

Part I

BHAKTAPUR
The City and its Ritual Specialists



The Urban Realm

Historical Development

It is not known where the settlement pattern of the Newars with its specifically urban life-style originated. When they arrived in the Kathmandu Valley (in inscriptions often named Nepāla-Manḍala) more than two millennia ago, they must have brought a tradition of living in clusters. Their settlements developed along narrow lanes and around courtyards in such a way that there was hardly any space left for kitchen gardens. The fields were not kept behind the three-storeyed houses with their pitched tile roofs, but beyond the architectural clusters. The opposition between an essentially narrow and dark living space and the open continuum of the landscape of fields and bamboo groves could not be more striking.

We do not know how large the settlements were in the early era (4th to 9th century), but they must have had an urban character, with palaces and monasteries, and with brick makers and carpenters who produced veneer bricks, elaborate door-frames, wells and fountains – all those architectural elements that were further developed in the 17th and 18th centuries before new ideas imported from India radically changed the notions regarding space and place.

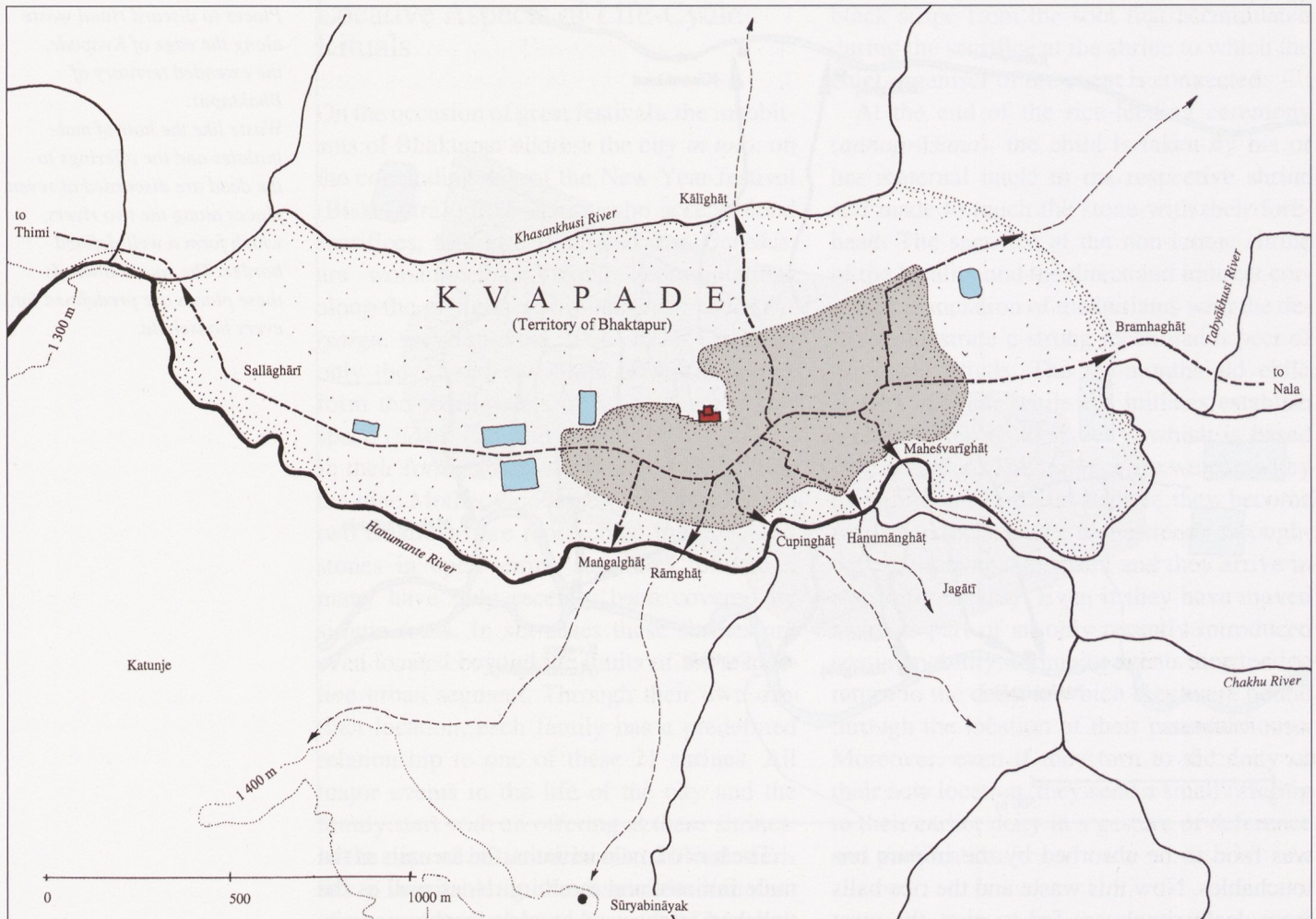
The royal cities of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur did not exist at that early period but developed gradually by incorporating a couple of village-like clusters and thus forming a larger entity (see also Gutschow 1982 and Gutschow and Michaels 2005: 15-23). The cluster units somehow survived as quarters, which are invariably grouped around squares, with shrines and temples housing the non-iconic forms of the neighbourhood deities that maintain the life and well-being of those who offer blood sacrifices.

The impulse to settle in clusters guided the Newars even at the trading stations that had developed along the main routes across the country since the advent of the unifying Śāha dynasty at the end of the 18th century. If only six houses had to be built to shelter a small community, a road would emerge twenty feet wide, with three houses lined up on either side. The basic unit of an urban cluster was replicated regardless of the specific landscape and climate. And no unit was without a shrine dedicated to Gaṇeśa.

Kvapade: The Territory Defined by Rivers

Transcending the narrow and until the early 1970s visible and experienceable limits of the urban cluster, the notion persisted of a *deśa*, a territory in between rivers. For Bhaktapur, this is Kvapade, the territory confined between the Hanumante River to the south and the Kasankhusi River to the north. In the south the Tabyākhusi River forms a confluence, an auspicious “*triveṇī*”, together with the Chalkhu River before forming the river Hanumante. From the confluence, the Tabyākhusi turns north but leaves a 700 metres-wide gap to the Kasankhusi. This area remains without a topographically defined border.

Covering the best part of two square kilometres, Kvapade is the realm which male initiates are not supposed to leave. Brahmin as well as Buddhist priests confirm that the territory of Kvapade represents a realm with the quality of interiority and of belonging to the city proper. Transcending the rivers or following the roads to the east would mean that for years the initiated boys would be obliged to travel and pursue their studies at Varanasi, the famous centre of learning. At the time of initiation (*Vratibandha* or *Kaytāpūjā*) the rivers mark a meaningful border between the fa-



Kvapade, the defined territory of Bhaktapur, which male initiates may not leave on their ritual journey.

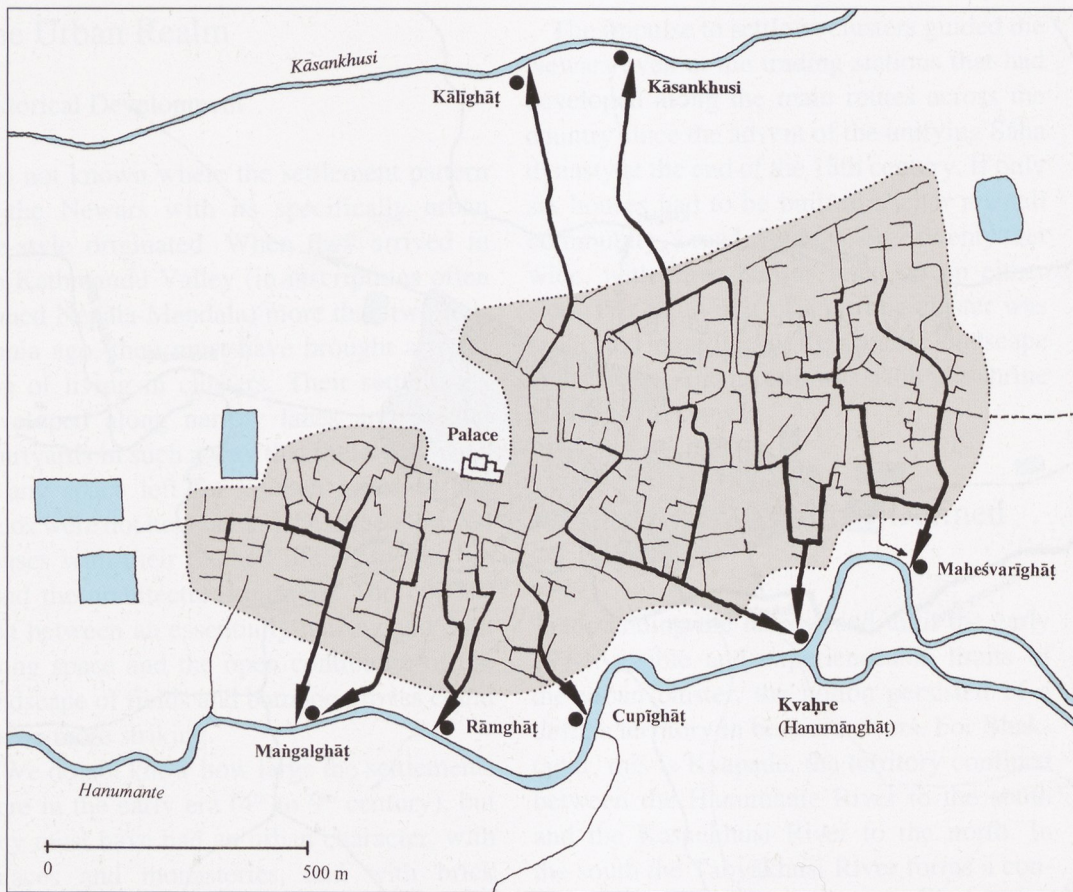
The two rivers in the north (Kasankhusi) and the south (Hanumante) form natural borders, while the edge of the territory to the east remains vague.

miliar, safe and pure territory and a limitless continuum that even transcends the confines of the Valley as part of the mythical rose apple continent (*jambūdvīpa*).

Five roads lead down a slope towards the Hanumante River (Maṅgalghāt, Rāmghāt, Cupinghāt, Hanumānghāt and Maheśvarighāt) in the south and one to Kālighāt at the Kasankhusi. These are six of those seven places designated for discarding ritual waste that is considered impure. In a widely practiced ritual found in settlements all over the world, impurities are discarded beyond a marked border that defines an interior. This notion does not come into conflict with the neighbouring entity, which in itself can be an interior.

Spatial Purity

Ritual waste is either absorbed by the threshold stone, the *pikhālākhu* in front of the house, or by the stone set at road crossings, the *chvāsah*. Transcending the scale of the quarter, the next larger spatial entity is the broader territory referred to as Kvapade. The rice balls (*piṇḍa*) produced in the context of death rituals (*śrāddha*) and dedicated to the ancestors have to be discarded at the designated places. The leftovers from household rituals such as *mhāpūjā* in autumn are discarded in such huge quantities that the untouchables come to collect the *mutumāri*, small cones of steamed rice flour. Until a generation ago, this



Places to discard ritual waste along the edge of Kvasade, the extended territory of Bhaktapur. Waste like the hair of male initiates and the offerings to the dead are discarded at seven places along the two rivers, which form a well-defined border. The routes towards these places are predefined for every household.

was food to be absorbed by the impure un-touchables. Now this waste and the rice balls from death rituals are fed to pigs, the meat of which finds growing acceptance. Sold on the shelves of anonymous supermarkets, it is consumed by the urban elite and by expatriates. The sods of grass that formed the hearth to cook food for the deceased on the seventh day are likewise discarded at the designated stones. In addition, all those offerings such as the feast offered to the souls of the deceased on the seventh day and the offering to the funeral priest on the tenth day are discarded at these places because members of the once absorbing purity specialists, such as the Jugi and Bhā, stopped absorbing such highly polluted offerings in the 1990s.

The hair of male initiates, the toenails of the male initiates and the Ihi girls, as well as the unbaked bricks used by girls for the sun worship after they are released from their twelve-day long seclusion (Bārhā tayegu), are also discarded at the seven designated places. The rivers absorb all these impurities.

Not all leftovers are considered impure. The unbaked bricks used to frame the pit of the sacred fire (*homa*) that forms the centre of the Ihi ritual are put aside. A carefully chosen relative will have the privilege of using the bricks for the foundations of a new house. The potential mothers addressed in the Ihi ritual obviously have imbued the bricks with a quality that ensures well-being and procreativity in a new house.

Locative Aspects of Life-Cycle Rituals

On the occasion of great festivals, the inhabitants of Bhaktapur address the city *in toto*: on the concluding day of the New Year festival (Bisketjātrā) all 35 deities who accept blood sacrifices, Mātrkās, Bhairavas and Gaṇeśas, are worshipped as iconic representations along the processional route (*dyah svagā bijyaigu*, see Gutschow 1996: 297). Of these, only the 21 old and more powerful deities form the focal points of urban segments of space (*ilākā*, Gutschow/Michaels 2005: 22). In their form as non-iconic, chthonic deities, the nine Mother Goddesses, ten Gaṇeśas and two Bhairavas are represented by unworked stones in open shrine structures, of which many have only recently been covered by simple roofs. In six cases these shrines are even located beyond the limits of the respective urban segment. Through their own distinct location, each family has a predefined relationship to one of these 21 shrines. All major events in the life of the city and the family start with an offering at these shrines. In the case of initiation rituals, a blood sacrifice is inevitable. In the case of the initiation of a boy of farmer status, the second loincloth is tied around the boy's body by the maternal uncle within the shrine's premises while the attending assistant priest, the Jyāpu Ācāju, graces the boy's hands and fixes unnamed deities (*pratimā*) in the shape thin gold and silver platelets onto the deity's representation in stone.

The soot that accumulates during the sacrifice on an inverted earthen cup is used for the black stroke placed on the forehead of lineage members, wife-takers and wife-givers before joining the ensuing feast, which confirms the community of which the initiate is now a member. Likewise, after the ritual of "offering the virgin" (*kanyādāna*), all Ihi girls and their mothers and fathers receive a

black stripe from the soot that accumulated during the sacrifice at the shrine to which the chief organiser of the event is connected.

At the end of the rice-feeding ceremony (*annaprāśana*), the child is taken by his or her maternal uncle to the respective shrine and made to touch the stone with their forehead. The sacrifice at the non-iconic shrine of the locality and the direct and indirect corporeal association of the initiates with the deity demonstrate a strong locational aspect of life-cycle rituals. The six-months-old child arrives in space while the initiates establish a relationship to their deity, which is based on interaction. The initiates are welcomed by their lineage as social beings; they become part of a social body that extends throughout a certain spatial realm and they arrive in a specific locality. Even if they have moved away as part of an only recently introduced spatial mobility, for major events they tend to return to the deity to which they were bound through the location of their parental house. Moreover, even if they turn to the deity of their new location, they send a small offering to their earlier deity in a gesture of deference and pacification.

Social Topography

The traditions of the *śāstras* are all based on a more or less centralised concept of spatial ordering. The palace occupies the centre, the Brahmins would settle near the palace, and the impure sub-castes on the periphery or even beyond. Such traditions have often been misinterpreted as mandatory prescriptions for the planning and building of cities. As guidelines they did, however, influence a general sense of order. As Bhaktapur is a linear city that has developed along a main road as its backbone, notions of centre and periphery prevail along a single ritual axis, starting from the palace, which itself occupies a peripheral location

upon a ridge. Up until the 19th century, the city only developed on the slope extending down to the Hanumante River as the southern edge of the territory of Kvapade. The Rājopādhyāya Brahmins of Bhaktapur, who can trace their origins to the early 16th century, occupy a few courtyards opposite the palace, where their esoteric shrine, the *āgāchē*, is also located. Only two hundred years later branches of the lineage were either expelled from the centre, or moved of their own accord to escape the crampedness of the original location.

The other end of the ritual axis is marked by the main cremation place across the river. In obvious contrast to the notion of the territory of Kvapade being pure, the quarter of some 80 untouchable Pvaḥ families is not found across the river but on the river bank, in a dense cluster of originally one-storeyed houses with thatched roofs just beyond and below the urban fabric of three-storeyed brick houses. Even the cremation grounds of the marginally pure and impure sub-castes are found on the riverbank. The periphery is also the realm of the impure butchers (Gutschow/Michaels 2005: 59), while the 56 households of barbers and even the 44 households of Jugi in their capacity as purity specialists do not form clusters but have set out their dwellings in a scattered fashion.

The example of oil-pressers and potters – as presented in the following chapters – illustrates how almost every sub-caste, pure or marginally pure, contributes to the ritual universe of the community. Occupational sub-castes offer the products of their trade and are thus bound to the social and religious body of the city. Beyond serving the households with oil and fired earthenware, their aid in rituals makes them indispensable. The body of the Newar society indeed appears as a fabric, a closely-knit web. Occupational sub-castes with a large number of members, such as potters (Kumaḥ/Prajapati) and oil-pressers (Sāymi/

Mānandhar), settle in clusters – but these clusters do not carry the notion of impurity that leads to the feelings of stigmatisation found in the clusters of butchers and sweepers.

The Oil-Pressers (Mānandhar/Sāymi)

Being of marginally pure status, the oil-pressers form five distinct clusters, originally organised around traditional oil mills (*sah*), which were replaced in the late 1970s by mills operated by diesel motors. As Buddhists they call in a Vajrācārya priest for their sons' initiations and they join the Ihi ritual organised annually by the Paśubāhā in the quarter of Kvathādaḥ. Being Buddhists does not exclude their participation in the Indra-jātrā, a major festival at the end of the summer in September. Beyond the bounds of their religious designations, the entire population is involved in thanking Indra for the life-sustaining rains. The lord of the demons and enemy of Indra (and thus of the rains) is chased along the prescribed processional route on three successive days after full moon in September, headed at a safe distance by the Mānandhar who carry elaborate torches fed by the mustard oil from their mills. Representing the mills of the upper town (*thatusah*) of Tācāpaḥ and Kvathādaḥ, the lower town (*kvathusah*) of Tekhācva and Tapalāchē and the middle area (*dathusah*) of Gvaḥmādhī, the Mānandhar share the central role in this urban ritual. On other occasions, they are needed to tie Betāl, the naughty companion of Bhairava to the shaft of the ritual chariot with reeds, and they tie the ropes around the world tree, the *yaḥsi*, with which it is pulled on New Year's Eve.

Quite a few sub-castes tell stories that explain their low or justify their high status. The Mānandhar maintain that they had originally been a “high” caste, but after a cow was killed

Bhaktapur settlement patterns according to sub-caste:

Above

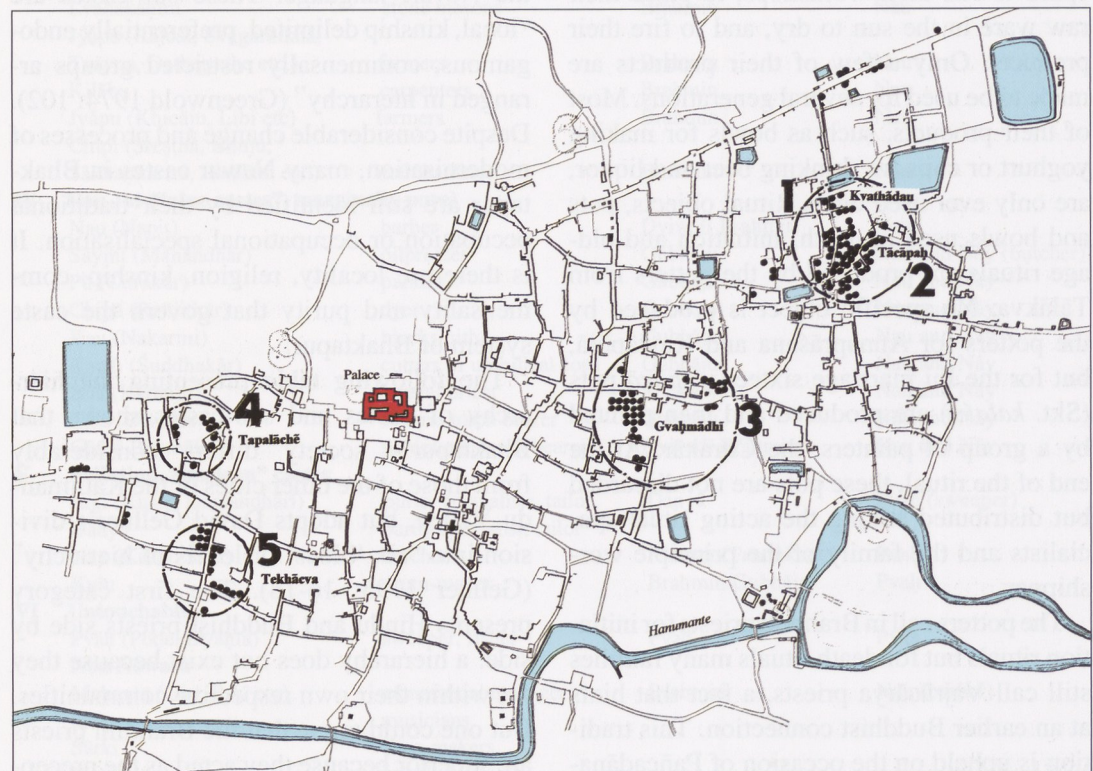
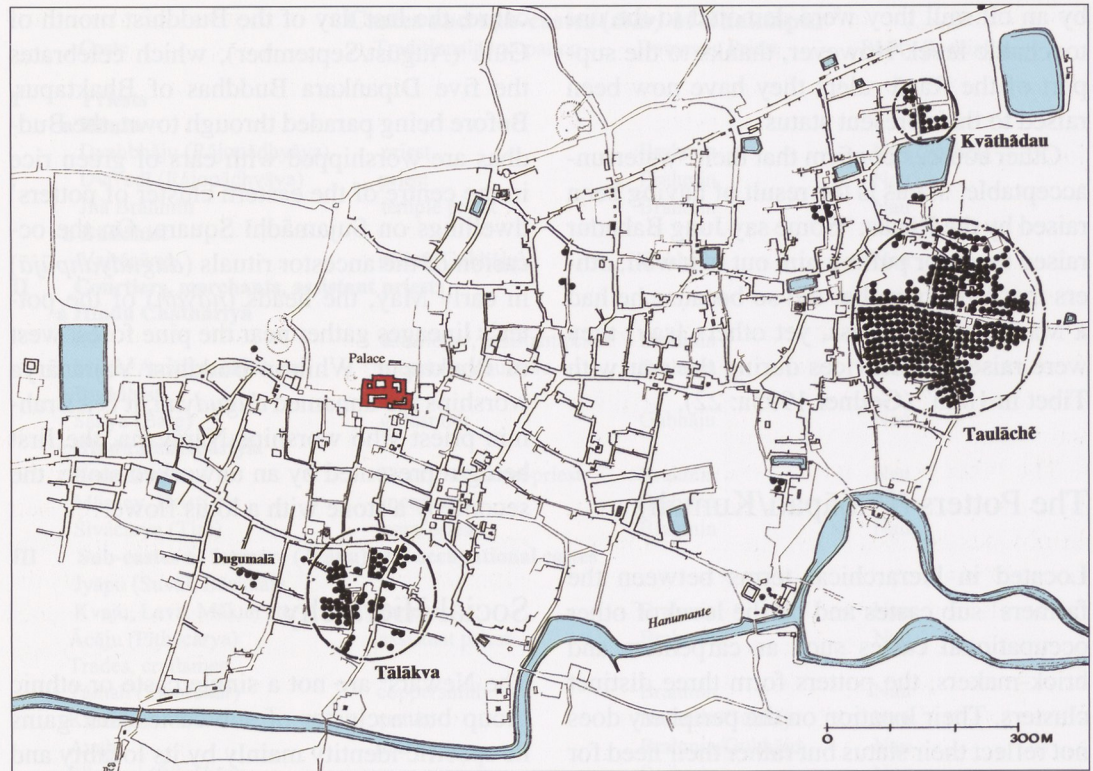
With 410 households, the potters (Nep. *Kumaḥ* or Nep. *Prajāpati*) form the largest sub-caste of the city's society. The largest group at *Taulāchē* dominates the eastern quarter of Bhaktapur, while some 60 households at *Tālākva* have settled together with farmers. A few scattered households at *Dugumalā*, *Khācā*, *Cvāchē* and *Kvathāḍau* already moved there generations ago. Brahmin priests are called for initiation rituals, while Buddhist *Bajrācārya* are sometimes preferred for death rituals.

Below

The oil-pressers (Nep. *Sāymi*, Nep. *Mānandhar*) are organized into five groups, which centre around former oil-mills (*saḥ*), which until the early 1970s worked with traditional techniques. As specialists, the oil-pressers are called on for rituals requiring ropes or reed to be bound, and on the occasion of *Indrajātrā* in September they lead the procession on three successive days with festive torches, fed with mustard oil from their own production.

For all life cycle rituals only Buddhist *Bajrācārya* priests are called on.

Mapped in 1974 on the basis of a city-wide household survey



by an oil mill they were demoted to the un-touchable level. However, thanks to the support of the Rāṇā rulers they have now been raised to their present status.

Other sources confirm that their ‘water-unacceptable’ status is the result of having been raised by the Rāṇās: “Some say Jung Bahadur raised them for pulling him out of a well, others that Bir Shumsher did so because he had a Mānandhar mistress, yet others [say] they were raised for services during the war with Tibet in 1855” (Gellner 1995a: 22).

The Potters (Prajāpati/Kumaḥ)

Located in hierarchical terms between the farmers’ sub castes and on the level of other occupational castes such as carpenters and brick-makers, the potters form three distinct clusters. Their location on the periphery does not reflect their status but rather their need for space to run their workshops, to place their raw ware in the sun to dry, and to fire their products. Only a few of their products are made to be used for several generations. Most of their products, such as bowls for making yoghurt or cups for drinking beer and liquor, are only ever used once. Ritual objects, pots and bowls used in death, initiation and old-age rituals are produced by the potters from Tālākva. No specific object is produced by the potters for Annaprāśana and Kaytāpūjā, but for the Ihi marriage sixteen *gapacā* pots (Skt. *kalaśa*) are produced and then painted by a group of painters, the Citrakār. At the end of the ritual, these pots are not discarded but distributed among the acting ritual specialists and the family of the principle worshipper.

The potters call in Brahmin priests for initiation rituals but for death rituals many families still call Vajrācārya priests, a fact that hints at an earlier Buddhist connection. This tradition is upheld on the occasion of Pañcadāna-

caḥre, the last day of the Buddhist month of Gūlā (August/September), which celebrates the five Dipaṅkara Buddhas of Bhaktapur. Before being paraded through town, the Buddhas are worshipped with ears of green rice in the centre of the eastern cluster of potters’ dwellings on Sujamādhī Square. On the occasion of the ancestor rituals (*dugudyaḥpūjā*) in early May, the heads (*nāyaha*) of the potter’s lineages gather near the pine forest west of Bhaktapur. While a Buddhist Vajrācārya worships the unnamed *dugudyaḥ*, it is a Brahmin priest who worships Nārāyaṇa, the first being represented by an unworked stone, the second by a stone with a lotus flower.

Social Hierarchy

The Newars⁸ are not a single caste or ethnic group but a cluster of sub-castes that gains its specific identity mainly by its locality and the Nevārī language. These sub-castes are “local, kinship delimited, preferentially endogamous, commensally restricted groups arranged in hierarchy” (Greenwold 1974: 102). Despite considerable change and processes of modernisation, many Newar castes in Bhaktapur are still identified by their traditional occupation or occupational specialisation. It is therefore locality, religion, kinship, commensality and purity that govern the caste system of Bhaktapur.

The following table presenting the hierarchy of castes and sub-castes shows that Bhaktapur’s society differs considerably from those of the other cities of the Kathmandu Valley, but adopts David Gellner’s division into “six ‘blocs’ or levels of hierarchy” (Gellner 1995: 16-18). The first category presents Hindu and Buddhist priests side by side: a hierarchy does not exist because they act within their own respective communities. But one could argue that the Brahmin priests are superior because they acted as the precep-

⁸ On the Newar caste system see Levi vol. I 1905:230-48, Chattopadhyay 1980 (1923), Nepali 1965:146-97, Rosser 1966:68-139, Greenwold 1974, Gutschow/Kölver 1975, Toffin 1984 and 2007, Löwdin 1985, Pradhan 1986: 14-35, Gellner 1992, Levy 1990.

Castes and sub-castes (<i>thar</i>) of Bhaktapur⁹			
Caste	Traditional Occupation	Domestic Priest	Purity Specialist
I Priests			
a Hindu			
Dyaḥbhāju (Rājopādhyāya)	priest	Brahmin	Nau (barber)
Dvivedī (Rājopādhyāya)	priest	Brahmin	Nau
Jhā Brahmin	temple priest	Brahmin	Nau
b Buddhist			
Vajracārya	priest (Gubhāju)	Gubhāju	Nau
II Courtiers, merchants, assistant priests			
a Hindu Chathariyā			
Joṣī	astrologer, assistant priest	Brahmin	Nau
Malla, Amātya, Hādā etc.	ministers, courtiers	Brahmin	Nau
b Buddhist			
Śākya (Bare)	goldsmith	Gubhāju	Nau
c Hindu Pañthariyā			
Karmācārya	Tantric assistant-priest	Brahmin	Nau
Māskey, Dristī etc	merchants	Brahmin	Nau
Śivācārya (Tini)	para-priest	Brahmin	Nau
III Sub-castes of formers (Jyāpu) and occupational castes			
Jyāpu (Suvāl, Bāsukala, Kvaḷu, Lava, Mākaḥ etc.)	farmers	Brahmin	Nau
Ācāju (Pīṭhācārya)	assistant priest	Brahmin	Nau
Trades, craftsmen			
Tāmaḥ (Tāmraḥ)	coppersmith	Brahmin	Nau
Kumaḥ	potter	Brahmin/Gubhāju	Nau
Avaḥ	mason	Brahmin/Gubhāju	Nau
Sikaḥmi (Śilpakār)	carpenter	Brahmin	Nau
Lvaḥkaḥmi	stone masons	Brahmin	Nau
Jyāpu (Rājcal, Svāgamikhā, Tvāyna, Datheputhe etc.)	farmers	Brahmin	Nau
Kilābu	carpenters	Brahmin	Nau
Jyāpu (Khicāju, Libi etc)	farmers	Brahmin	Nau
Chīpi (Śreṣṭha, Bhuju, Śākhaḥkarmi, Pradhān etc.)	merchants	Brahmin	Nau
IV Nau Jāt ("nine castes", marginally pure)			
Nau (Nāpit)	barber	Dvivedī Brahmin	Nau
Sāymi (Mānāndhar)	oilpresser	Gubhāju	Nau and Nāy (butcher)
Pū (Citrakār)	painter	Gubhāju	Nau and Nāy
Chīpā (Rañjītkār)	dye	Gubhāju	Nau and Nāy
Kau (Nakarmi)	blacksmith	Gubhāju	Nau and Nāy
Kataḥ (Śuddhakār)	cutters of umbilical cord	Gubhāju	Nau and Nāy
Bhā (Kārāñjit)	funeral priest	Śivācārya	Nau and Nāy
Cālā (Divākar)	funeral torch bearer	Gubhāju	Nau and Nāy
Gāthā Banmālā	gardeners, mask bearer	Dvivedī Brahmin	Nau and Nāy
V Polluting, "unclean" castes			
Jugi (Kusle, Darśandhārī)	purity specialists, tailor	Danyā	Pvaḥ (sweeper)
Danyā	purity specialist, tailor		
Nāy (Kasāī, Śāhī)	butcher	Khusaḥ (Tandukar)	Pvaḥ
Kulu	drum-maker	Brahmin/Gubhāju	Pvaḥ
VI Untouchables			
Pvāḥ (Poḍe, Dyaḥla)	sweeper, fisher	Pvāḥ	Pvāḥ
Non Newars			
Mahanta (Girī, Purī etc)	monasterial managers	Brahmin	Nau (barber)
Gāine	musicians		
Śārki	shoe-makers		
Muslim	bangle makers		

⁹ Cf. Rosser 1966, Greenwold 1974: 103-04, Pradhan 1986, Gellner 1992: 44, Levy App. 2.

tors of the Malla Kings and only serve clean-castes, while a very small group of debased Brahmins, the Dvivedī Brahmins, and the Buddhist Vajrācārya priests serve marginally pure castes and, as the example of the drum-makers (Kulu) demonstrates, even impure castes. The Dvivedī Brahmins are also called Lakhe Brahmins although they maintain their original designation as Rājopādhyāya.

The Brahmin priests serve all families of high status (Chatharīya and Pañtharīya), all of them former courtiers, merchants and ritual specialists, while the Vajrācārya serve goldsmiths (Śākya) who in the table are placed at the bottom of the Pañtharīya, although they should be seen as in a parallel location.

As “fallen” Brahmins (Levy 1990: 358), the Śivācārya mark the border between “high” and “middle” in the social hierarchy. They act as priests on the tenth day after death (Gutschow and Michaels 2005: 109) to purify the mourning family and the house, and in Ihi rituals they empower the fruits of the wood-apple tree (*belpūjā*). Śivācārya, moreover, have a special role inasmuch as they serve as family priests to the marginally pure Kārāñjit, whose members have their own de-contaminating function as funeral priests.

Within the sub-castes of Jyāpu (farmer) and occupational groups, the notion of hierarchy varies according to the perspective of each of these sub-castes. The next lower group, the disparagingly termed Chipi, marks, however, the border between clean and “borderline clean status”. Offspring of inter-caste marriages often hide their origins behind names that veil them. Only when the western researcher comes is the hidden story behind these names revealed, while people of Bhaktapur are only really concerned when it is a question of their daughters marrying a Chipi. Already a girl from the higher levels of Jyāpu such as Suvāl or Bāsukala marrying a member of an occupational caste poses a problem. Even if the lineage members agree to such a

liaison, the death association (*siguthī*) usually accepts neither the wife of their member nor their children. The *siguthīs* of Jyāpu serve in fact as the guardians of status. The judgement of their elders confirms who is of their status and who is “low” and thus unacceptable. Inter-caste marriages do not, however, have any impact on the ritual for initiating boys, because dissenting branches of the lineage would already have split on the occasion of marriage. But they may have consequences for the Ihi ritual, as could be seen in one particular case. A Buddhist Śākya who had married a non-Newar girl preferred to join the Ihi ritual under the guidance of a Brahmin. Obviously he was avoiding taking part in the corresponding Buddhist ritual.

Beyond the middle section with contested hierarchies follow the “nine castes” (*nau jāt*), which are of “borderline clean status”, as Robert Levy says (1990: 358). These are served in rituals by Dvivedī Brahmins or by Buddhist Vajrācārya priests. The barbers mark the border, because they serve all those who are “higher” while butcher women have to serve those who are “lower”. The question, why Buddhist priests serve the *nau jāt* cannot be answered. However, it seems instructive that the members of these “nine castes” are either purity specialists, or belong to occupational groups such as oil-pressers, dyers or blacksmiths, whose activity is considered to be “unclean”.

Girls from all nine castes undergo the Ihi marriage in either a Hindu or Buddhist framework. The daughters of the Gāthā, however, only join the ritual on the second day because their joining the feast on the first day is considered pollutant. It is unclear what specific quality it is that excludes them from full participation. Is it the fact that they will act as the wives of those who perform as the Navadurgā deities, the “living” gods who grace the city with their presence? Their sons are usually initiated by the eldest of the lineage.

Referring to “marginal groups” similar to the nine castes on the edge of the Valley and in neighbouring towns, Gerard Toffin (1984: 19-20) has argued that these are “relatively poorly assimilated to the Newars”. Asking whether “these groups represent an old, strictly Newar tribal substratum that was gradually pushed back towards the edges of the Valley [and to the edges of society, we should add] and in which it should be possible to discover the traces of a putative ‘primitive’ social organisation”, Toffin touches on issues that have also been discussed by Gellner (1995a: 32) but that remain unsolved.

Below the nine castes follow sub-castes whose touch does not require purification by those who consider themselves “higher”. These are butchers (Nāy) and purity specialists (Jugi) who as musicians until recently headed the processions on the occasion of Macā jākva (Skt. *annaprāsana*), Kaytāpūjā (Skt. *mekhalābandhana*) and Ihi, and who work as tailors. Buddhist priests from Patan, so-called Nāyguhājū, serve the butchers, while the Jugi are served by the single Danyā of Bhaktapur who belongs to the larger group of Jugi. The only remaining drummer (Kulu) in Bhaktapur had, until fifteen years ago, life-cycle rituals performed by the eldest (*nāyah*) of the lineage. In an attempt to attain a higher status, the Kulu started to call in a Subedi Brahmin from Harasiddhi, but shifted to a Vajrācārya from Patan seven years ago. Such shifts demonstrate the wide range of possibilities in a society in the throes of change. For Jugi, the boys’ initiation is introduced by music played on shawm, an instrument that is played exclusively by them. Nāy celebrate the tying of two loincloths, a white one by the eldest of the lineage, and a green one by the paternal aunt (*nini*) without the presence of a priest. The knot, however, is not worshipped.

At the bottom of the hierarchy are the untouchables (Pvaḥ), from whom “clean castes”

take no water and, if touched by them, are supposed to purify themselves. The Pvaḥ do not require any priest for the enactment of their life-cycle rituals; the tying of the loin-cloth is done by the eldest of the lineage. Neither members of unclean nor of untouchable status perform the Ihi marriage.

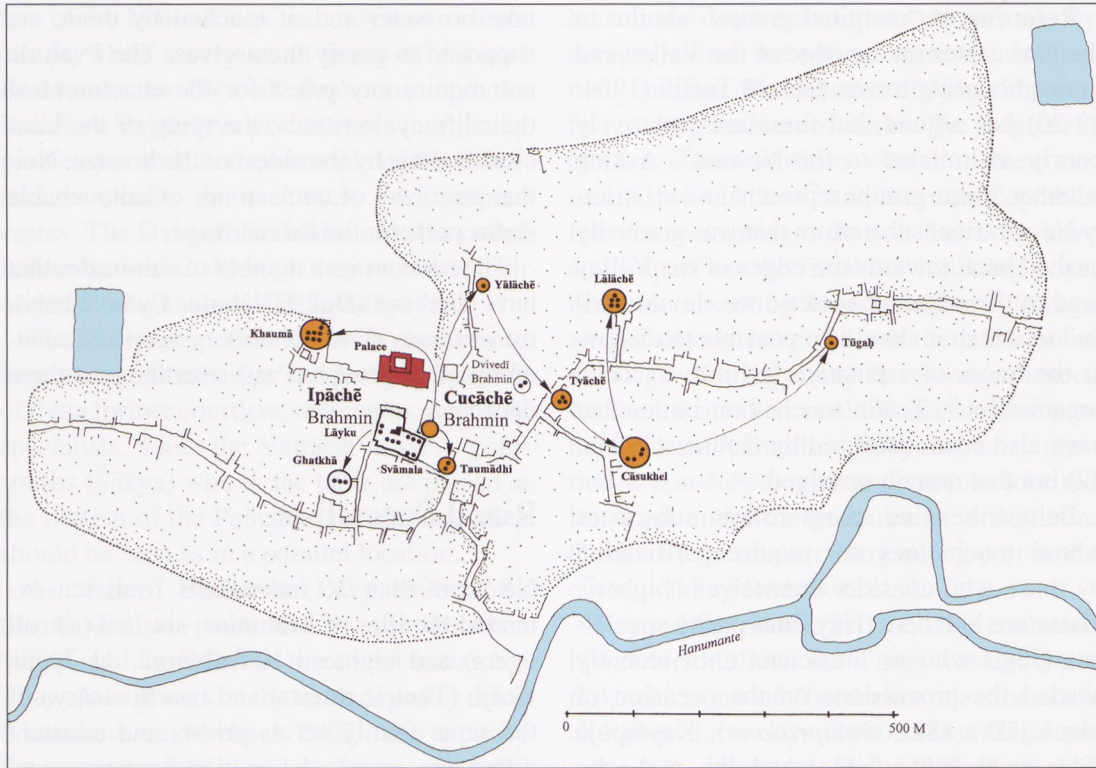
The table omits a number of sub-castes that have died out (Duī, Hālāhulu, Cyāmākhalā), moved away (Dvā, Dhobi), or been assimilated by other groups (Pasi) over the past three decades.

Ritual Specialists

No more than 36 individuals from ten extended families of Brahmins, six Jośi (astrologers) and eighteen Karmācārya, 31 Jyāpu Ācāju (Tantric priests) and two Śivācārya of the same family act as priests and assistant priests (see map).

Brahmins

Of the five groups of Brahmins, the Newar Brahmins (Dyaḥbhāju) from India began settling in the Kathmandu Valley at the end of the first millennium and not, as is often said, in the early days of the Malla dynasty in the 14th century (Witzel 1976: 156). Michael Witzel has traced documents in the possession of Ratnaraj Sharma to prove that the Dyaḥbhāju of Bhaktapur arrived in the early 16th century. Uhlāsārāja, their progenitor, died in 1576. They probably settled right from the beginning in the Khāisima courtyard opposite the palace where their esoteric shrine is located. The original family is said to have split some two-hundred years later into the Ipāchē clan and the Cucāchē clan. While the former remained in its central location, the latter moved across town, and its 23 active priests settled in seven different locations. The Khaumā branch, which according to family



Bhaktapur, location of 36 Brahmins, Rājopādhyāya, who act as priests in life cycle rituals.

Some time in the 17th or 18th century they split into two clans. The Ipāchē clan remained settled around the Khāisima courtyard opposite the palace and kept the privilege to worship Taleju. The Cucāchē clan of Yābvaḥ moved to Taumādhi, Yālāchē and Khaumā. In the 19th century, one member of the Cucāchē clan shifted to Tyāchē and his descendants further to Cāsukhel, Lālāchē and Tūgah. Two Dvivedī Brahmins, who migrated from Benares, are located at Tulāchē. They have the exclusive privilege to perform the life cycle rituals for families of the barber's community (Nau).

Mapped in January 2007 by Nutan Sharma

tradition was deprived of its property by the Śāha rulers after 1768, was forced to move to the periphery (Gutschow/Michaels 2005: 35/36). It is not known why other members of the Cucāchē clan have moved away from the central location since the late 19th century. Some families like those from Lālāchē and Cāsukhel still share their inherited clients. No more than four or five of these Newar Brahmins preside over or, as is the case with the Khaumā branch, organise Ihi rituals. Others serve as assistants.

Two families of Dvivedī Brahmins are said to be the offspring of an improper marriage and thus of “lower” status; they do not preside over Ihi marriages but are occasionally called on by Nau or Gāthā for initiation rituals. The Mahantās of Bhaktapur’s fourteen Hindu monasterial institutions (*maṭhas*) do not perform Ihi. For the initiation of the boys Pūrbīya or Tirhutya Brahmins are called in.

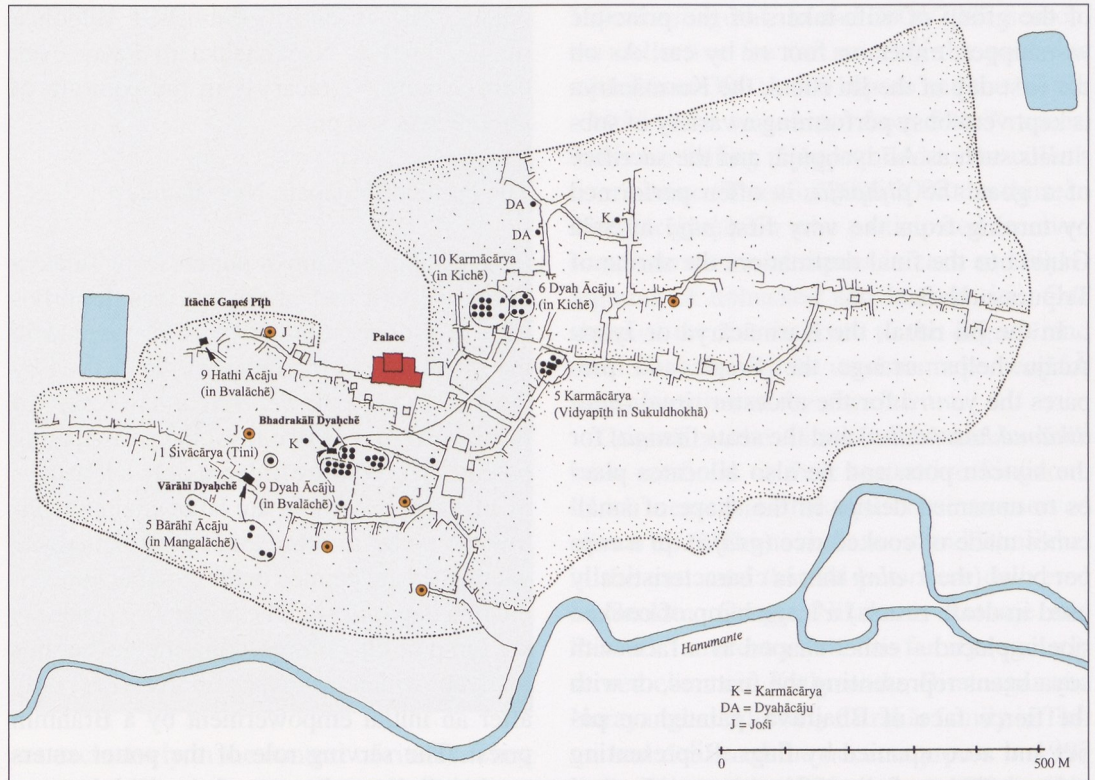
The Brahmin is by no means the master of the ritual place, but he guides the entire ritual

and announces the actions to be performed by the participants, in Ihi rituals often with the help of a microphone. On the second day, he tends the sacred fire, while his wife prepares the food on the first day (*ihijā*), sprinkles sacred water (*jal*) and is a helping hand.

Assistant Priests (Jośi, Karmācārya, Jyāpu Ācāju and Śivācārya)

The Brahmin priest has an established relationship with the assistant priests. In Bhaktapur, the Jośi already appears at the potter’s square to arrange the ritual place for the Alīdyaḥpūjā. Should the Śivācārya not be there, the Jośi also presents the Alīdyaḥ to the potter boy (see below). Such changes of duties have become common in recent decades. The astrologer and the Tantric priest both know their trade and can easily take on the job of other specialists. On the second day the astrologer’s duty is to perform the *sinhapūjā*, worshipping the vermilion powder needed to

Bhaktapur, location of assistant priests acting in initiation rituals: Karmācārya, Jyāpu Ācāju and Joṣi. Of the 18 Karmācārya, most of them are settled in a cluster in Kichē. Divided into two groups, they are organised around different esoteric shrines (āgāchē). Those Karmācārya attached to the Vidyāpīṭh have ritual obligations in the Taleju temple and serve exclusively in life cycle rituals of upper caste (Chathārīya) families. Families of farmers (Jyāpu) or privileged workmen like carpenters, masons and potters call on Jyāpu Ācāju, who are divided into three groups. Seventeen Dyaḥ Ācāju from Kichē and Bvalāchē regard Bhadrakālī as the esoteric deity, nine Hāthi Ācāju turn to the Gaṇeśa shrine in Itāchē and five Bārāhī Ācāju turn to Vārāhī. Only six Joṣi (“J” on the map) act as astrologers and as assistant priests, who perform the vermilion pūjā.



colour the girl's forehead and the parting of her hair in an act that indicates marital status.

The eighteen Tantric Karmācārya priests who serve families of “high” status and their “lower” counterparts, the 29 Jyāpu Ācāju who serve exclusively sub-castes of farmers and occupational castes, act as assistants to prepare the ritual place, often prior to the arrival of the Brahmin priest. The Karmācāryas are divided into three groups, each centering on a separate esoteric shrine, where they are initiated. Of particular importance is the group around the *vidyāpīṭha* (which serves as their esoteric shrine) at Sukuldhokā, the members of which serve in the Taleju temple.

The Jyāpu Ācāju, also called Pīṭhācārya (Mishra/Shrestha/Shrestha 2004: 77), are divided into three groups, named after their association with a deity, Bhadrakālī (Dyaḥ), Vārāhī or Gaṇeśa. The Dyaḥ Ācāju from the quarters of Kichē and Bvalāchē are tied to

Bhadrakālī, who presides over the urban territory of Bhaktapur. As the consort of Bhairava, this deity occupies a powerful position in the city's pantheon. The Bārāhī Ācāju from Maṅgalāchē are connected to Bārāhī, the fifth of the protective Mother Goddesses. Referring to the theriomorphic shape of their deity, those who worship Gaṇeśa in the quarter of Itāchē are called Hāthi Ācāju (*hāthi*, “elephant”).

The Tantric priest, either the Karmācārya or the Jyāpu Ācāju, ties the respective ritual place to the eight protective Mother Goddesses, the Aṣṭamātrkā, whose non-iconic shrines have to be worshipped on the preceding day or in the early morning of the first day (*dusva*) of Ihi. In January 2007 a variety of such performances could be observed: the eight shrines of the Mother Goddesses and the one dedicated to Tripurasundarī at the centre were visited by the Karmācārya or Jyāpu Ācāju in the company of the representative

of the group of wife-takers of the principle worshipper, either on foot or by car. As on the first day of the Ihi ritual, the Karmācārya is kept very busy performing a variety of sub-rituals such as Alīdyahpūjā, and the sacrifice of a goat, the *pīṭhpūjā*, is often performed by turning from the very first *pūjā* at Salā Gaṇeśa to the final destination, the shrine of Tripurasundarī.

In the Ihi ritual, the Karmācārya or Jyāpu Ācāju helps arrange the firepit and prepares the *yantra* for the ancestor ritual (*nāndikāmukhaśrāddha*) and the seats (*āsana*) for the sixteen pots, and he also allocates places to unnamed deities in the shape of small cones made of cooked rice (*gvajā*). In a copper bowl (the *kvalaḥ* that is characteristically used in death rituals) a large lump of cooked rice is placed – either shaped as a face with soya beans representing the features, or with the fierce face of Bhairava, painted on paper and accompanied by flags. Representing a *bau*-offering dedicated to potentially evil spirits, this lump is cast onto a stone in the pavement of a neighbouring street crossing. Such stones, called *chvāsah*, absorb ritual waste and offerings dedicated to unidentified spirits called *bhūt-pret*.

Of the Śivācārya, who are needed to arrange the platform for the nine sacred vases and the consecration and distribution of the bel fruits, only one family was still acting in 2006/2007. Quite a few organisers do not invite the Śivācārya any more and engage the Karmācārya for this job.

Helpers

Potters (Kumaḥ) and painters (Citrakār) are neither classifiable as auxiliary priests of “high” status nor as purity technicians of “low” status, although their service is obligatory in Ihi rituals. In Bhaktapur at least their role is unquestioned, while in Kathmandu and Patan their trade is often taken over by

others. The recently established Buddhist ritual school at Nyākhācuka in Patan even trains young Vajrācāryas in the painting of *ihipā* bowls and pots.

The Potters (Prajāpati, Nev. Kumaḥ)

In Bhaktapur a group of potters from Tālākva in the western half of the city has the privilege to produce the sixteen pots needed in the Ihi ritual and the bowls (*salāpā*) used by the girls to keep the *bel* fruit and to receive a formal offering of rice from the participating parents. The pots are ordered only a few days in advance, but stocks are large enough to allow the potter to bring them to the ritual site where they are painted in the evening hours of the first day (*dusva*). The potter also produces the lump of clay representing the mysterious Alīdyah, which he shapes on his wheel only after an initial empowerment by a Brahmin priest. The serving role of the potter enters a semi-divine sphere as the principle worshipper, with the help of an assistant priest – either the Śivācārya or the Jośi – hands the lump of clay over to his son. The tying of a white turban and a gift of clothes indicate a kind of union with the potential deity. The young lad receives the rough form of the deity and hands it over indirectly to his father to be given a sophisticated shape. A few hours later, the new form is empowered again, this time by the Tantric Karmācārya priest.

The Painters (Citrakār, Nev. Pū)

The painters of Bhaktapur established an Ihi *guthī* in the 1960s in order to allow and even force all the Citrakār families – which are organised as a *deguthī* (*de*, “territory” or “country”) – to participate in painting the pots and bowls that are needed not only in the context of the Ihi ritual, but also in old-age rituals (*jākva*), and for Satyanārāyaṇa and Nāga worship. The painters of Bhaktapur

Surje Chitrakar, having just completed the painting of the *Gaṇeśa kalaśa* for the Ihi ritual at Cvāchē on 21st January 2007.



act exclusively in the context of rituals. They renew wall paintings and produce objects – pots, sandals, block prints and paintings on cloth or paper – that are used in life-cycle rituals or for annual events. Until recently, the Citrakār received only a humble return for their services: the block prints were sold for a rupee and painting the pots was rewarded by 50 grams of vermilion, two kilograms of unhusked rice, half a kilogram of flattened rice, and some paper. To free themselves from such a demeaning situation, the painters of Bhaktapur established the Ihi Guthi, which discusses the prices in the light of the ongoing inflation every year six days after full moon in March (Holipunhi). The leadership (*palah*) of this association changes by rotation. Prior to presenting the annual accounts and handing out the shares of the annual income to the participants, the entire group visits the Chumā Gaṇeśa in Cvāchē, the most powerful Gaṇeśa of Bhaktapur, who is considered by the painters as their Viśvakarma, the protector of crafts. The *guthi* is therefore also named

Viśvakarmaguthi. In the 2006/2007 season, the collective fee for painting the pots was raised from 300 to 400 rupees and the fee for a block-print was raised from 5 to 7 rupees. Fines for failing to appear add to the collective income. Thus, in 2006/2007 the thirteen Citrakār *guthiyārs* who participated received some one thousand rupees in cash and 60 kilograms of unhusked and husked rice. One share of the rice is given to the *deguthi* and the 15th share will be used to make beer for the convention of the *deguthi*.

Originally, the Citrakār are said to have been confined to their respective kingdom, which meant that Bhaktapur's painters served clients up to Thimi in the west and Dhulikhel in the east, and that Ihi pots were delivered to Sankhu, Cangu, Nikosera, Katunje and Panauti. In recent years, one family regularly served clients in Kathmandu, Biratnagar and Narayanghat. The only Citrakār family in Thimi had delivered the necessary pots in 1997 to Sankhu and in 1998 as far as Baglung in West Nepal. Painters also worked in Citlang (until 1965), Tokha and Capagaon. Only five families each in Kathmandu and Patan pursue their inherited trade. The Pū Society of all painter families in Nepal, established in 1995 to represent the social and ritual obligations, as well as the economical and artistic interests of their 700 member families, discusses the endangered crafts and proposes regularly to run classes to teach the iconographical details of painting. However, only the painters of Bhaktapur have so far managed to ensure the participation of the younger generation.

The Newar painters not only paint the required earthenware needed for the Ihi ritual, they are also engaged in the ritual act of opening the eyes painted on the neck of the pots. The opening of the eyes with a stroke of the brush using the soot that has accumulated during the sacrifice of a goat at the local Gaṇeśa shrine is an act of consecration. The acting Brahmin has empowered the brush to

be used, similar to the empowering of the razor chisel (*caḥlā*) used by the barber women to pare the toenails of the Ihi girls. With his empowered brush, the painter almost attains the status of an auxiliary priest. Until a generation ago the most respected painters in town, called *khvāpināyaḥ*, even had to be initiated by a Buddhist priest, a Vajrācārya, in order to be entitled to paint the central sacred vase (*pūrṇakalaśa*) with a blue diamond (*nīlavajra*) symbolizing Akṣobhya, the Tathāgata of the eastern direction. In order to avoid obligations that would complicate daily life, no painter in the last generation has received initiation (*dīkṣā*).

In Patan and Kathmandu, earthen bowls (*salāpā* or *ihipā*) are now rarely used. Small pieces of paper, often depicting only a faint idea of a *svastika* are placed on plates of brass. The entire set of earthen pots has been replaced by three copper pots that are used in various rituals.

The extent to which the duties of the painters supported their rights, which sustained their families, is documented by a legal case¹⁰. For an Ihi ritual for 22 girls on the Indestructible Third, at the end of April in 1907 in Khadpu, a small Newar settlement near Banepa, a Rājopādhyāya from Bhaktapur painted the pots and the block prints himself. On being questioned by the leader (*nāike*) of the Citrakārs of Bhaktapur, the Brahmin priest confessed to his guilt of having done something “untraditional” (*vithithi*). In the presence of his chief tiller, Būkumān Gojā from Byāsi as witness, he paid twice the amount the painters would have charged as fine on the 25th July 1907, a Thursday.

Women-Givers and Women-Takers as Helpers (*jyāḥcvanipū*)

Members of Chatharīya and Pañthārīya subcastes do not classify as mandatory helpers (*jyāḥcvanipū*) in initiation rituals. Instead, the

tillers (*mhaynāyaḥ*) of their fields and their relatives have to act: not in death rituals but in any other lifecycle ritual they act as cook.

Among the farmers, the helpers come from two essentially different groups. The first can be classified as those who took women – a gift for which they return a service in a relationship for which Michael Oppitz has coined the term “wife for compulsory work” (Oppitz 1988). However, the social context of the Magar of western Nepal is based on a threefold alliance: those who take women provide compulsory work and are obliged to give women to a third group. As Newar farmers are not tied to an identifiable group of “women-givers”, the reciprocity of taking a woman and providing assistance in return is based on a different notion that surfaces particularly in death rituals. These are father’s and grandfather’s sisters (*nini* and *niniāji*), women who leave their paternal home, the *thachē* (lit. “your (own) house”). They are regarded as “living ancestors” (Nev. *māmhā pitr*) because they have joined a new lineage and worship a different ancestor deity. But the relationship to the maternal home remains remarkably strong, for they regularly return to their brother’s, nephew’s or grandnephew’s house on the occasion of urban rituals such as Dasāi (October), Kijāpūjā (November), Yaḥmāripunhi (December), Gyaḥcāku-saṃkrānti (January), Bisket (April), Sitīnakaḥ (June) and Gunipunhi (August). Having left the maternal house, these women are only marginally polluted in cases of death and therefore predestined to act as cooks in their *thachē*.

Their husbands, named *jicābhāju*, not only act as helpers in cases of death, but also on the occasion of Kaytāpūjā. They are the masters of the kitchen, supplying food continuously. Before long, these *jicābhāju* will replace the ritual specialists like Bhā, Jugi and Tini and eventually even the priest in death rituals. Since the 1970s, purity specialists like

¹⁰ Document written in Nepālī, in the possession of Narain Kumar Chitrakar in Bhaktapur, a text of 16 lines, for which a notebook with iconographical details was used.

Jugi and Bhā only reluctantly follow the call of their clients, while only one Tini is left in Bhaktapur, and he is rarely called on.

The second group of helpers come from the “wife-givers”. These are the maternal grandfather and his brothers (called *aka* by the initiate’s mother, *bājya* by the initiate) and mother’s maternal uncle (*māma* and *tama*). They all help in the kitchen, as do the paternal relatives.

Relatives and Lineage Members (*phukī*)

A lineage rarely traces its origin back for over three generations. Members are male agnates, i.e. brothers, father and his brothers and grandfather and his brothers and their male descendants. Male descendents of the great-grandfather and even great-great-grandfather are often remembered and invited for the concluding feast, but they rarely form an enlarged *phukī* on the occasion of the annual worship of the ancestor deity. Nor do they share duties in the context of initiation rituals.

The lineage members are kept extremely busy in almost all of the major life-cycle rituals. In the Kaytāpūjā, for instance, they are engaged for days in advance in finding the sacrificial animals and the wood for the fire of the temporary kitchen, because food has to be served for three days. They also join in the procession to the river to discard the sacrificial balls (*piṇḍa*) dedicated to the ancestors. The ensuing feast that same evening is attended by all *phukī*-members as well as helpers, the husbands of the paternal aunts, and the helpers from the initiate’s mother’s and his father’s maternal uncle’s side. The mistress (*nakhī*) of the lineage discards the food (*kalaḥ*) dedicated to the ancestors on the nearest protective stone, the *chvāsaḥ*. The lineage members are present at every single act of the initiation ritual and they lead the procession to the seat of the deity, where the initiate receives the second loincloth from the maternal uncle.

Ritual Agency

The distinctiveness of the sub-castes is created, constituted and publicly displayed in their life-cycle rituals. Caste depends on birth, but it is not so much the natural birth that matters in this social context as ritual birth. Only the ritual birth goes to make up the status and identity of a sub-caste because one becomes a member of the *phukī* (lineage covering three generations), *thar* (sub-caste) or *siguthī* (funeral association) only by a series of life-cycle and initiation rituals. The status thus acquired must be reaffirmed over and over again by communal rituals. Viewed from this angle, life-cycle rituals are to be seen – and this is our basic argument – not as a singular event in the life of an individual but as a process that connects the various steps in the life of a certain man or woman as well as the members of various social groups in order to maintain or create the identity and purity of a social group.

A major factor in this ritual process is the relationship between the various purity specialists. In *Handling Death* (Gutschow/Michaels 2005: 34-61), we have described the main groups and castes that take active part in death rituals and how they are related (or not) to the Brahmin’s dominant role. Much of what has been said there also holds true for the present volume (cf. also Levy 1990: 341ff.). Life-cycle rituals are a complex interplay between various ritual specialists and their “customers” or principle worshippers, between priests, auxiliary priests, para-priests, and ritual experts. It is a matter of definition and choice whether these ritual specialists are to be called priests or not. If emphasis is placed on their relation to scripture and temple, only few such specialists can be seen as priests. If, however, their expertise and proficiency in non-verbal aspects is considered, a great number of other specialists must also be regarded as persons with priest-

ly functions. They also mediate between this world and the other world; among the Newars they do this sometimes without the guidance of Brahmins.

It is often said that in this multifaceted setting, the Brahmins play a dominant role and that they are regarded as especially pure because they perform the majority of rituals (Greenwold 1974: 103-104). The frequency of rituals might indeed be seen as an indicator of status, but it should be borne in mind that many rituals of the so-called lower strata of the Newar society are not or little known – certainly not to the members of high castes or priests. We are concentrating in the present study on a group that belongs to the middle sector of Bhaktapur society, the Jyāpu, which makes up the majority of the city's population. In general, they employ Brahmins as priests for their domestic rituals but at times they also perform such rituals without them. Moreover, a number of non-Brahmin specialists have to be involved, so their rituals are distinctively different from traditional Sanskrit life-cycle rituals or *samskāras*.

However, certain Newar castes do not call in these priests for their life-cycle rituals. They either have their own priests or do not need a priest at all – like the Jugi for whom the Dhaniya perform the death rituals, or the Gāthā, among whom the maternal uncle (Nev. *pāju*) acts as the ritual specialist. Moreover, some domestic rituals such as birthday rituals, the worship of the goddess Śaṣṭhī or, among Jyāpu sometimes even Kaytāpūjā, do not require any priests. Even high castes do not always call in a priest.

Given this fact, we prefer a model of centrality rather than hierarchy that places various ritual specialists and participants in the middle of the ritual action. For in Hinduism, it is clearly quite difficult to define a certain substance or material as absolute and thus allowing a unifying hierarchy to be built on it. This even holds true for the Veda as the main

source for the dominance of the Brahmins. Among the Hindu Newars (and partly also among Buddhist Newars) the Veda – represented by the Vedic mantras that accompany almost all actions performed by a Brahmin – is generally accepted as the principal religious foundation. However, even “Vedic” rituals are supplemented and sometimes even substituted by a number of non-Vedic elements for which the Brahmin is neither regarded nor required as a ritual specialist. A look at the elements of Newar rituals shows such ritual sequences that often have a non-Brahmin and non-Vedic origin and performance. Thus, the care of the absorbing stones (*pikhālākhu* and *chvāsaḥ*) at thresholds and street crossings, animal sacrifices, the application of pulverised oil-cake (*sarvakhau*), the welcoming ritual (*lasakusa*) and many other Newar ritual elements are performed not by a Brahmin but another ritual specialist of lower status, who works more or less independently. It is perhaps significant that the principle worshipper and the eldest from the group of wife-takers are called “leader” (*nāyaḥ*) although their leadership is based on seniority.

In the course of initiation rituals, astrologers (*Jośi*), Tantric priests (Karmācārya), “fallen” Brahmins such as Śivācārya and even painters (Citrakār) act independently, without any guidance. This is also acknowledged in the texts:

The Śivācārya should invoke Brahmā. The Citrakāra (painter) should draw the eyes of the Brahmā (*kalaśa*) with the black soot (brought) from the worship of the *pīṭha* (power place, reciting) ***tac cakṣur devahitaṃ*** (VS 36.24). (Ipv, p.2, no. 8)

They prepare the ritual place and provide necessary objects for the participants and essentially they contribute to the flow of actions. If need be, the Brahmin priest in turn assists them. They also receive *dakṣiṇā* (see Dkv,

fol. 20r). The *deśabalipūjā*, for example, the sacrifice of an egg and empowerment of the *gvajā*-offerings to the city's territory – Kva-pade – is usually performed by a Karmācārya, but it can also be performed by a Śivācārya or the Brahmin priest. Nevertheless, it remains true that a Hindu Brahmin or Buddhist Vajrācārya priest more or less directs the other ritual specialists and the participants at the major life-cycle rituals. His dominant role does not become manifest, because for Kaytāpūjā the Ācāju has left the scene before the Brahmin arrives or he acts parallel with the others. The assistant priests receive their “high” status not because they serve high or higher castes but because they refuse to serve “low” castes. These call in their own priests or ritual specialists, sometimes called “fallen” Brahmins, Buddhist Vajrācārya (for most of the marginally pure castes) or Buddhist Khusaḥ (for untouchables and drum-makers). So the involvement of priests does indeed reveal a clear and widely accepted agency and hierarchy.

Status and Purity

For the castes at the upper end of the hierarchy – Chatharīya and Pañcharīya – the major life-cycle rituals are performed by Brahmins. While tending the sacred fire (Nev. *jage*, Skt. *homa*), they are, as on many other occasions, assisted by a Karmācārya, and in all those cases where the initiate is receiving a Tantric initiation (*dekhā*), a Jośi (astrologer) also attends the ceremony.

Among craftsmen, e.g. Śilpakār (carpenters), Kumaḥ (potters), Tamrakār (coppersmiths), Āvāḥ (brickmakers), some 700 families who make up ten per cent of the population, and also among farmers, the situation varies: those who for personal reasons feel forced to demonstrate or even reconfirm their status, will either invite their Brahmin

or the Vajrācārya family priest, whose presence is obligatory in the case of death rituals. The overwhelming majority has a hereditary link to a Brahmin priest, while a few potters, bricklayers and farmers call their Buddhist priest in defiance of a gradual shift from the Buddhist to a Hindu priest. This ambivalence is convincingly demonstrated in the collective annual worship of the ancestor deity by some 200 lineages (*phukī*) of potters from the eastern quarter of Sujamādhī. On that occasion the Brahmin priest worships an aniconic representation of Nārāyaṇa, while the Vajrācārya priest worships the ambiguous and undefined ancestor deity, the *dugudyah*.

Most sub-castes of farmers, irrespective of their own judgement of their either “low” or “high” status, enlist neither a Brahmin nor a Vajrācārya for their sons' initiations, but simply a Jyāpu Ācāju. The Ācāju acts either as an assistant to the Brahmin or as the sole performer of the entire initiation and the following sacrifice, i.e. as a kind of “para-priest” (Levy 1990: 253). The Ācāju has learned his trade from his father and uses no texts. His duty is to produce the rice cones (*gvajā*) needed for the *kalaśapūjā*, which he will perform in the absence of a Brahmin. He will also hand over the mirror to the initiate's father who has his son look into it, and he will perform the ritual of introduction at the seat, the *pīṭha* of a deity, be it a Mātṛkā, Gaṇeśa or Bhairava.

The barbers (Nau), who call on a “fallen” Brahmin for their life-cycle rituals, mark the divide between those “above” them, for whom their wives pare the toenails in an act of purification, and those “below” them, for whom they shave the heads but who have to call on a butcher's wife to have their toenails pared with a sharp chisel (*cahlā*). These are the dyers (Chipā), torch-bearers (Cālā), funeral priests (Bhā), painters (Pū), oil-pressers (Sāymi), cutters of the umbilical cord (Kataḥ) and blacksmiths (Kau). The “low” status of

this almost five per cent of the population is reaffirmed by the fact that they call in a Buddhist Vajrācārya priest for domestic rituals.

Below these marginally pure sub-castes come the Gāthā, those forty families whose male members serve as the dancers of the Navadurgā troupe on a rotational basis, while the female members supply the people of Bhaktapur and the temples with flowers. This “profession” was instrumental in their being named Banmālā or simply Māli (gardener). The Gāthā do not call in a priest for their life-cycle rituals, and their toenails are pared by a butcher’s wife. The initiation of their sons is done by the maternal uncle, the *pāju*, who acts under the guidance of the eldest of the lineage, the *nāyaḥ*.

Beyond these marginally pure sub-castes come overt para-priests, the musicians and tailors (Jugi) and Pvaḥ who remain in a permanent state of impurity, like the butchers (Nāy), who are unclean because of what they do. Butchers are needed for the initiation ritual if the family decides to offer a fivefold sacrifice (*pañcabali*) to the non-iconic deity to which its household is tied. Such a sacrifice requires a duck, a cock, a ram, a goat and a buffalo. At least two skilled butchers are needed to isolate the carotid artery and to sprinkle blood from a tiny hole onto the seat of the deity for a period of over five minutes.

The Jugi have designated the job of paring their toenails to a separate family of Dhaniya and perform an initiatory ritual for their sons with an introduction on their musical instrument, the shawm. On the occasion of Kaytāpūjā of Jyāpu, the Jugi collect five leaf plates with food for the ancestors (*jugibvaḥ*) the moment the procession returns from the river.

Such offerings of food are dedicated to the ancestors not only during death rituals but also on annual occasions such as *mhāpūjā* (the worship of the body, after new moon in November), full moon in November/December

(Yaḥmāripunhi), New Year’s Eve in April, and the eighth day of the Dasā festival.

The butchers have their toenails pared by the untouchable Pvaḥ and enact the initiation without any priest, although for death rituals Buddhist Khusaḥ from Patan are called on. Finally, the Pvaḥ do not perform any initiation ritual.

The presentation of sub-castes as either “on top” or “at the bottom” of the social hierarchy follows conventions prevalent in Bhaktapur. Levy (1990) uses terms like “pure”, “marginally pure” (for Nau etc.), and of a “depressed status” (for Jugi and Pvaḥ) to avoid a general judgement. However, he states that the nature of these oppressed groups form “an orienting and defining contrast” (p. 366) to the way of life of those who consider themselves “pure”. Such observations are by no means a thing of the past. To this day, the butchers serve as a kind of scapegoat and are not allowed to join the routine of life in many ways. A good example can be observed during the Dasā festival. On the eighth day of the festival every farmer-household receives a share from the buffalo slaughtered by its respective death association. Then all of the household members convene for the feast (*kuchibhvay*) on that same evening. By contrast, the butchers do this on the seventh day. And if someone wants to tease a friend he would insinuate in a mean way that he is a “*kuchibhvay*-eater of the seventh day”.

In the context of the initiation, the maternal uncle, the *pāju*, can also be called a ritual specialist. He is the central figure who masters the entire household over a period of four days, and it is he who ties the knot of the loincloth on the right side of the thigh – an act that created the name for the ritual – *mekhalābandhana*.

As we have seen, a decisive marker of caste status are the rituals of body purification: The higher castes (Brahmins to Jyāpu) employ the barber’s wife (*naunī*) to pare the toenails, eight

sub-castes below the barber (Sāymi to Kau) call in a member of the butcher's community (Nāy), and butchers call on an untouchable (Pvaḥ). Until recently, a barber and a butcher woman had to attend the Buddhist Ihi ritual in Bhaktapur side by side. The barber's wife had to pare the toenails of the higher Buddhist castes (Vajrācārya and Śākya) and the butcher woman did the same for the six lower Buddhist sub-castes, the Citrakār (painters), Mānandhar (oil-pressers), Rañjītkār (dyers), Divākār (funeral torch-bearers), Nakarmi (blacksmith) and Śuddhakār (whose women-folk cut the umbilical cord).

However, as a result of the dynamics of rituals these relations are often subject to change and debate. Castes who previously did not employ Brahmin priests try to raise their status by using them in their rituals, or by imitating high caste rituals. Since the 1990s, the nine marginally pure sub-castes (*nau jāt*) do not call in a butcher woman any more and butchers do not call on an untouchable. Paring toenails is no longer part of the initiation ritual, it is done quietly by members of the household. It is not even an issue any more. In the same way, "unclean" castes increasingly refuse to take or absorb polluting substances from the "higher" castes. The Jugi are in the process of refusing to perform the *cakrapūjā* on the seventh day after death on the occasion of which they had to accept the food offered to the deceased. The Jugi also no longer accompany the processions on the occasions of Kaytāpūjā or Annaprāśana with their music. In the same way the funeral priest (Bhā) does not accept the offerings of the 10th day. Similarly, the Divākār no longer head the death processions with torchlights and cymbals, and the Gāthā do not carry the bride to her groom's house. Polluting material is now simply discarded by a member of the group of wife-takers, usually the *mhaynāyaḥ*, who in initiation rituals acts as the helper of the Karmācārya; musicians playing drums

and flutes are now exclusively of farmer (Jyāpu) status; and brides are brought to their destination in cars.

It has also been stated by Per Löwdin, who did his fieldwork in the early 1980s mainly in Lubhu, that "polluted things" determine a caste's standing in the hierarchy:

The more a caste by tradition works with polluted things, the lower its rank will be. And inversely, the less a caste handles polluting matters and the more it handles sacred matters, the higher it will be ranked. Subsequently, sweepers (Pvaḥ), who take care of others' refuse, and cobblers, drum makers (Kulu), and butchers, (Nāy) who handle leather and the bodies of dead animals, are ranked among the lowest, whereas priests, astrologers, and courtiers, whose refuse is handled by others, are among the highest. The priests are the highest as they perform most purificatory rituals and pass several initiations that members of other castes are not entitled to. (Löwdin 1985: 32)

Indeed, there are substances that are regarded by most, if not all Newars as polluting. They have mostly to do with the body, but even more so with alterations and transformations in life. The body receives and excretes. "We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its especially vulnerable points," notes Mary Douglas (1966: 121). All liquid excretions – sweat, saliva, semen, blood, especially menstrual blood, excrement – but also hair, fingernails and toenails can therefore be polluting if someone else comes in contact with them. However, these excretions as well as other substances are not polluting in themselves, but because they are an expression of a visible, biologically physical process, hence a change. Life-cycle rituals try to bring these changes to a standstill, to create a realm in which everything is something that has always been and never changes.

Moreover, it is not the individual body that is polluted through its biological changes (birth, food, menstruation, death), but the social body of the extended family and the clan. Thus, pollution is not a question of personal feelings, such as disgust, but due rather to biological change or the violation of the norms of an extended family and the position of the individual within it.

Likewise, pollution is also not a material substance that is independent of the status of its originator or bearer. Dust and sweat on feet are not impure in principle, but only depending on the person in question. If a younger person touches the feet of an older person, if a woman touches the feet of her husband or of her child (see, for example, the chapter on *Annaprāsana*), this is a sign of subordination and respect. And even when a person has ritually purified himself after pollution he or she is still not pure for all other members of his or her sub-caste. The status of purity of the extended family as a whole can only be

elevated collectively but not through the virtuous behaviour of the individual.

Biological intervals imply extreme changes of the body and thus are extremely polluting. This relates above all to birth and death. According to the *Dharmaśāstra*, the woman in childbirth is on the same level as corpse-bearers or dogs. Or, for example, death: for days, many relatives are polluted. But life-cycle turning points such as birth, initiation or marriage are also changes that require special purification. At these points the social body changes to a certain extent. A child becomes a Twice-Born; a virginal daughter becomes a marriageable girl or a wife. These are rites of passage in which the extended family changes because the family roles have to be redefined.

In short, it is contact and change that are polluting, and life-cycle rituals help to overcome such critical moments by creating timelessness and changelessness, in other words immortality.

Opposite
Homa, the sacred fire
performed on the occasion of
the Buddhist initiation, Bāre
chuyegu, on 21st November
2006 at Ukubāhā in Patan.