

Part III

CONCLUSION

The Dynamics of Newar Childhood Rituals



Introduction

In the conclusions to the previous chapters we have focussed on what we believe to be specific aspects of various life-cycle rituals within the community of the Newars in Bhaktapur. In this final chapter we will examine what these rituals have in common. We propose that all rituals are in way non-recurring initiation rituals that are embedded in a highly complex, urban and literate socio-cultural environment. With the exception of the rituals for infants (Annaprāśana or birthday rituals), all these rituals integrate the children and adolescents into a social group and involve certain aspects of learning, socialisation and the definition of cultural identity. They mark admission to a kin group and socio-religious community. For that reason, we consider all these events as initiation rituals.

In these rituals, boys and girls are ritually, psychologically and socially transformed. Ritually, because they obtain the right to perform and participate in certain ritual activities; psychologically, because the son's and daughter's maturity, adulthood or manhood and womanhood (their ability to marry) is celebrated; socially, because the coherence and status of a family unit is confirmed. Only in a limited sense are these initiation rituals plainly life-cycle rituals of adolescence in that they ceremonially recognise the change to a new stage of life (but also ritually conclude the coming of age). Newar initiation rituals have little to do with adulthood or with coming into one's majority, and even less with finding one's identity or coping with a crisis of adolescence. After all, there is no term for adulthood in Nepālī and Nevārī: *lyahma* (for males) and *lyase* (for females) denotes young people aged between fifteen and thirty independent of their marital status – simply boys and girls who are neither children nor adults.

In generating personhood and adulthood, Newar initiation rituals possess many fea-

tures that they share with other life-cycle rituals in general and initiation rituals in particular. Therefore, there is no need to repeat or summarise the vast literature on initiation rituals here.²⁸ We also do not claim to have developed a new theory of initiation rituals since most of our findings accord with the observations made by Mircea Eliade, Arnold van Gennep or Victor Turner – to mention only the most prominent scholars of initiation rituals. Such rituals are steeped in connotations of rebirth, renunciation, separation and integration. They may follow van Gennep's basic, though simplifying, scheme of separation, liminality and incorporation (see Michaels 2006).

Instead we aim at highlighting certain aspects of childhood and adolescence, social participation, moral community, purity/impurity and auspiciousness/inauspiciousness, space and time, ritual transfer and transformation, text and intertextuality, as well as constructions of immortality. We deliberately do not wish to reduce the rituals to one or two aspects or functions, because we consider that to be misleading. Life-cycle rituals are rich and dense events full of ritual elements and socio-religious relations that have a kind of irreducible and singular richness. One can only arrive at broad generalisations by neglecting the specificity of the event.

Childhood and Adolescence

Most of the described life-cycle rituals confer rights on those for whom the rituals are performed or who are at centre-stage of the rituals. The rituals transfer membership rights of the lineage group (*phukī*), sub-caste or socio-religious institutions, such as the monastery, to the individual. They bestow the right to learn or teach the sacred Hindu (Veda) or Buddhist texts, to worship the ancestors or (lineage) deities, and to marry or to perform the death rituals. They thus imply a concept

²⁸ Snoek 1987 presents a fairly reliable overview of this literature. For the Hindu initiation see Michaels 2004: 71-98 on which parts of the following are based.

of adulthood that encompasses notions of self-control, responsibility or moral accountability. The children leave childhood and its lack of restrictions behind them. Growing up in traditional South-Asia means leading a life together with many children of all ages, in an extended-family community, with relatively little school instruction and individual freedom. With initiation, the children become members of a social body defined and bound by a complex set of moral and ritual rules.

The Western concepts of life stages such as childhood, youth, and adulthood only inadequately mark the subtle processes of maturing and aging in traditional societies. Childhood is not only a biological phase, but rather a cultural construct. Only in the aftermath of the Renaissance did Europeans begin to perceive the child not only as a small adult but as a creature with its own thoughts and feelings. Youth, puberty, or adolescence became the focus of public attention only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In ancient India, these phases of life were not conceptually delineated. Thus, in the traditional legal literature of India, childhood rarely appears. In Sanskrit texts, the first years of life are sometimes divided into separate phases: Childhood (*kaumāra*) ends at the age of five, boyhood (*pauganḍa*) at ten, adolescence (*kiśora*) at fifteen; then begins youth (*yauvana*) (Bhāgavatapurāṇa 10.12.32 and 41). Or: “A child is called an infant (*śiśu*) till his teeth are cut; till the tonsure ceremony he is called a child (*bāla*); a boy (*kumāra*) till the *kuśa* girdle is given (i.e. during the boy’s initiation or *upanayana*)” (Garuḍapurāṇa, Abegg 1921: 17).

Most legal scholars consider children to be ritually impure. Only a few childhood rites are treated, very briefly, in Sanskrit and Nēvārī texts on life-cycle rituals. They concern the naming of the child, its first outing, and the ingestion of its first solid food. This is because Indian children in their early years

are predominantly in the care of mothers and sisters, and not in the world of the men who wrote the Sanskrit texts. Only from initiation rituals onwards do the legal texts become more eloquent. But this silence about childhood in the Sanskrit texts should not make us ignore this phase of life when analysing the processes of socialisation (see Michaels 2004: 99-110).

Adulthood among the Newars (and in Hindu South Asia) is ritually marked by the Brahminical ideal of the four *āśramas* or life stages, i.e. studentship (*brahmacarya*), householder (*gṛhastha*) with the establishment of the family, and then a retreat to asceticism, first as a forest dweller (*vānaprastha*), then as a wandering ascetic (*saṁnyāsa*). The *āśramas* were originally theological concepts of equally valid life-styles, which an adult male could feel compelled to follow all his life (cf. Olivelle 1993: Chapter 3). Life-long scholarship or a direct transition from the phase of studentship to that of the wandering ascetic was possible, although this was more the exception. But increasingly these paths became a theological ideal of successive life stages with specific tasks and life goals (*puruṣārtha*), which succeeded mainly in integrating asceticism into the stages of life. Although only very few people practice the life forms of first (and third or fourth) stage, the phase of studentship is symbolically enacted during the male initiation by the *deśāntara* episode, “the rite of (going) to a foreign (country)”. In this sub-rite, practised by both Hindus and Buddhists, the son leaves the house, equipped with the ascetic’s paraphernalia of wandering: staff, hide, begging bowl, bow and arrow. He explains that he wants to go to the forest to become an ascetic-monk or to Benares to study the Veda for twelve years. But his mother points out the dangers and troubles of life abroad. She asks him not to violate his obligations to others. Instead, she praises home and family life, promises

him a bride. But the son prefers to woo Sarasvatī, the goddess of the arts and sciences, as a bride. Only when the game threatens to become serious and the son sets out on the road, does his maternal uncle hold him back.

It is by such symbols that certain rights and obligations are bestowed. Receiving ritual competence is also a key element in initiation rituals among the Newars of Bhaktapur. For the boys, and to a lesser extent the girls, it is an initiation into the *sacra* or the right to worship the ancestors and the lineage deities (*digudyah*), to join the annual feast of the lineage (*phukī*), to perform the death rites, and, above all, to marry. Among the farmers (Jyāpu) the aspect of learning the Veda is almost absent; for they do not receive the sacred thread and are therefore not taught the Gāyatrī hymn or the Veda. However, they also have to learn specific things. They have to learn and are taught in the rituals how to worship the gods and Brahmins with gifts and gestures, to respect elderly people, to ritually eat cooked rice (*pañcagrāsa*), to exchange gifts, and to bind a loincloth.

This learning does not imply a specific age or consciousness. “Adulthood” is often achieved by a symbolic and mimetic education independent of the maturity of the children, who are quite often at an age when they are incapable of understanding what they are doing and what is done with them. In the legal Dharmaśāstra texts, the age of initiation, calculated from the time of conception, not of birth, depends on social class: a Brahmin is to be initiated at the age of eight, a Kṣatriya (aristocracy, warrior class) at eleven, and a Vaiśya (merchant, farmer class) at twelve; the Śūdras (slaves, manual labourers, serfs) are not considered to be Twice-Born. In modern Nepal, hardly anyone follows the age instructions of the legal texts. To save the high cost of such a celebration, many parents initiate several sons together or along with the sons of relatives from the same lineage. Thus,

a small child who has just cut his teeth may stand in line in the same ritual ceremony with a boy who has already grown a beard. Occasionally, the initiation is put off even until shortly before the wedding, the reason being that one has to be initiated in order to be married.

More important than the understanding of the initiates are the signs communicated to the society, above all to the members of the extended family and other kin groups, fellow caste members and the neighbourhood. In the case of initiation, what is communicated is that a child has changed its role, has left childhood and become a partially or fully responsible member of the social group. The aspect of a new life or second birth is therefore at the centre of the boy’s and girl’s initiation rituals. It is made noticeable by a number of ritual elements and notions. For the boy the most obvious signal is his first ritual haircut (*busā khāygu*, Skt. *cūḍākaraṇa*) with all its accompanying symbolism; with his bald head, the boy looks visibly different.

Another clearly discernible sign of the transformation of the boy into an “adult” is the tuft of hair (*śikhā*) that is left unshorn, unless somebody enters a Śaivite monastic order. Traditionally it symbolises the sign of the paternal line. According to Hindu belief, the individual soul escapes from the body through the crown of the head during the cremation of the male corpse. It then begins its journey to the forefathers. Cutting the *śikhā* means severing the patrilineal “umbilical cord”. It keeps the ancestors in their deplorable in-between state, in which they are unable to get to heaven. Much like the sacred thread, the lock of hair came increasingly to be identified with the right of a person to conduct/execute a sacrifice. With that the (ascetic) critique of the Vedic sacrificial ritual as the only path to salvation was given a striking means of expression: those who renounced the faith needed only to have their heads fully shaved

and to cut up the sacred thread (see Michaels 1994a), the sign of the Twice-born. Since Buddhism also criticised the central mediating role of the Brahmins for individual salvation, Buddhist monks came to shave their head completely. Even in the separate world of Nepalese Newar Buddhism, a form of Buddhism almost devoid of monasticism and with a social caste structure, boys have their tuft of hair cut off at their consecration, even though the other parts of the rite are based on the Hindu initiation.

A new birth or the birth into ritual immortality (see below) requires not even the death of the former life. Indeed, such notions can be observed during the rituals: the boy renounces the world by temporarily becoming an ascetic, i.e. a person that is dead to society because he refuses to produce offspring. In ritual terms, a man that is not allowed to sacrifice is not yet born (*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 1.3.2.1), and in social terms a man that is not initiated is not a member of the socio-ritual *communitas*. Mircea Eliade's general observation that initiations often represent a *regressus ad uterum*, followed by a ritual "rebirth", also applies to the Hindu initiation rites.

This is also the case in the context of the substitution of the biological parents by ritual parents. The boys even have to leave their parents in the ritual choreography. This may occur not only in the *deśāntara* sub-rite, but also when the boy has a final meal with his mother during the *vratibandhana* initiation or, as we were able to see, the *Annaprāśana* ritual. Throughout the meal he sits on her lap. Once again he returns to the well-protected place of his childhood. After the initiation, other norms will apply to him. Then he may no longer eat with his mother (only in very traditional high-caste families is this regulation maintained).

The natural parents only play a subordinate or caring role in the rituals. Much more important in terms of ritual activity are the

Brahmin and the *nāyah* and *nakhī*, the senior-most elder couple of the *phukī*, as the ritual parents, or the maternal uncle (*pāju*) and the father's sister (*nini*) as the nearest consanguine brothers and sisters.

It almost goes without saying that the initiation rituals treated in this volume also have to do with sexual maturity. After all, they turn both boys and girls into potential marriage partners. The rituals imply sexual connotations on various levels. In the *Kaytāpujā* and *Bāre chuyegu*, the boys are completely undressed and then receive a loin cloth, a garment that covers the private parts; in the *Ihi* marriage the girls are dressed like brides, and in the *Bārhā tayegu* they are secluded from the world in order to ritually protect them and their family from the supposed impurity of the menarche. However, we challenge the common view that the girls' sexuality becomes controlled through the *Ihi* marriage and that girls are considered dangerous until and unless their sexuality is tamed. We argue that this aspect should not be overestimated since it is fostered by the underlying Western notion of the male fear of the female sexuality in Hindu societies. We do not reject this concept *per se*. But we hold that it is difficult to see clear evidence of it surfacing in the context of the girl's initiation rituals. To be sure, the initiation rituals highlight the sexuality of the adolescents. But not so much out of fear of sexuality as due rather to the fact that with marriage the autonomy and coherence of the extended family is endangered because either a partner from another kin-group is admitted, or a member of the own kin group leaves it. The initiation rituals mark the biological change of adolescents. But this has to be understood as a social affair instead of the individual's personal body transformation.

Purity and Impurity, Auspiciousness and Inauspiciousness

Like most religious rituals, initiation rituals have a lot to do with purification, blessings, and appeasement. Through them, the biological and social changes are challenged. In an ideal world nothing changes because it cannot be improved. In rituals, men are identified with this world in order to protect themselves and participate in and benefit from this eternal perfect world that never changes. It is the Brahmin who, in a Hindu context, knows how to make such identifications with the ideal world. He purifies and blesses the house and calls on the gods for assistance and pacifies the ancestors, he prepares the sacred place, performs the fire sacrifice (*homa*), the centre of the rituals' activities, and the pacifying rituals for the forefathers and -mothers (e.g. *nāndīkamukhaśrāddha*).

In order to bless the ritual specialists and participants with auspiciousness, they have to be purified. This happens time and again by employing the symbols of immortality: gold (coins), *ḍubo* or couch grass (*kuśa*), or the *kalaśa*, the pot into which the gods have been invoked. Initiates and participants are welcomed with Newar symbols of blessings, especially with *svagā*, a yoghurt mark made on the temple, wet rice with red powder on the forehead, or ritual food.

In many contexts the children themselves are treated as deities. They sit on gods' seats, are fed special foods and are worshipped as gods or goddesses. They receive and give the *tikā* or gifts like a temple deity. By accepting certain gifts they also bless the donors. However, paradoxically girls lose the ability of becoming a *kumārī*, a "real" virgin goddess, through their Ihi marriage. They then become a *kanyā*, a maid that has to be given away. By this the girl becomes liable to impurity whereas as a child she was beyond such cat-

egories. Purity, thus, becomes important for the distinction of status.

The creation of purity entails the removal (or shifting) of impurity. This is performed, for example, by discarding polluted substances, e.g. nails, umbilical cord or the shaved off hair, on the absorbing stones (*chvāsaḥ*) or in the river, by washing the children's body and anointing them with turmeric, by pouring water over them from the sacred pot (*kalaśa*), e.g. during the *kanyādāna* subrite in the Ihi marriage, by wafting fire and smoke over the ritual participants, or by holy words, especially *mantras*, that accompany the ritual acts.

Most Newars regard substances that have to do with the body, but even more so with alterations and transformations in life, as polluting: liquid excretions such as sweat, saliva, semen, blood, especially menstrual blood, as well as excrements, hair, fingernails and toenails. However, these excretions and other substances are not polluting as such, but rather because they are an expression of a visible, biologically physical process, and hence of a change. Life-cycle rituals are intended to bring these changes to a standstill and to create a life that never changes.

Moreover, it is not the individual body that is polluted through its biological changes (birth, food, menstruation, death etc.), but the social body of the lineage (*phukī*). Therefore, pollution is not a question of personal feelings, like disgust, but due rather to biological change or the violation of the norms of an extended family and the position of the individual in it.

Likewise, pollution is 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 gain their meaning through their relation to the person in question. If a younger person touches the feet of an older person, if a woman touches the feet of a Brahmin, her husband or of her child (see, for example, the section on An-

naprāśana), this is a sign of subordination and respect. And even when a person has ritually purified himself after pollution, he or she might still not be pure for all other members of his or her sub-caste.

Biological intervals imply extreme changes of the body and thus are extremely polluting. This concerns especially birth (including the second birth that initiations are meant to be) and death. According to the legal Sanskrit texts, the woman in childbirth is on the same level as corpse-bearers or dogs. Or, for example, a death in a family: for four to six days, many relatives, especially the women of the lineage, are polluted. But life-cycle turning points like childbirth, initiation or marriage are also changes that require special rites of 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.

The Individual and the Social

Initiation rituals have mostly been studied as events that concern the individual's transformation from one life-stage to another. Jan Snoek (1987: 152), for instance, summarises: "The object of an initiation thus is an individual person." Without neglecting this aspect, we regard such rituals primarily as a family show of membership, honour and prestige, and as an event that orchestrates ritual actions and spatial relations that involve and bind together the members of an extended family or lineage group and inhabitants of the neighbourhood, city quarter, or to a certain extent

even the whole city. It is only by initiation that a boy or girl can become a full member of the lineage. The initiation therefore is a matter of the nuclear family's standing within the extended family and the greater kin group. It is not a personal ritual where a social group celebrates an individual for his or her own sake.

Newar initiations can therefore only be understood in social relational terms. It is the son or daughter, father or mother, maternal uncle or father's sister who are required, but not the individual. Psychological analyses of childhood and initiation rituals underscore the relative ego strength of the individual and often tend to underestimate the strengths of the extended family's cohesion. Max Weber's methodical individualism, as well as Louis Dumont's transcendental holism – to some extent the obverse – illustrate that the actual dynamic social force in South Asia, the extended family, is neglected. Neither individual persons nor caste alliances are South Asia's social driving force, but rather the extended family. However, Western economic theories recognise individuals and business units, but not families as driving social forces.²⁹ Individuals are paid salaries; individuals work, buy, and sell. Just as housework is seldom included in economic calculations because it is not subject to market rules, so the family as an economic and social agent in India is not perceived, or is perceived only negatively. Such thinking maintains that strong family cohesion leads to unprofitable parcelling of the family property, low mobility, nepotism, and a lack of initiative. But the Indian extended family is basically a company with capital, production of goods, distribution of labour, hierarchical corporate organisation, bookkeeping, reserves, and social security, but also with a market value, as becomes clear in initiations and marriage negotiations. The cohesion of this "company," its corporate identity, is attained, among other

²⁹ For a critique of that, see Sen 1993:452ff.

things, through childhood and it is marked by such rituals.

Initiation rituals are an event by which the extended family demonstrates its social status by inviting many guests. The preparations for the important day must be meticulous and extravagant in order to impress the guests. Everything is prepared with great accuracy and in enormous detail. Other ritual specialists (barbers, *Jośi*, *Tini*) are involved and the materials for the ritual have to be acquired: these include ritual items as well as food, animals that are sacrificed, party tents, chairs, tables, carpets, crockery, lamps, and so on. Since the 1970s, families send out printed, often gold engraved invitations to relatives, dignitaries or prestigious personages, neighbours, and also friends.

Although most initiation rituals concentrate on the individual, *Ihi* and *Bāre chuyegu* are, to a certain extent, collectively organised status group rituals in which many families and castes come together in public. Other initiation rituals are performed in the privacy of the houses or courtyards of the nuclear or extended family, generally without much public attention. But even in these cases the voluminous joint meal (*bhoj*) concluding the ritual is obligatory.

In all these rituals, members of the extended family are integrated on various levels. The *Ihi* girls have to visit the relatives before their marriage to the *bel* fruit, while the consanguine relatives, especially the maternal uncle and the father's sisters, take an active part in the rituals. In this temporary *communitas*, kinship boundaries and brotherhood (which also include the ancestors) are reaffirmed.

The act of binding, which in a way symbolically expresses the bounds of a social group, is seen on a number of occasions. Threads and girdles are used to make connections between the children or sacrificers and deities, to encircle auspiciousness in the case of the *kumaḥkāḥ* thread in *Ihi*, or to mark with a

sacred thread (*mekhalā*, *yajñopavīta*) the second birth of boys.

Given these aspects, initiation rituals can even be regarded as events of de-individualisation. Pierre Bourdieu (1990) has aptly remarked that rites of passage separate those persons who have undergone them from persons who have still yet to. They are lasting demarcations of this difference because there is no return. The way in which this is done might appear or even be arbitrary, but it is more important that it is socially legitimised and accepted, independent of what an individual may actually believe or feel. Such rituals are related to a symbolic and authoritative cosmos by which the group (extended family, caste etc.) defines itself. Only if this value system is commonly shared are the rituals effective. Bourdieu calls this a reasonable fallacy and a plausible act of social magic, through which any family member can become a member of the lineage group even if he or she might be a lunatic, a criminal or a transsexual. The status ascribed in the ritual effects social norms and rules that are difficult to overcome unless the whole system is questioned. In initiation rituals this system is established and celebrated.

Aspects of Space and Time

In their complexity as social events, Newar initiation rituals include various spatial aspects. They happen in a place that is topographically larger than the sacrificial place. They include temples, public buildings, homes of relatives, and processions through the city to holy places, ritually absorbing stones (*chvāsah*) and rivers. Thus, during the *Ihi* marriage the girls have to move from the house to the spaces where the rituals are publicly announced and performed; often with a loudspeaker so that everybody in the vicinity gets to know about the event. Moreover, at the end of the *Annaprāśana*, the infant is taken to

the Gaṇeśa shrine of the city quarter, and this is believed to be the first social outing for the baby. Or during Buddhist Kaytāpūjā the boys in their ascetic's dress do a round to worship the nearby *stūpas*, *caityas* and shrines of the deities. Often such processions are accompanied by a little band with flutes, drums and cymbals.

In and through these ritual dynamics, private events transmute into public events in which many people and ultimately the whole city are involved. At certain times, Bhaktapur pulsates with all the life-cycle rituals being performed at numerous places.

Furthermore, a constant task for the initiates is performing all the movements from the natal to the conjugal space by sending or receiving gifts or obligatory ritual items. A striking example is the large number of trips the potential Ihi girls make to their relatives (see map, page 124). By this the young girls move within the city space and become familiar with the realm of their future life. As we have pointed out, in a way the city can be imagined as a "greater house" which the girls inhabit as ritually mature beings after the Ihi marriage. The outer limits of Kvpade, the extended territory of Bhaktapur as defined by two rivers, are only transcended when accompanying the parents to work in the fields. The ritual space is protected by the seat of the Eight Mother Goddesses, the Aṣṭamātrkā, while the inner space is literally occupied by the girl's paternal and maternal relatives.

Interestingly, despite its importance for social coherence, there is no central place such as a large temple or a central town square for Newar initiation rituals. The rituals are family-bound events and mainly incorporate nearby shrines or temples to local deities close to the family's house. This is of course due to the fact that Hinduism does not have a central institution such as the church. In Hinduism, the house is the temple, and an initiation is an initiation into the community of the house

(as a symbol of the lineage) but not into the community of a religion or church.

Initiation rituals are rituals of separation (from childhood) and integration (into the extended family). In between lies a liminal phase that is replete with spatial connotations. Thus, the mothers and newborns are impure and socially avoided for four to six days after birth, girls undergoing Bārḥā tayegu are secluded in a separate room for twelve days, and the Buddhist boys of Kaytāpūjā are for a moment on their way to Benares or into the forest. They all return bathed and with new dresses in order to be transposed into their new life stage.

A last spatial aspect that appears unique to us is the spatial construction of the ritual events. Most rituals are performed in a highly congested space with very little room for the ritual specialists and individual participants to move. Often they have little more than a small cushion on which they can sit. Despite the long duration of a ritual, nobody ever seems to complain about these conditions. It seems that this density corresponds with the close bonds that are enacted through the rituals.

Newar initiation rituals also show specific features with respect to ritual time. In the introduction, we have already remarked on the importance of the calculation of the exact moment (*sāit*, Skt. *muhūrta*) for the core element of rituals. This time is based on the personal horoscope of the initiate, as is true of most initiation rituals. This fact, however, does not emphasise the importance of the individual because a horoscope places a person within cosmological coordinates that are related not only to the planets, but also to the parents and ancestors. It makes a person become part of an astrologically fixed structure that has little room for personal preferences and choices. Newar Hindu initiation rituals take place in a time that relates the individual to the lineage and the cosmos. The exception is the time for the Ihi marriage, which is calculated ac-

ording to an auspicious date in the calendar. In this case, the ritual is at once a public and collective event so that the individual aspects do not concern the ritual time in the same manner.

Another striking quality of Newar and many other South Asian rituals is their duration. Ihi and Kaytāpūjā take three or more full days, Bārhā tayegu takes twelve days during which many family members, especially the women, are absorbed and kept busy by a great number of activities. From a Western point of view, the duration sometimes seems like a waste of time, and even more and more Newars complain about the long phases where they just have to wait for the next ritual step. However, given the fact that these initiation rituals are essential for establishing and demonstrating the status and honour of the extended family, ritual time becomes a highly productive time in which different forms of efficacy surface. One could even argue that the longer the ritual takes the more prestigious and socially productive it is.

In life-cycle rituals we also often observe the contrast between ritual and natural time. Thus, in the Ihi marriage girls are “married off” before reaching a marriageable age; boys leave their home to study before actually being able to read and write. In a way, Newar life-cycle rituals are embodiments of ritual time that show much greater variety than natural time. The time span of the age for Ihi, Kaytāpūjā, and Bāre chuyegu is considerable: infants might stand in a row with grown-up boys or girls. This does not hold true for Annaprāsana, birthday rituals or Bārhā tayegu, where the biological phase is more important.

The ritual time of initiation rituals also includes phases of liminality, i.e. periods for seclusion, separation, or reversal of roles. We have already mentioned the spatial seclusion after birth and during Bārhā tayegu, or the *deśāntara* episode when the boy is positioned

outside the boundaries of his social group as an “ascetic” or “monk” – as neither child nor man but a hybrid. Such periods seem to be inserted in order to make the rebirths more impressive and effective.

The final aspect we want to point out in this part of the conclusion is the procedural character of Newar initiation rituals. Many of them are linked and combined and have to be seen as gradual steps in a process of social and religious integration into the lineage group of the religious community. Thus, the Ihi marriage is the first of three marriages, for it is followed by the marriage to the sun during Bārhā tayegu and the “real” marriage to a man. Kaytāpūjā, too, is combined with Busā khāyagu (*cūḍākaraṇa*), the shaving of the head. In this way, certain life-cycle rituals have to be performed in order to allow another one to take place. It is impossible to marry without Kaytāpūjā or Ihi. Likewise, a Newar man who has not undergone Kaytāpūjā cannot light his father’s funeral pyre. It seems as if the life of a Newar is embedded in a parallel ritual life which is constructed according to principles that have a lot to do with salvation and immortality, while at the same time being closely intertwined with everyday social relations.

The Construction of Immortality

Initiations can be seen as rebirths into a world of immortality. In the male initiations the boys are identified with the immortal Veda or Buddha, in the Ihi marriage the girls are married to Buddha or Suvarṇakumāra or Viṣṇu, an immortal god. All Hindu and even the Buddhist rituals are performed together with the fire sacrifice (*homa*), which in brahminical tradition is the Veda that stands for immortality and salvation. Seen from the perspective of the sanskritic-brahminical scriptures, initiation is not therefore a transformation. Instead, it is the construction of a world that

man, or rather the absolute principle, *brahman*, has created itself; a world of the sacrifice or Veda.

The Hindu initiation is therefore full of identifications with this immortal world expressed for instance in the fire, the *mantras*, the evergreen couch (*kuśa*) grass, the gold, or the virgin cult. To give just two examples: in the Ihi ritual and the Kaytāpūjā, the priest hands the father a ring, called the “ring of the *kuśa* grass” in Nepal (Nep. *kuśāumṭi*). *Kuśa* grass is an attribute of Brahmā, the creator god and the personification of the eternal *brahman* principle with which the Brahmin priest sees himself identified by virtue of his knowledge of the Veda. In the boy’s initiation, especially the Vratibandha, this ring is bound into the son’s hair on the evening of the day before and keeps apart the tuft (*śikhā*) of hair that will not be cut off later because it represents the paternal line and thus the link to the ancestors. In the Ihi marriage, the father wears the ring during the *kanyādāna* sub-rite when he hands over his daughter to the Suvarṇakumāra deity. In both cases, the initiates are thus ritually identified with immortality. As Marc Bloch (1992: 4) aptly remarks, in initiations individuals are made “part of something permanent, therefore life-transcending”.

The other example has to do with parenthood. The new birth also signifies a ritual substitution of the parents: ritual parentage almost excludes biological parents. By maintaining a distance to natural parentage, it is intended that ritual parentage will acquire a greater legitimacy in the religious training of the children. Natural biological parentage is linked with deadly forces. According to Hindu belief, birth is an impure process, which poses an obstacle to the realisation of immortality. Birth actually implies death.

Only human beings need birth whereas gods never die and therefore are not born. As a result the natural parents have either to be identified with immortal substances, such as the “ring of *kuśa* grass”, or they have to be substituted by ritual parents such as the Brahmin priest who in ritual terms is to be regarded as immortal on account of his identification with the *brahman*. It is therefore the Brahmin priest who teaches and instructs the boy during the initiation, even though the boys are not initiated into learning the Veda.

Such identifications are the bases of all sacrificial ritual practice and theology (cf. Michaels 2004: 332-239). They are an essential characteristic of Hinduism. However, the aspect of immortality is certainly not present for all participants. In terms of doctrine, the initiation is a release from individualism aimed at incorporating the individual into immortality, making him equivalent with it. But an initiation has to do with individuals and actors, not with virtual ritual beings. The danger in rituals conceived as normative and textual is that reality is seen as an imperfect realisation of an ideal. It is assumed that rituals have to proceed by plan according to rules. Such rituals exist only in the minds of those who codify the ritual rules: priestly theologians and scholars. Standardised rituals are also an expression of habits that are thought and felt, done and experienced, that are acquired, learned, and shaped in a specific culture; and introduced deliberately in this manner, they can be moulded tactically, combatively, jokingly, or playfully. With the cultural awareness acquired in childhood, most of the participants know what is permitted and what is not, what is good or bad, beautiful or repulsive.

