a bath in the river mandatory, but also having the hair trimmed (*sā khāygu*) by the barber to whom he is bound by a hereditary relationship. In case of a *soraśrāddha* (4), the elder of the lineage takes a bath on the preceding day and has his hair trimmed. Other members (male as well as female) also undergo the process of *byēkegu*, but in their case the Nau will just touch their feet in a symbolic gesture of paring the toenails.

Embodiment and Tactility

Where and what is a dead person? This question is crucial for all survivors, and the answers given in Hindu death rituals of the Newar farmer community of Bhaktapur are highly ambivalent and polyvalent. The departed person is believed to reside in sacrificial balls (*piṇḍa*), animals, the wind or air, stones, cotton strips, or the *liṅga*. It seems that he has no fixed realm, and that rituals have to build places of refuge for him.

Piṇḍas and other bodies

The goal of the *latyā/sapiṇḍīkaraṇa* ritual is the composition of a body for the deceased

to allow him to reach the forefathers and ancestors. This is done ritually with sacrificial balls (*piṇḍa*) – a mixture of barley or wheat flour or cooked rice that is made with the hands. Tactility is one of the most significant features of this ritual. Death is literally taken into one's hands. Thus, in the *latyā* ritual the chief mourner takes great care kneading the dough for the *piṇḍas*, which in this case are the deceased and his forefathers, assisted by the priest who again and again advises him how to shape them and not to hurt them. Through kneading the dough, pasting it, and pouring water or scattering sesame seeds over it, the deceased attains a new body. In handling death this way emotions are moved from inside to the outside, from imagination to form. For the transformation from a living human being into an ancestor, the deceased has to be newly formed and shaped.

Moreover, *piṇḍas* constitute a social body. "Bound by the sacrificial ball" (*sapiṇḍa*) is a sign of kinship, which is not only taken into account at birth, but also in determining endogamy and exogamy. *Sāpiṇḍya* relatives form a common body because one is linked by forefathers (seven generations on the paternal side and five on the maternal side). Among the Newars of Bhaktapur, *piṇḍas* or the material for them are brought by the relatives.

Moreover, it is important to see how even the female and agnatic side of kinship is involved in the death rituals: It is the daughter or sister of the deceased (*mhāymacā*) who prepares the *nhenumhā* food and assists in the *latyā* rituals by handing, for example, the chief mourner the piece of meat (!) that is mixed with the *piṇḍa*. And it is the *jicābhāju*, the non-polluted son-in-law or brother-in-law of the deceased who takes on many purificatory tasks. In this way the social bodies of family and clan bonds are re-established.

However, *piṇḍas* are offered during all stages of the death and ancestor rituals, having different functions and being offered to

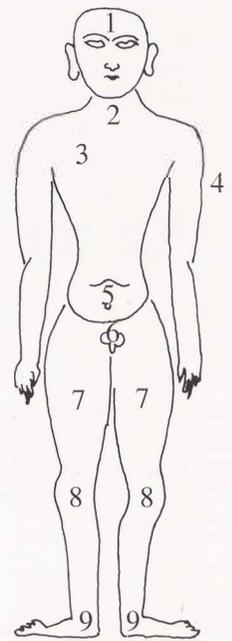
different addressees, not only to the deceased and the ancestors but also to gods and the servants of Yama. The offering of *piṇḍas* is also not restricted to the death ritual. After merging the deceased with his three paternal ancestors in the *sapiṇḍikaraṇa* he is worshipped in the regular *śrāddhas*. The number of *piṇḍas* which have to be offered during the death rituals varies considerably. According to the highly influential *Garuḍapurāṇasāroddhāra* (GPS) three sets of sixteen *piṇḍas* have to be offered. With reference to the gradually decreasing impurity, the first set is called *malinaṃ śoḍaśaṃ*, the second *madhyam śoḍaśaṃ* and the third *uttamaṃ śoḍaśaṃ* (GPS 12.66 ff.).

The first six *piṇḍas* of the first set are placed on the ground on the way to and at the cremation ground, the other ten of the first set are offered during the first ten days or – as in Bhaktapur in the *du byēkegu* ritual – collectively on the 10th day. *Piṇḍas* are often meant to create a transcendental body for the deceased. Through them, the dead person receives a new body, for the ten *piṇḍas* mostly stand for the various parts of the body (see figure on the margin). This composition corresponds to Ayurvedic ideas of the development of the embryo and the formation of the foetus in the mother's womb.

The second set of sixteen *piṇḍas* is offered almost in its entirety to the gods, for only one is offered to the *preta*. And the final set of sixteen, called *māsikaśrāddhas* or *māsikapīṇḍas*, are meant to be food for the one-year-journey to Yama's world after which the *preta* becomes a forefather (*pitṛ*). The term *māsikapīṇḍa* thus refers to the monthly offerings for the deceased during the first year after his death before the *sapiṇḍikaraṇa*. Previously the *sapiṇḍikaraṇa* was apparently held after twelve days. In most normative texts, however, it is prescribed after a year – although in practice this period came to be shortened again to twelve or thirteen days.

The sixteen monthly *piṇḍas* are meant to feed the deceased during his one-year-long journey to Yama's world in which he passes through 16 different cities, where he eats the *piṇḍas*. For his journey he also receives during the ritual a bed (*śayyādāna*) and several gifts, such as a seat, sandals, an umbrella, a ring, a *kamaṇḍalu* water pot, a Sacred Thread, clarified butter, clothes, food, and a plate for food. The number sixteen includes the twelve months and four additional points of time. These sixteen *piṇḍas* are mostly offered in advance for the following year on the 10th or 11th day after death. In the special case of the *latyā* ritual the timing is different: the *sapiṇḍikaraṇa* is performed on the 45th day (= *traipakṣe*) after death, which according to the ritual handbooks is another possible point of time for the *sapiṇḍikaraṇa*.

The third set of sixteen *piṇḍas* should be distributed throughout the year of mourning, but in fact this ritual takes place, if at all, as a preliminary rite for the *sapiṇḍikaraṇa*, which celebrates the arrival of the deceased among the ancestors. In the process, the chief mourner divides one of the *piṇḍas*, which is somewhat lengthened, into three parts using gold (or money) and *kuśa* grass and mixes the whole thing with three *piṇḍas* that represent the father, the grandfather, and the great-grandfather. Here again, the chief mourner and the Brahmin priest take the balls as representatives of the forefathers (*pitarah*), ancestor-gods (*viśvedevāḥ*) and the deceased (*preta*). This is the crucial moment when the deceased, abandoning his former name, is brought into the band of forefathers (*pitarah*), thus forming a commensal community with them and no longer being the helpless outsider he was as a *preta*. All this is done by the hands of the chief mourner. He touches the deceased and his forefathers, and moulds and unites them with his fingers. Thus the deceased and the forefathers are both close to him and far away.

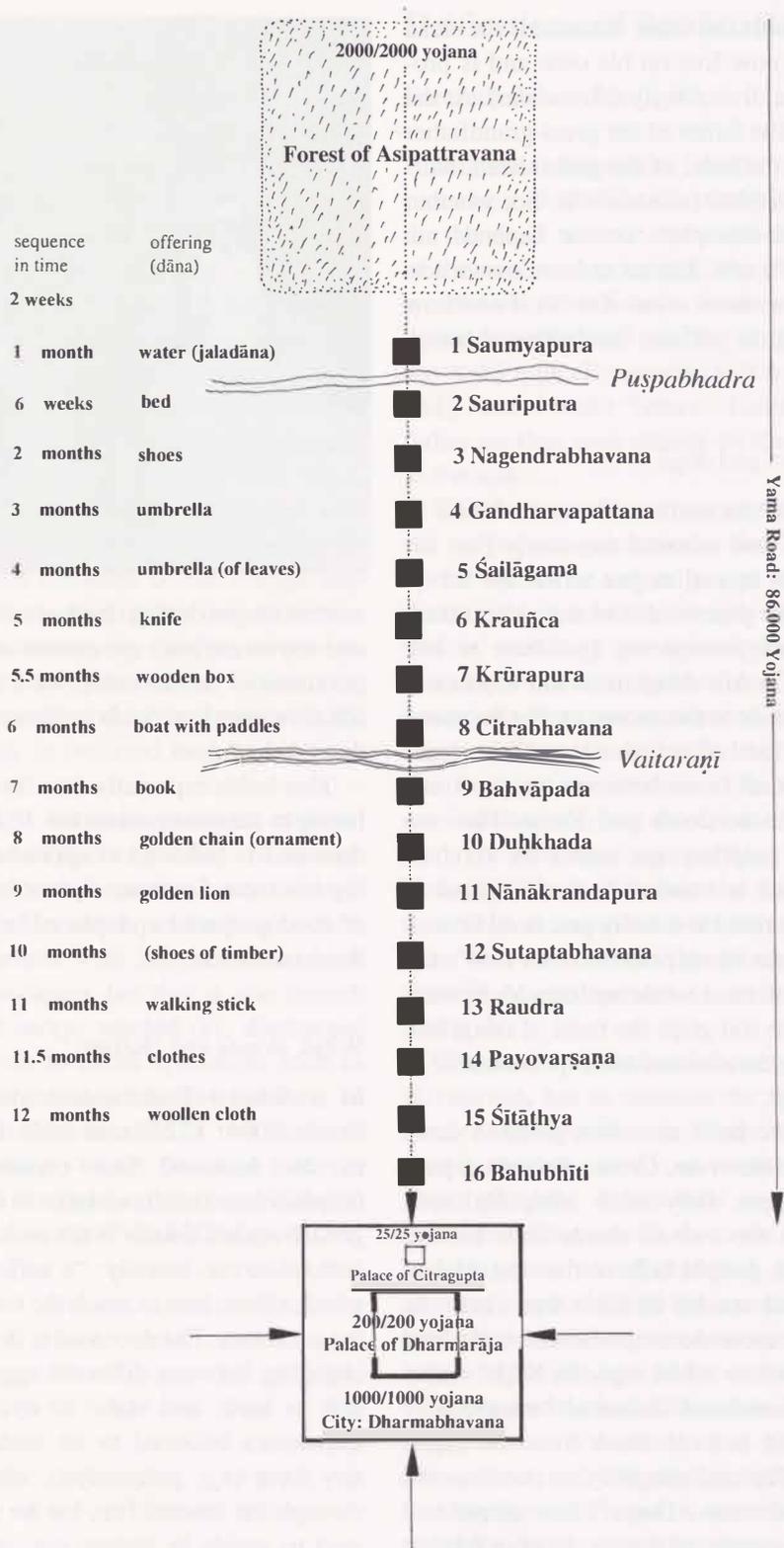


After six balls have been offered on the way to and at the cremation ground, the following ten constitute a transcendental body for the deceased:

- 1 head
- 2 neck, shoulders
- 3 heart
- 4 back
- 5 navel
- 6 hips, sexual organs
- 7 thighs
- 8 knees
- 9 feet
- 10 hunger and thirst

Passage through the sixteen cities of the underworld

According to the *Pretakalpa* of the *Garuḍapurāṇa*, second, third and fourteenth *adhyāya*. The road measures 86,000 *yojanas* not including the *Vaitaraṇī*. Shaped as a *piṇḍa*, the *pitṛ* has to cover 247 *yojanas* a day. The *Asipattravana* forest measures 2,000 *yojanas* and is located "anywhere" – the diagram locates it at the beginning. On the 18th day the *pitṛ* reaches *Saimyapura*, where the *Puṣpabhadra* river and the *Priyadarśana* tree are found. The *pitṛ* enjoys the first *piṇḍa* and proceeds to *Sauriputra* and the following cities. In *Śailāgama* the *pitṛ* is exposed to a rain of rocks. In *Citrabhavana*, where *Yama*'s younger brother *Vicitra* reigns, the *pitṛ* receives a boat and paddles as an offering from the bereaved ones. The use of a boat to cross the terrible river *Vaitaraṇī* requires, however, the gift of a cow to the officiating Brahmin. Otherwise the *pitṛ* will undergo extreme tortures while crossing the river. To reach *Duḥkhada*, the *pitṛ* has to fly and is exposed to severe cold in *Śītāṭhya*. Before reaching the 16th city, *Bahubhīti*, the *pitṛ* leaves the *piṇḍa* body and reaches the city of death, *Dharmabhavana*, to repent his evil deeds. Those who had been evil enter the city from the southern gate. The righteous enter through the other three gates: from the east the demi-gods and those of good character and pure faith; from the north those who were familiar with the Vedas, who died in *Vārāṇasī* or in the waters of a *tīrtha*, who made large offerings or were killed by a collapsing idol; from the western gate those who are exclusive devotees of *Viṣṇu*, or who consider lumps of earth, stones and gold to be equal, or who perform sacred acts and utter prayers.

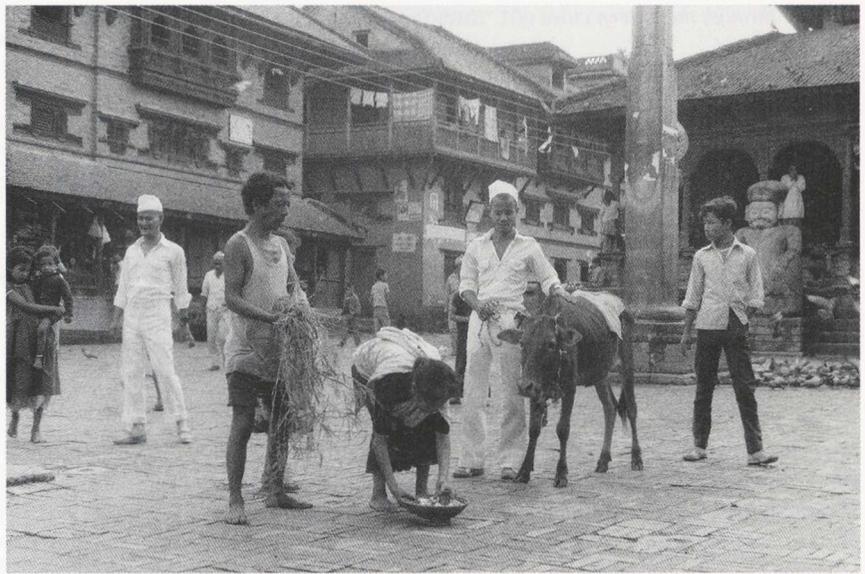


United with the other deceased, the dead person can now live on his own and is provided with a divine body (*divyadeha*). At the same time, the father of the great-grandfather moves into the band of the generalized, half-divine forefathers (*viśvedevāḥ*). So, whether one reaches this place or not depends not only on one's own Karma and one's own acts – on guilt or merit – but also on if and how the descendants perform the death and ancestor rituals.

Cows, crows and dogs

According to the traditional texts, a bull is to be branded and released (*vr̥ṣotarga*) on the eleventh day or earlier, but nowadays this is almost never practiced. On the other hand, the ritual of cow-giving (*godāna*) is still common. On his dangerous and extremely painful journey to the ancestors, the deceased comes to a kind of hellish river of blood and excrement that flows between the earth and the realm of the death god Yama. The cow is given to help him get across the river. A similar motif is enacted in the *Gājātrā* of Nepal. This ritual is usually practiced in such a way that the death priest holds a cow's tail and a leaf of basil while reciting Vedic sayings, and the son grips the hand of the priest. Once again, the son acts as a representative of the deceased.

Part of the balls are often given to cows or cast into the river. Crows also get a part. As scavengers, they have allegedly been linked with the cult of death since ancient times. Thus, people believe that the soul of the deceased resides in birds that circle the house. If a crow does not eat the balls, this is interpreted as a bad sign. In Nepal crows are also considered immortal because they are supposed to have drunk from the nectar of immortality and allegedly no one has ever seen a dead crow. Dogs, often considered as the messengers of Yama, receive food at



several stages during death rituals. Both dogs and crows are also sometimes seen as incorporations of the deceased, such as during the ritual removal of death pollution on the 10th day (*du byēkegu*).

This holds especially true for the food offering to the deceased on the 7th day when the deceased is believed to appear as a dog eating his most favourite dishes from the heap of food prepared and placed in front of the bereaved house.

Wind, stones and clothes

In traditional Brahmanical ideas (see Michaels 2004: 132ff. and table 12) the body of the deceased first consists of wind (*vāyusaṛīra*), then is as large as a thumb (*liṅgaṣarīra*), and finally is the size of a forearm (*yātanāṣarīra*, literally: “a suffering body”), which allows him to reach the forefathers and the ancestors. The deceased is thus constantly changing between different aggregates from soft to hard, and static to dynamic. He is sometimes believed to be embodied in an airy form (e.g. *prāṇavāyu*), which he takes through the funeral fire, but he is also imagined to reside in stones, e.g. *pikhālākhu* in

Symbolic offering of a cow (godāna) on Dattātreya square in Bhaktapur on the occasion of Sāpāru, full moon in August. Photo 31st August 1985

front of the house or – at a different level – in the *dugudyah* stone or, in case of an untimely or unpacified death, in *dhvākā* stones indicating the presence of evil spirits on crossroads. On other occasions he flies around in the form of a crow or in his soul, threatening to leave the bereaved relatives, or to float away on the river.

These ambiguous forms of embodiment are represented at several stages during the death and ancestor rituals in which there is a dynamic change between spatially limited actions at a specific sacrificial arena and moving around. Thus, in the *latyā* ritual almost everything happens within the limited area (*maṇḍala*) of one square metre, and in the *dugudyah pūjā* the seats of the lineage deities are deeply rooted in the soil. However, on several occasions, e.g. the funeral procession, the *dugudyah pūjā* or the *Gāijātrā* the relatives move around, sometimes with the deceased who is believed to be present at such occasions.

This change between presence and absence of the deceased might have to do with the ambivalence expressed in many forms in death rituals. The dead person is mourned, and the mourners wish that he comes back and is present again, but this is also feared: he is chased away, warded off, discharged or handed over to ritual specialists such as the Bhā or Brahmin when, for instance, he is believed to be embodied in two strips of cotton (*nāhkāpaḥ*) which the chief mourner wears around his waist and his head in the *du byēkegu* ritual on the 7th and 10th day.

Deification and Pacification

Forefathers and demi-gods

Brahmanical-Sanskritic death rituals are processes of deification. Only after a year do the dead achieve the semi-divine status of the ancestors (*pitaraḥ*). The plural of this word means “forefathers, forebears,” but also “great-grandfathers”; in the singular (*pitṛ*), the word typically means (and is etymologically related with) “father”. Father and forefather are thus seen ritually on the same level as the son.

The dead remain in the status of ancestors for only three generations, then they move up to the rather vague groups of heavenly creatures (*viśvedevāḥ*; literally: “all gods”), and as such they are worshipped only collectively in a de-individualized manner. In a way, the three generations of the deceased form a ladder of rising status but decreasing proximity to the survivors. Therefore, sons are important for the salvation of one’s own soul, for only they can perform the rituals. Consequently, in Sanskrit the son (*putra*) is described as someone who saves the father from hell. In contrast, the living man traditionally has obligations to seers, ancestors, and gods.

The dead – either forefathers, ancestors or *viśvedevāḥ*, not to mention the spirits of the dead – are ubiquitous in South Asia. No domestic ritual is carried out without them getting their share. Often they are worshipped every day. They are closer to the house, they are dangerous and dissatisfied, they always demand respect. Only the ascetic, who has paid his debt to the gods, ancestors and men, is free of the pressure of the deceased.

There are marked differences in the worship of the *viśvedevāḥ* and the *pitaraḥ*. Thus, the *viśvedevāḥ* are invoked with *svāhā* and the Sacred Thread is placed on the left shoulder. While invoking the *pitaraḥ* with

svadhā the Sacred Thread is kept on the right shoulder; with the ancestor-gods, the preferred number is even, with the forefathers it is odd; the ancestor-gods receive grains of barley or rice, the forefathers sesame seeds (whose significance in the death cult is still to be studied – and recalls the “open sesame” of the Thousand-and-One Nights); the one performing the sacrifice looks east in the case of the ancestor-gods, south in the case of the forefathers; the form of the sacrificial place (*maṇḍala*) is square for the ancestor-gods, round for the forefathers.

The changes in the *ekoddiṣṭaśrāddha* are of two kinds: first, only the deceased is worshipped and receives a single *piṇḍa*. No fire-offering and worship of *viśvedevāḥ* is performed. The use of the words “*svadhā*”, “*namah*” and “*pitṛ*” as well as some of the Vedic recitations and *mantras* are forbidden. Secondly the *śrāddha* for the deceased has its own features. Thus the *maṇḍala* for the deceased is triangular, the tuft of grass (*kūrca*) has one blade for him instead of three as for the *pitaraḥ* or two or four blades for the gods. But although being in a liminal and impure status, which is different from the *pitaraḥ* and ancestor-gods, characteristics of the worship for both *pitaraḥ* and *viśvedevāḥ* are also adopted in the ritual for the deceased. As in the worship of forefathers, the performer wears the Sacred Thread on his right shoulder and sesame seeds are used. And as in the case with the ancestor-gods the deceased is addressed with *svāhā*. Finally, the *piṇḍa* is placed on the top of the *darbha* blade, not on its roots as is the case with the forefathers.

The close relationship between gods and ancestors (*viśvedevāḥ*) is constantly re-established. They are both considered deities (*devatā*), though there are marked differences in the ancestor rituals. But here, too, when a ritual counter-world is constructed the ancestors are associated with the gods,

but only because they too have a heavenly body (*divyadeha*).

The unpacified dead

As long as the deceased have not yet found their place as forefathers, they are powerful and potentially dangerous, and mainly wander around feeling hungry. But, as ancestors, the dead are sometimes seen on a level with the high gods – ancestors and gods once lived together, it is said – sometimes in a separate class (with *Vasus*, *Rudras*, and *Ādityas*). In any case, they have a semi-divine status. Thus, the place of the forefathers is a kind of heaven, not the heaven of the gods (*svarga*), but not the earthly world of humans (*bhūloka*) or that of the spirits (*antarikṣa*).

If the deceased does not die a natural death, if he is killed for example in a traffic accident, in a crime, or in early childhood, or if he commits suicide, and likewise if the death rituals are not performed or are carried out incorrectly, he is threatened with remaining a *preta* or restless spirit (*bhūta*, *piśāca*). The Sanskrit word for a deceased person, *preta*, is often used in Indian idioms together with a word for spirit: *bhūt-pret*. These spirits can also be the unpacified dead, not only the ritually escorted dead. They populate the realm of the living and are sometimes fed collectively, e.g. on the day before new moon in March (*Pasacahre/Piśācaturdaśī*).

As was described above, as long as their *sapiṇḍikaraṇa* ritual has not yet been performed, that is a maximum of one year, *pretas* often have only a fine material thumb-sized body without a mouth. They have consciousness and feelings, but no accompanying bodily organs. Like the survivors, they are in a marginal situation, full of ambivalence, pollution, weakness, and low vitality. They are hungry and – because of their internal heat (*tejas*) – thirsty: they hang around the house of the survivors, envy them their life, and



The gifts of the sixth month: a boat of silver and a paddle of gold floating in a brass vessel. Photo 21st July 2002.

want to inflict illnesses on them. However, there are special Brahmanical death rituals (*nārāyaṇabali*, *pālāśavidhi*, *vṛṣōtsarga*, *sarpabali* etc.), for direct deification, without the long road through forefatherhood, which is also used for those who cannot have the normal death rituals because they are missing, for example.

The unpacified dead have to be brought to a place where they can do no more harm to the survivors. This is done by several rituals, at times even with tricks such as the trap for the deceased on the 10th day (*svanecā taye byēkegu*) or with obscene words, as during Holi or Ghatāmugaḥcahre. Even when the deceased is believed to reside in cotton strips.

In such rituals everything is direct and concrete, little is symbolic. It is the deceased who falls into the trap, or who gets the tiny boat with paddles that should help him or her to cross the fetid river Vaitaraṇī in order to reach Yama's realm.

Memory und Mourning

Śrāddha – remembering
and feeding the ancestors

The temporal and kinship distance to the dead person affects the frequency and intensity of ancestor worship. It can be observed that the frequency of joint death ceremonies increases the farther back in time the death occurred and the more faded the memory of the deceased.

The common term for Brahmanical-Sanskritic ancestor worship, *śrāddha* (cf. Michaels 2004: 144ff. with references), which is derived from a religious attitude (*śraddhā*) referred to as early as the Vedic Epoch (1750-500 B.C.), indicates – even in the opinion of Brahmanic legal scholars – various parts of rituals, three of which are especially important: the fire offering (*homa*), the balls (*pinḍa*), and feeding the Brahmins. In addition, gifts to Brahmins (*dāna*), and worship (*pūjā*) of the gods, especially Viṣṇu as a saviour in death, are significant sub-rituals. In popular parlance, *śrāddha* denotes both death rituals and ancestor rituals, even though death rituals are considered impure, while ancestor rituals, on the other hand, are not. However, what certainly has to be noticed in the history of death and ancestor rituals is their “pūjaisaition” (see Michaels/Buss forthc.).

Traditionally there are different classifications of the *śrāddha* based on the occasion for which they are performed, or the general division of Sanskritic rituals into *kāmya*, *naimittika* and *nitya*, and others. The main distinction, which concerns us here, is of two types: the *pārvaṇaśrāddha*, considered as the basic (*prakṛti*) form according to which all other *śrāddhas* are modelled, and the *ekoddiṣṭaśrāddha*. The main difference – as indicated in the name *ekoddiṣṭa* („determined for a single (deceased)”) – is the number of the worshipped as well as the status of the wor-

shipped that results from the decreasing impurity – as achieved through ritual acts – and leads to different treatment for the deceased (*preta*), the forefathers (*pitaraḥ*) and the ancestor-gods (*viśvedevāḥ*).²⁵⁵ All offerings of *piṇḍas* prior to the *sapinḍikaraṇa* usually follow the rule of *ekoddiṣṭaśrāddha*, while in the *sapinḍikaraṇa* both forms are performed, and after the *sapinḍikaraṇa* the offerings follow the *pārvaṇaśrāddha*.

The model form of the *pārvaṇaśrāddha* has three basic features: the fire-offering (*agnaukaraṇa*), the feeding of Brahmins (*brāhmaṇabhojana*), and the worship and offering of *piṇḍas*. For that purpose at least three Brahmins are traditionally invited, who are worshipped with offerings (*upacāras*) as representatives of the *viśvedevāḥ* and the forefathers, who are always three (i.e. father, grandfather and great-grandfather of the *yajamāna*).

These traditional rules are also basically followed by the Newar farmers of Bhaktapur. However, for them the aspect of the *viśvedevāḥ* is almost non-existent, at least terminologically. The concept of “All-gods” representing a certain status of the deceased is perhaps too abstract for them. In the *śrāddhas* they worship the forefathers who are remembered, or the ancestors in general whose memory has more or less faded.

The *śrāddha* rituals can also be seen as a kind of feeding of the ancestors – through the fire and the sacrificial balls. Memory and sympathy is often expressed by food and feeding. The *nhenumhā* ritual, for instance, is structurally a kind of *śrāddha* intended to feed and nourish the deceased and to strengthen his or her diminished vitality. Moreover, on several occasions food is brought to the polluted home by relatives or others, and the priest(s), relatives or neighbours are invited for feasts. All this is done in the more or less explicit memory of the deceased.

Hindu mourning

There is no terminological equivalent in Hinduism for what we call “bereavement” or “mourning”. Where we talk of mourning rituals or ceremonies, one speaks in India and Nepal of rituals (of removing) impurity (*aśauca*), sacrifice (*pitṛmedha*), last rites (*antyeṣṭi*), ten-days-duty (*daśakriyā*, Nep. *kājkiriyā*), embodiment (*sapinḍikaraṇa*), and faithful welfare service to as well as commemoration of the ancestors (*śrāddha*), but rarely of emotions or personal feelings. It goes without saying that Hindus also feel deep sorrow and pain after a near or loved one dies, but even close relatives or friends seldom ask them about their inner states.

A more or less clear indication of mourning is weeping. This certainly happens in Hindu traditions as often as in other cultures, depending on the emotional relation between the deceased and the survivors. However, it should not occur at the cremation ground, and only in public at fixed times, for it is believed that otherwise the deceased has to eat the mucus and tears. In the Nepalese Mulukī Ain of 1854 people are even to be punished when they cry on their way to the death house:

“The Newar women shall not cry on the way while visiting the place where a Newar dies. Cry only when you reach the place of death. If the women cry on the way while walking in the lanes, a fine of 8 *ānā* shall be imposed on each of them. If the rupees are not paid, imprison [them] according to the Ain.” (MA para. 97.7)

The rule that mourners should not cry can also be found in ancient Dharmaśāstra sources.²⁵⁶ In the *Garuḍapurāṇasāroddhāra*, one of the most influential texts for Hindu death rituals, it is mentioned that any kind of lamenting on the loss of somebody is useless. It is worth having a closer look at this passage, since it ultimately leads to the statement

²⁵⁵ Cf. Kane 1991/IV: 516 and Müller 1992: 48, 87 and 89.

²⁵⁶ Manu III.229, Viṣṇu LXXIX.20.

that rituals are more important than sorrow and mourning.

“The son should give up his sorrow, he should remain resolute in his true steadfastness (*sāttvikī dhṛti*), then he should make the balls (*piṇḍa*) etc. for (his) father, (but) not shed tears.

Since the deceased (*preta*) is forced against his will to consume (*bhuj*) the mucus and tears that are shed by his relatives, one should not show sorrow without reason (*nirarthakāt*).

Even if a man would mourn (*śuc*) day and night for thousands of years, the deceased would never see his final place (*nidhana*).

Anyone who is born must also die, anyone who is dead must be reborn; therefore a wise man should not mourn the unavoidable.

The food prepared in the morning is already bad in the evening; how can a body that is nourished from the juice of such cooked food (*tadannarasasampuṣṭa*) be more constant!

The son considering that (all) this could be a medicine (*bhaiṣajya*) against the pain (*duḥkha*) should abandon the sorrow (*śoka*) which comes from ignorance (*ajñāna*) – and he should do what has to be done (*kriyām kuryāt*).” (GPS 11. 3-12)

As it seems, Hindu mourning is primarily concerned with what is to be done, i.e. rituals, rather than what is to be felt. However, although precise prescriptions suggest clear norms of behaviour, Hindu mourning remains as ambivalent as mourning in Western and other cultures. Rituals do not make things any easier (see also Michaels 2005c).

Seen from the emic perspective, the following interlaced aspects are prevalent: purification (i.e. removal of *aśauca*), embodiment and transformation (*sapīṇḍīkaraṇa*), deification and pacification (from *preta* to *viśvedevāḥ*) as well as welfare (*śrāddha*) and commemoration of the deceased and the ancestors. Whether one should call this mix-

ture “Hindu rituals of mourning” is a matter of terminology and debate, but it certainly means reducing an extremely complex set of actions to just one aspect.

In Judaism and Christianity the fate of the dead is comparatively independent of the world of the living, whose influence seems to be low. The ancestors are gone. Thus, the mourners are in the focus. In Hinduism it is almost the other way round: the focus is on the deceased. But, as we have seen before, the temporal and kinship distance to the dead person affects the frequency and intensity of ancestor worship. It is by the *damnatio memoriae* that the deceased die (again).

Continuity and Change

Three categories of change can be observed to heavily influence the tradition of death rituals. (a) Stigmatisation: A number of purity specialists of low status have ceased to carry out their duties. They consider the duty to be beneath their contempt. (b) Economic mobility and the change of values: Extensive feasts are considered a burden imposed by a rigid society. Committees are formed to denounce such obligations. (c) Religious innovations: Since 1990 Nepal’s constitutional monarchy ensures freedom of thought; new religions along with new Hindu reform movements are often anti-ritualistic. Guided by vegetarianism, many groups still perform rituals but strictly without blood offerings and alcohol – once the core of Newar rituals that define the acting group on the basis of commensality.

Stigmatisation and ritual discontinuity

Almost all those whom Robert Levy calls purity technicians engaged in “stigmatised ritual-symbolic activities” (1990: 98) have been exposed to the growing impact of change.

Modernists from a wide range of political and religious backgrounds were successful in shaking off the oligarchic rule of a single class. The revolution of spring 1990 resulted in a multi-party democracy which led to the ban on missionary activities being lifted and the increase in ethnocentric particularization. As the hitherto unquestioned “Hindu-Monarchy” lost its grip on a superficially and at times forcefully unified society, a new “freedom” allowed a number of absolutely new promises of liberation to surface – both religious and secular. The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the revival of the radical belief system of Maoism which, by the end of 2004, dominated more than 80 per cent of the country. The radical anti-ritualistic stance of this movement denounces rituals in general. It intimidates people to such an extent that Brahmins of villages on the periphery of Bhaktapur do not dare to wear a *dhoti*, the obligatory dress for the performance of a death ritual when called on to conduct it in town.

In the 1950s, members of the Jugi (or Kusle) sub-caste staged demonstrations to gain access to temples and to overcome the stigma of impurity. Only a generation later the Jugi started to question their ritual obligations in general. By the end of the 20th century the Bhā had joined the Jugi in their protest, while the washermen (Pasi) and torch bearers (Cālā) had already fully withdrawn from their ritual duties. The barbers (Nau) had turned their trade into a regular profession, demanding cash. They regard their ritual duties as a side job which provides an additional income – no longer done in kind but for cash.

The Jugi constitute by far the largest community stigmatised by impurity. Until recently they had to collect ritual waste from the *chvāsaḥ* stones, accept offerings of cooked food (*jugibvaḥ*²⁵⁷) made to the forefathers, and absorb pollution from the higher castes. Beyond simply suffering from pollution, Ge-

rard Toffin even sees the Jugi as playing “the role of scapegoat” (Toffin 1987: 230). In an interview with Basala Jugi, who in 2002 and 2003 acted for those Svāgamikha, Bāsukala and Suvāl families whose death rituals are documented in the previous chapter, she expressed considerable reservation and even contempt towards her ritual obligations. She said that “in a democracy people are equal – if we continue our work, the stigma of impurity will persist”. She considered her work to be lacking in “respect” or “prestige” by using the Urdu word “*ijjat*” which is widely used in a Nepālī context. According to her, wealth does not provide prestige because it can be stolen. But since low status work (Nep. *ijjat jane kām*) can be seen by others it fosters disrespect.

In all towns the Jugi have formed committees which have issued statements of contempt, calling upon their members to discontinue their services. Fines have even been discussed. But in reality a few members still follow the call of their clients to take advantage of the cash that is offered. In the long run the married daughter or sister of the deceased (*mhāymacā*) will have to step in and cast the offerings of the 7th day into the river. Since she had already cooked the food she is destined to touch the food again and dispose of it. In cases of *jugibvaḥ* a person without parents will discard the offering to the *pitṛ* either on the *pikhālākhu* in front of the house or in the river.

Similar to the Jugi the Bhā (or Kārāñjit) acts as a para-priest. The actions of the Bhā are instrumental in restituting a new body for the deceased; he is even identified with the spirit. From ten families of Bhā (in 2003) only two, slightly disturbed persons follow the calls of bereaved families. For a long time now there has been no more relationship to a defined group of clients. People are unable to remember a Bhā ever coming to a client’s house to receive the cotton strip (*nāḥkāpaḥ*)

²⁵⁷ Toffin (1987: 224), whose study is mainly based on fieldwork in Pyangaon and Panauti, calls the offering of the 7th day *jugibau*. In Bhaktapur this offering is simply called “*nhenhumhā*”. Other offerings to the crow on the 7th day are called *kvajā* while the annual offerings to the Jugi are called *jugibvaḥ*. “*Bvaḥ*” includes cooked rice (nowadays also beaten rice), a variety of vegetable, sweets, and also beer and alcohol. “*Bau*” includes grains, husk and mash offered to the spirits on crossroads or to *pitṛ* on plots of agricultural land (*bhulā*).

and eat in their presence in order to demonstrate his identity with the spirit of the deceased. The term *kāṭṭo nakegu*, “to feed with a dish that includes a piece of the skull of the corpse” is known only from a royal context.

Within a few years Bhā may no longer officiate in Bhaktapur. The *jicābhāju*, the non-polluted son-in-law will probably one day take over the duties of the Bhā.

The purifying fire of the 12th day (*lhā panegu*) is rarely performed by a Tinī, as only one member of the group of these “lower Brahmin” continues to offer his services. His task has largely been taken over by Parbatiya Brahmin or simply by the *jicābhāju*.

The Pasi have discontinued their duty of washing the two cotton strips worn by the chief mourner during the ten day period of pollution. The duty of these purity specialists is only vaguely remembered by people over the age of seventy.

Likewise the Cālā, who lead the procession to the cremation ground carrying a torch and cymbals, are no longer seen performing their duty. The torch is now carried by a member of the funeral association.

Ritual – an economic burden

Complaints about the economic burden imposed by ritual activities are perhaps almost inevitably an expression of life when it has started to turn sour. The opposition between duty and burden is a familiar stress which often is admitted with a sense of humour. In the case of death rituals, a number of simplifications are remembered by the present generation, introduced in order to save time and resources.

While “years ago” the chief mourner had to turn to the respective embankment at the rivers on ten successive days after cremation in order to constitute the body of the *preta*, the disembodied ghost of the deceased, today this is done collectively on the 10th day

because nowadays it is allegedly too difficult to move to the river without touching and thus polluting other people. Likewise, the fourteen offerings of water along the journey through the underworld, the annual death rituals for the deceased parents (*śrāddha*), and even the annual death ritual for the ancestors (*soraśrāddha*) are now rarely done in a “proper” way by inviting the Brahmin to the house involved. Rather the chief mourner or the head of the lineage will visit the house of the Brahmin in the early morning, hand over water, a *nislā* plate, the prescribed food offerings and a small *dakṣiṇā* of just ten rupees. As more and more people are employed and wage-dependent, a visit to the Brahmin’s house for a few minutes is considered manageable, while an elaborate hour-long ritual with many participants and the ensuing feeding of guests is considered a burden that has to be avoided.

The most sorely felt burden is the offering of the feast on the 13th or 45th day to celebrate *sapiṇḍīkaraṇa*, the merging of the deceased with the ancestors. Inviting a wide range of related families – those whole families (*bhvaḥ pāhā*) and single persons of certain families (*yākā pāhā*) who contributed the raw material to make the balls (*piṇḍas*) – remains unquestioned to this today. Those who contributed are in fact duty-bound to appear. In case somebody fails to join the feast, the chief mourner has to ask the others repeatedly why that person did not come.

The imperative to invite friends and neighbours, however, easily doubles the costs incurred. As young people tend to avoid the feast, and as the household concerned wants to reduce the costs, the mandatory character of the funeral meal is fading away.

An open discussion started in a few neighbourhoods of farmers for the first time in the year 2000 AD. In June 2003 fourteen young people from Byāsi – invariably from sub-castes of farmers – joined in wording an

“appeal” to “the brothers and sisters” of their quarter not to “offer a feast to neighbours after the death of a person” (Nep. *mṛtyu pa-chi ṭolabāsikarulāi khuvāindai āeko bhoj*). Everybody in the quarter concerned felt relieved by this idea, so hundreds of people signed the appeal. It is not quite clear whether it is more the social burden of appearing and spending time, or the economic burden, the cost of the feast, that caused people to join the appeal, as it is considered improper to show signs of miserliness. In disregard of the appeal, printed invitations are still handed out in Byāsi to more than 100 families. But few people nowadays consider such an invitation to be binding.

Furthermore, many ritual specialists now demand cash payment as compensation instead of being paid in kind, as was previously the case. Thus, since the 1970s the barber refuses to absorb the pollution of his clients by receiving his clothes. Instead, he receives some cash as compensation. And the newly-established association of barbers (*nāpit saṅgha*) asks their members to accept unhusked rice or cash from their clients rather than their annual share of the crops, since that is considered humiliating.

Despite the economic burden, rituals are not easily altered, reduced or given up. They are not just instrumental acts or “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine” (Turner 1967: 19), for they guarantee security of social relations, the authority and legitimisation of ritual specialists, and they perhaps fulfil a need for ludic and mimetic imitation (cf. Michaels 2003a). Thus they constitute a form of symbolic or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1998) that cannot easily be given up. This is only possible when the socio-cultural ground is prepared by other means of security and legitimisation – such as modern social security systems, media, class organisations etc. Then rituals are criticized and anti-ritualism arises.

हार्दिक अपिल

“मानिस मरनशील प्राणी हो” सुखको साथै दुःख पनि आउनु स्वभाविक प्रकृया भएकोले मानिस जन्मेपछि मृत्युलाई पनि स्वभाविक रूपमा लिन सक्नु पर्छ । त्यस कारण आदरणीय टोलवासीहरू हामी विभिन्न व्यवहारले गर्दा हामी भन-भन गरिवको चपेटामा पर्दै आएको छ । सामाजिक व्यवहारमा कुनै भोज भत्तेर गर्नु पर्दा तडक भडकमा नगई साधारण रूपमा मात्र मनाउन हुन हार्दिक अनुरोध गर्दै मिति २०६० साल आषाढ २४ गते **सुनौलो टिम वाचनालय** को कृयाशिलतामा स्थानिय टोलका दाजु भाई तथा दिदि बहिनीहरूसंगको परामर्श पश्चात कुनै व्यक्तिको मृत्यु पछि टोलवासीहरूलाई खुवाइन्दै आएको भोज भत्तेर परम्परालाई हटाई सुखःमय जीवनयापन गर्न हुन हार्दिक अपिल गर्दछौं । साथै आवश्यक छलफल गर्दै उक्त कार्य कार्यान्वयन गर्न गराउनको लागि निम्न व्यक्तिहरु रहेको एउटा कमिटी गठन भएको ब्यहोरा सहर्ष जानकारी गराउदै छौं ।

धन्यवाद !

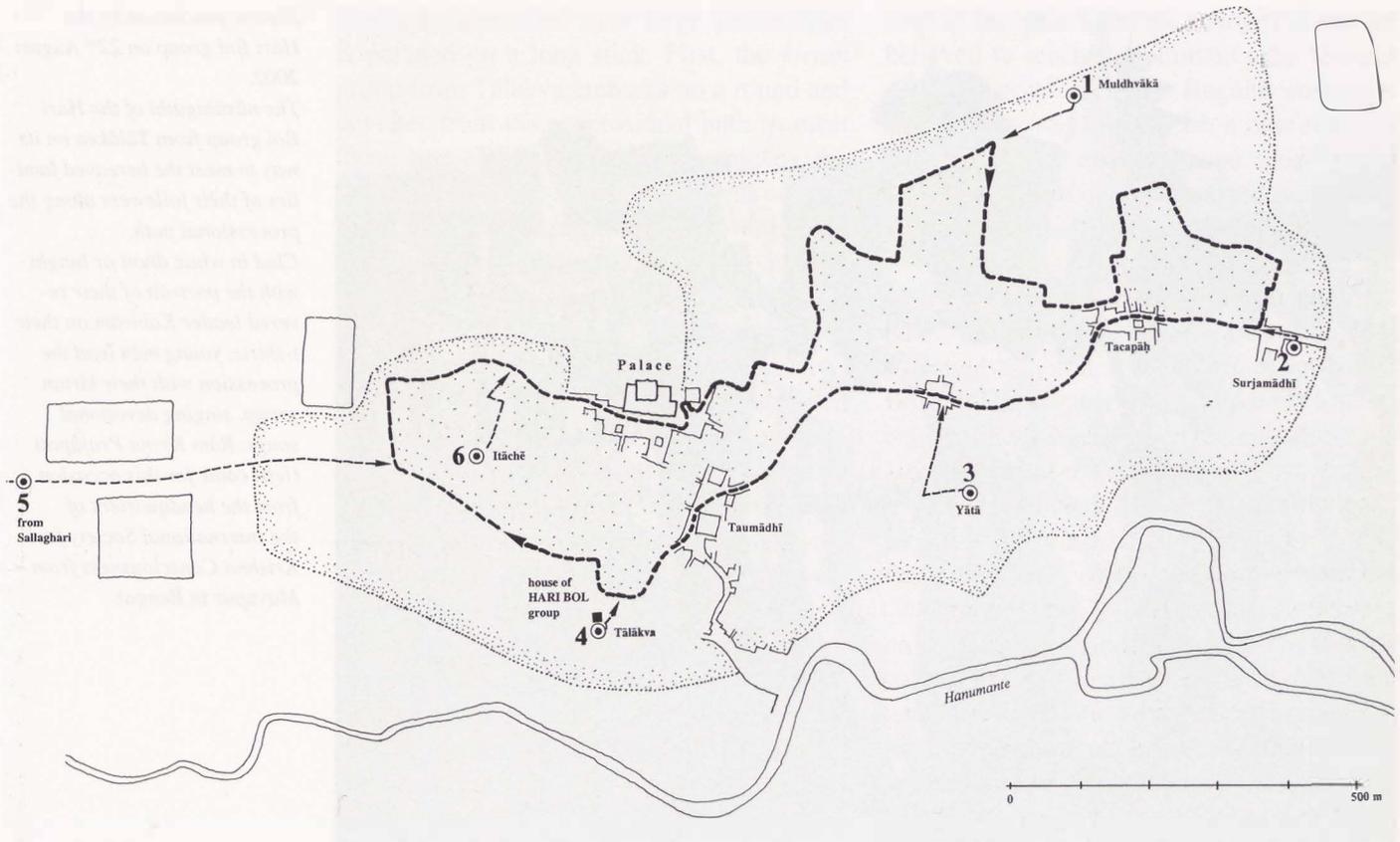
रमेश राजचल	-	संयोजक
सिद्धि राम कासुला	-	सदस्य
रोसन सुनु		
तुल्सि राम सुवाल		
शंख बहादुर कासुला		
राजबाम दशैपुथे		
राजेन्द्र दशैपुथे		
कृष्ण सुन्दर दशैपुथे		
विश्वराम सुवाल		
सत्यराम सुवाल		
बलराम राजचल		
कृष्णराम पछिजु		
राजन पछिजु		
धन्नबहादुर राजचल		

Modernity and anti-ritualism

The revolution of March 1990 and the subsequently promulgated constitution brought about a multi-party democracy based on political and religious freedom. While Christian missionaries were previously denied access to Nepal, a number of Christian sects immediately stepped in to establish their churches – the majority being protestant sects from North America. In 2003 five sects were present south of Bhaktapur, in Surjebināyak,

Appeal to discontinue the tradition of inviting neighbours and friends to join the funerary feast in completion of the rituals on the 13th or 45th day after death. Phrased in Nepālī and signed by the 14 members of the “Library of the Golden Team” (sunaulo ṭim vācanālay) in Byāsi on 8th July 2003.

With the slogan “man has to die” (manis maranaśil prāṇi ho) the authors of the “apil” blame the performance of the ritual for increasing poverty.



Sāpāru procession by the Hari Bol (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) group on 13th August 2003.

The narainguthī of the group from Tālākva headed the procession for six bereaved families of their followers. In a first round the individual families are met at the threshold of their residences. Then the women's group singing devotional songs joins the procession at Tālākva for one full circumambulation, while the male group completes a second circuit before returning to the meeting place of the Hari Bol group.

while the Brothers In Christ (BIC) established a prayer room under the name of Hope Church in the quarter of Byāsi in 2002 and the Friends Church in Bharbacva in 2003.

The Brothers In Christ community claims to have more than 1000 baptized followers in Bhaktapur alone. But obviously only a few followers joined with their entire families, and were thus able to effectively cut their traditional ties, represented by the bonds of lineage and the funeral associations. The new Christian community promises truly baptized followers a proper burial at the ground provided by a follower on his plot in the village of Gundu, a few kilometres southwest of Bhaktapur. No more than three people were buried there in 2003.

Similar to the Christian sects, new religious reform movements have reached Bhaktapur from India since the early eighties. Although

they can only claim to have attracted a much smaller community than the Christians, they perform processions which allow the public to take notice of them.

The binding basis of the reform movements is the propagation of non-violence, Skt. *ahimsā*. “Non-harming” or “non-injury” indeed ranks among the foremost ethical codes of Hinduism, for it expresses the sacredness of life. “Non-harming” is in turn the basis for a strict vegetarianism that also excludes onions, garlic and eggs from the diet.

Since all of the important annual urban rituals as well as death and ancestor rituals prescribe blood sacrifices, the followers of the reform movements are faced with problems to varying extents. The followers of the “International Society for Krishna Consciousness”, locally known under the name “Hari Bol”, are strict vegetarians, but they do



Sāpāru procession by the Hari Bol group on 22nd August 2002.

The nārāinguthī of the Hari Bol group from Tālākva on its way to meet the bereaved families of their followers along the processional path.

Clad in white dhoti or lungi with the portrait of their revered leader Kabirām on their t-shirts, young men lead the procession with their kirtan group, singing devotional songs. Rām Kṛṣṇa Prajāpati (left) came for this occasion from the headquarters of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness from Mayapur in Bengal.

not reject the rituals of Newar society. Belonging predominantly to occupational sub-castes such as farmers and potters, they have developed a skill for reconciling the existing rituals with *ahimsā*. In principle, all rituals are performed without blood offerings. No flesh is mixed into the *piṇḍa* in their death rituals, and no cooked meat is offered to the Jugi who collects the share of food dedicated to the deceased or the ancestors.

Few followers have been radical in breaking the ties with their lineage and their funeral association. In such cases the newly formed *nārāinguthī* offers help in the process of cremation. The decisive change is reflected by the presence of a *kīrtan* group, which performs choral singing interspersed with chanting the names of deities such as Hari, Kṛṣṇa and others to the sounds of drums, cymbals and harmonium.

Another *vaiṣṇava* sect, the “Krishna Bhakti” movement, was established in Nepal by one Kabirām as early as 1927 AD, with reference to Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhū, the founder of the *vaiṣṇava* sect, born in 1485 in Nadia, Bengal. Rājmaya Prajāpati from the potters’ caste in Tālākva was instrumental in establishing a branch of Hari Bol in Bhaktapur in 1981 AD. Since that time more than 400 people, the majority from sub-castes of farmers and potters, have joined the sect.

On the occasion of *Gāijātrā* in August, when all those who had died within the preceding twelve months are dismissed by the urban community in a collective procession, the Hari Bol group offers a slightly “modernized” alternative. The otherwise compulsory symbolic cow which is fabricated from a basket or a skeleton of bamboo is no longer mandatory. Instead, the deceased

is simply identified by a large picture that is paraded on a long stick. First, the *kīrtan* group from Tālākva embarks on a round and deviates from the processional path to meet those bereaved groups who accompany the picture of their deceased. Once all those who had earlier signalled their wish to join have been met, the *kīrtan* group of Tālākva joins the collective funeral procession. All indications of the playful and satiric character of the procession are replaced with expressions of devotion to Kṛṣṇa. The *kīrtan* group is led by young men in a *dhoti*, and all of them wear t-shirts with a portrait of their beloved founder, Kabirām. A few of them come for this occasion from Mayapur in Bengal, the headquarters of the Kṛṣṇa Bhakti movement. Large banners saying “Hare Kṛṣṇa, hare Kṛṣṇa – Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa, hare, hare, hare – hare Rām, hare Rām – Rām, Rām, hare hare” are carried at the head of the procession. A smaller poster carried on 23rd August 2002 in memory of Indra Kumārī Śarmā from Cvāchē said:

bha pu bhaḥ puḥ coche ṭola basne janma miti 1984 sālāmā janma bhayako svargīya miti 2058 sālā barṣa 12/6 gate mā īndra kumārī sarmā barṣa 75 ko coche ṭola harināma ko prabhāvale samasta piṭṛ udhāra hos (parikramā) (hari bola) nāmai japdā mīldacha gati (jaya rādhe) nārāyaṇa.

“Living in the quarter of Coche in Bhaktapur and born in the year 1984 [BS] gone to heaven (*svarga*) in 2058 on the 6th day of the 12th month [21st March 2002 AD] Īndra Kumārī Śarmā at the age of 75 of the quarter of Coche by the power of the name of Hari may all ancestors (*piṭṛ*) be lifted up! (Procession) (*hari bola*) by reciting the name alone one will achieve liberation (*gati*). (Hail Rādha) Nārāyaṇa.”

While the Kṛṣṇa Bhakti movement tends to incorporate and transform existing rituals, the Om Śānti sect outrightly rejects rituals of any kind. Collective meditation sessions (fol-

lowing the principles of *rājyoga*) alone are believed to reach the ultimate aim, “correct consciousness” (*cetanā*). Regular congregation is supposed to establish a new sense of community that does not need rituals to renew any links to the lineage or the ancestors, or to place oneself in time and space.

In 1990 this sect established a place for collective meditation and instruction in Bhaktapur, the Prajāpīṭha Iśvarīya Brahmakumārī Viśvavidyālaya at the eastern periphery of Bhaktapur. Almost three-hundred followers join in an annual procession (*śantijātrā*) along the main road. In February 2003 some 67 women joined the procession carrying sacred water vases (*kalaśa*) on their heads while constantly chanting “*om śānti*”.

In theory, the followers of this sect not only have to practice *ahimsā*, they also have to avoid death rituals and other life-cycle rituals. In reality, few individuals and very few families have left their lineage in order to become fully devoted to the nameless god, *bhagavān*. Most members reconcile their devotion with the need to meet the expectations of society in performing the necessary life-cycle rituals. A total break-up would have far-reaching consequences as only the daughters of other followers would qualify as a potential bride. Cutting across the strict boundaries of sub-castes, hitherto unknown matrimonial alliances would give birth to a new sub-caste.

The process of the individualization of death

It was mentioned earlier that the dead were and still are offered a tiny plot, a “field”, as it were. The soil was to make sure that there was enough food to last forever. The plot is offered on the 7th day after death and never touched again. The name of the deceased to whom such a plot has been dedicated is remembered for three generations. For older plots the name is no more remembered and

thus a general term like *ajimā* (“grandmother”) is used.

The deceased began to attain a “face” and be named slightly less than two generations ago, when portrait photographs became fashionable. Made in local studios in front of fancy settings that served as a backdrop, these photographs adorned the reception rooms on first floor level. These photographs used to be attached to the cow structures or the palanquins bearing the clay bulls on the occasion of *Sāpāru*, the collective dismissal of all the deceased on the day after full moon in August.

More recent is the custom of publishing a photograph of the deceased in an expression of bereavement. Often this is organized by the institution to which the deceased was affiliated, and a few days later the newspaper publishes a photograph of prominent visitors paying their condolences. Only very recently have such public announcements reached the community of farmers of Bhaktapur. For example, the demise of Rām Bāsukala (whose cremation is documented in a previous chapter) was announced in the *Kathmandu Post*. His second son and one of his sons-in-law work in the Gulf. Obviously the family felt obliged to demonstrate a new economic status. The same picture, supported by a lotus flower, graced a souvenir that was handed out on the occasion of *Sāpāru* on 31st August 2004 in memory (*lumantī*) of the deceased. Rām Bāsukala was presented as the one who has reached heaven (*svarga*). Titled “Rāmāyaṇa”, the brochure suggests the renowned story or the life of Lord Rāma. The following eight pages, however, are dedicated to the life of Rām Bāsukala and address in ever new variations the sorrow and tears suffered by the bereaved ones.

The first of seven poems – a *doha* which normally will be sung while walking – is dedicated to Rām Bāsukala’s life, condensed into 16 lines. His marriage with Ratna Māyā

is mentioned and the birth of two sons and four daughters. A pious man is presented:

“Always keeping *dharma* and *karma* in mind/ after [visiting] Palāñcok Bhagavatī he has been/ visiting Kāsāghāṭ every day throughout one year/ [to the effect] that all kinds of diseases vanished”.

*dharma karmay matī tayā
pālañcoka bhagavatī th kājhāyā
kāśāghāṭa dachī tāka nhi nhī jhāyā
roga phukkā tākā diyā.*

The poem ends with the statement that Rām’s death, his journey into heaven (*svargavāsa*) on 21st October 2003 made the family cry. In Nevārī the verb *khvaygu* for “crying” remains rather unspecific in this context. It denotes weeping as well as ritual wailing. To our surprise, none of those who accompanied the ensemble was aware of the text of the song. It was said that the visual experience of that day was so overwhelming that grasping the meaning of words was beyond the capacity of an individual.

The subsequent poems are dedicated to Gaṇeśa, by whom the bereaved seek refuge, and Nityanātha. Although in a Buddhist context the latter is the “eternal protector”, we must assume that Nṛtyanātha, the Lord of Dance and Music is being addressed. A few times, the lines address the picture (*kipāḥ*) or the face (*khvaḥ*) of the deceased, which arouses “tears of love” in those who look at it. The loss is experienced as something beyond one’s wildest dreams.

The booklet with the poems was handed out to eight granddaughters of the deceased, who had specially learnt to dance and sing over a period of six weeks. To this end a teacher was hired along with musicians playing harmonium, violin and tabla. A cart had to be rented and a sound technician engaged with his amplifier and speakers. In this spe-

cific case a professional event manager, a Karmācārya from Bālākhu, was engaged. He provided the technical equipment, the musicians, the phrasing of the songs and finally a video coverage. A considerable sum of around 40,000 rupees was spent in preparing this prestigious performance. In addition, food was made for the more than 300 guests in a hall rented for the purpose.

The entire performance was to last for 14 hours. The decoration of the cart, however, seems to have transcended the abilities of the family to coordinate the actors. It started six hours late, the girls only danced on nine prominent squares along the processional route, and late in the night nobody joined the feast except the family members.

The performance during the procession demonstrates a considerable shift of performative actions during *Gāijātrā*. Until the early nineties, scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and a variety of dances or humorous sketches were performed on the seven days following the collective procession. The vital centres of the urban quarters served as the stages. One group might cover up to five such stages in one night. For almost ten years now there have been no more street theatre groups of this kind. Performances are now exclusively produced along the single, linear processional route. For one week not only five deities are paraded along this route, but thousands of women and girls literally march along the circumambulatory route, arranged in rows of two, with a *sukunḍā* lamp directed outwards and incense sticks inwards. Occasionally men and boys are kept between the two rows, with lights on their heads and their shoulders and hands in a gesture of devotion. Each evening hosts of increasingly beautiful women and increasingly devout men from precisely defined quarters of the town appear along the route which almost serves as a promenade demonstrating the mobilization of the participants.

However disappointingly the presentation of the above-mentioned presentation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of a recently deceased individual ended, the family tried hard to present their situation, the loss of a devout man who never played an important role in the farming community. The performative presentation of the poems was certainly meant to provide an individuality to the deceased, allowing him to rise above the otherwise anonymous cows, stylised according to the aspirations of the chief mourner. No doubt, the individuation of a deceased heralds the advent of hitherto unknown funerary rituals which mirror growing globalisation: memory (*lumantī*), memorial services and finally memorials will replace the pervasive silence of a society that rarely remembers a forefather beyond the great-grandfather, as a clan normally does not reach beyond three generations.

The collective dismissal of all the deceased on the occasion of *Sāpāru* presented a variety of changes in 2004. While the year before a group of activists from the farming community phrased an “appeal” not to accept invitations to feasts involved in death rituals, other sub-castes issued printed individual invitations to join the circumambulatory procession (*nagara parikrāma*) in the morning at seven and the concluding feast in the evening at seven. In the case of a respected teacher, Gajendra Baidya, the invitation was signed not by the chief mourner but by the widow.

The Uncertainty of Death

It is by rituals that people try to find a hold in life, but they grant neither security nor certainty, only the suggestion of both. Rituals do not really help to overcome uncertainties about the meanings of death and afterlife, rather they are expressions of such uncertainties.

In the legal texts and in popular notions there is also some uncertainty about who the offerings and sacrifices apply to or what meaning they have. It is sometimes stated that the food is intended for the Brahmins themselves, but elsewhere that latter represent the forefathers or ancestors. The *pinḍas* are sometimes considered to be provisions for the journey of the dead, and sometimes as part of his body in the next world. The uncertainty about the status of the survivors also involves the uncertainty about the future of the deceased: will he or she get to heaven, has he or she earned it?

Uncertainty about the inherent meanings of the rituals of death and the ancestors (cf. Michaels 2004b) does not mean that the people involved are unable to gain clarity. Rather, rituals are expressions of the fact that there can be no clarity. Life-cycle transition rituals are, on the one hand, always meaningful, for they have reasons and an obligatory formal resolution (*samkalpa*) that makes the ritual effective and confirms its intention in clear words. On the other hand, ritual acts are meaningless (cf. Michaels 2005b) and rigid because something else could also and often is done: sequences of actions from other rituals are forever being substituted. It is precisely this that creates the special dynamics of rituals and the constant alteration of ritual procedure. It is this aspect of constant dynamic change which helps to revise what seems to be one of the firmest aspects of ritual theory: the formality of rituals. Given the evidence from our material, rituals now no longer appear to be strict, stereotypical events, but to be action modules which can be substituted, altered, shifted, postponed, interpolated, omitted, mixed, duplicated, or invented and re-invented.

Although this indicates an astonishing continuity in death rituals from the Vedic Epoch to the present, a significant change of meaning has also taken place. While in the

Vedic-oriented death ritual, the focus is on the path to the ancestors and reaching heaven or immortality, ever since the Ascetic Epoch (500 BC - 200 BC) the idea of repeated re-incarnation has emerged, along with the fear of a return of the dead and of hell in popular religious and Puranic concepts of afterlife. Whether the dead person goes to an intermediate realm or is reborn immediately after death, whether he or she becomes an ancestor or a de-individualized soul-body, whether life in this world affects life after death or whether the last thoughts at the moment of death do so – all these considerations and differing ideas are anything but harmonized. Thus, in the Brahmanical-Sanskritic death ritual, various conceptions of the afterlife are mixed together, leaving the path of the dead person as that which it must be: an uncertain path.

Indeed, death in Hinduism is not the end of life, but rather a change from one form of existence to another. A spiritual body remains. Only when it is completely “de-individualized”, when it is identical with the Absolute, is it really “dead” – which is to say without return. In Upanishadic and Vedantic terminology, mortality is *Ātman*-lessness, when the *ātman* (the individual soul) is identical with the *brahman* (the All or Absolute); this forms another counter-world to life. Death leads to rebirth. Anything that changes, that alters is mortal. *Kāla* means both “time” and “death” in Sanskrit. Thus death also leads to re-death, but not to an end to life, for the spiritual body is always seeking new existences.

The pyre burns away the impurity of the mundane body, as many people believe, carrying the spiritual body to heaven. The death priest “eats up” the impurity of the dead. But seen from a salvational point of view, the dead always remain in the realm of mortality through the possibility of rebirth, even as demigods (*viśvedevāḥ*). Through their life itself, they have accumulated death-bringing



Dogs sleeping on a cremation platform along the Bāgmatī river in Deopatan, Nepal. Photo February 1981

forces. The older they were, the more they had accumulated. When one is still young, i.e. uninitiated, there is only a need for a few rituals. Only timelessness or immutability is eternal, and the preferred means to achieve these are ritual and spiritual identifications with what is not subject to change and therefore to time.

These notions of salvation have many effects on the cult of death: it has many variants, corresponding to the various forms of Hindu religiosity. But, on the whole, it is not surprising that Brahmanical-Sanskritic Hindu religion has hardly any places of death worship, no photos, tombstones, death masks, or the like. Such individual worship of the dead implies a debasement of the deceased. Therefore, in Hindu death ritual, the individual becomes the sacrifice, which always was and does not die, becomes the de-individualized ancestor through the father-son identification, as the ascetic is himself the sacrifice and therefore immortal. Death – in the extreme Brahmanical view – is not fate, but rather inability, error in ritual or the incapacity to take the ascetic path and thus achieve immortality in one's lifetime.