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## Newar Hybrid Ritual and its Language in Hindu Initiations<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In his article “The Language of the Buddhist Sanskrit Texts” from 1954, John Brough aptly remarks that in comparison to texts in Classical Sanskrit, Buddhist Sanskrit works frequently appear “ungrammatical, on occasion barbarously so.” And he continues: “The immediate and natural reaction of scholars accustomed to the regularity of Sanskrit was to stigmatise these shortcomings, and to attempt to remove as many irregularities as possible by forcibly emending the text” (Brough 1954: 25).

Similarly Newar ritual handbooks and other texts in Newari seem to be obscure, written in a rather fussy Sanskrit with numerous grammatical and orthographical “mistakes” and lacunae, and cheaply produced or simply copied in low-priced modern copy-books. These shortcomings have been declared (with regard to the *Svayambhūpurāṇa*) to be the result of the authors’ “lack of proficiency in what to the Subcontinent was the chief language of traditional learning” (Kölver 1999: 189)—and according to Sylvain Lévi the text is written in a “barbarous style and abominable metrics” (Lévi 1905: 210).

However, whereas the anomalies of the Buddhist Sanskrit tradition were soon recognised through Edgerton’s *Buddhist Hybrid Grammar and Dictionary* to be something genuine and as texts in their own right, Newar ritual handbooks continued to be treated with scepticism or curiosity. The difference is partly due to the fact that Newar ritual handbooks have yet to receive the attention they deserve. And the structural and fundamental problem behind this hierarchy of texts and contexts is likewise seldom addressed: the problem posed by the contextualisation of the texts, a typical ethno-Indological conundrum which I would like to examine in this paper.

To be sure, ritual handbooks, especially as manuscripts, are often just private notebooks that have been written and produced solely for private and practical use. They are *aide-mémoires* for the priests and therefore provisionally designed: full of trans- and overscriptions, additions, corrections, marginalia and sketchy drawings concerning for instance how and where to place ritual objects, *maṇḍalas* and *yantras*, or the *nava-grahas* (Kropf 2005). They are not meant for an audience or for publication. In the Newar context, the scribes are not always Brahmins, sometimes they are Jośis or other specialists. The “mistakes” are therefore not always a sign of linguistic incompetence

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but rather of the personal ways notes and memos are made. After all, these priests are more concerned with getting the ritual right rather than the text. Such personal handbooks are far more personal than the subject they are dealing with.

Any editor of such texts is confronted with problems relating to this aforementioned conundrum: should one regard the anomalies of the texts as showing a lack of knowledge of Sanskrit, as priestly and/or scribal fallibility, and if so, should the text be emended and corrected—to the extent that the original becomes scarcely recognisable? Or is the language and style of these texts a phenomenon in its own right that can be understood as a local (Newar and Newari) hybridisation of Classical Sanskrit traditions? In other words, do the texts simply show linguistic decadence, corruption and incompetence, or do they constitute a genuine and authentic genre, a linguistic and stylistic category of its own?

In the following I will argue that Newar initiation rituals and the accompanying handbooks are basically distinguished by two facts:

1. The use of the texts does not necessarily require a knowledge of Sanskrit;
2. Although seemingly written in a form of Sanskrit, the structure of the language is Newari, not Sanskrit.

In both cases, Sanskrit is on the surface while the hypertext is a local ritual and linguistic context. Both the ritual context and the structure of the language can be seen as a Newarisation of ritual traditions. The handbooks combine Newari with Sanskrit and Nepali, verses (mantras) with prose, and manuscripts with printed texts. And the ritual combines the high with the local tradition, Brahmanical rituals with non-Brahmanical rituals, Hindu ritual elements with folk customs. Such interferences between Sanskrit and Newari have been noticed before, especially with regard to Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit and the *Svayambhūpurāṇa* (Kölver 1999).

I will focus on the Hindu initiation ritual (*mekhalābandhana*, New. *kaytāpūjā*) among the Newar farmers of Bhaktapur, but despite this limitation I regard my argument as valid for the following categories of such texts:

- Personal handbooks belonging to the priests, not normally printed, but occasionally microfilmed by the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project; such texts are generally written in a mixture of Sanskrit, Newari and Nepali.
- Printed manuals in Sanskrit, often published with a commentary or translation in Nepali; such texts are used by many *pūjāris* during their rituals.
- Documents from private persons or from the Guṭhi Saṃsthāna related to the rituals performed.
- Grey literature (pamphlets etc.) from ritual organisations.

The argument does not concern ritual handbooks in Sanskrit (*sūtras*, *smṛtis*, *nibandhas*, *vidhis* etc.) from the Great Tradition with a pan-Indian distribution, and only partly elaborated ritual texts in Sanskrit written by known learned scholars and locally published by the Mahendra-Saṃskṛta-Viśvavidyālaya, Tribhuvan Viśvavidyālaya, Nepāla Rājākīya Prajñā-Pratiṣṭhāna or private publishers.



## The example from the loin-cloth ritual (*mekhalābandhana*)

Before I come to my main point, I would like to present an example from a *Daśa-karmavidhi* manuscript belonging to a Rājopādhyāya family of Bhaktapur, the *mekhalābandhana* section. For reasons of convenience I have numbered the ritual sequences in this excerpt from 1 to 48. The Newari sentences are underlined and the mantras appear in bold.

No. 1–15 are preparatory and include several purifying ritual elements that in many respects are “typically” Newar, e.g. worshipping the absorbing stones in front of the house (6), sprinkling water with an *arghapātra* (7), throwing pieces of dried fruit and flowers from a wooden measuring vessel (8–9), worshipping the lamp, the wooden measuring vessel and the iron keys (10), paring the nails by the barber’s wife (12), the nails being collected by the father’s sister (13), and bathing the boy with water mixed with pulverised oilcake and a special mixture of herbs (14).

The boy is brought to the sacred arena, where the main ritual starts with *nīrājan* or *nirañjan(a) yāy(e)gu* (16). This is followed by waving a small clay saucer with burning coals in which a lit wick of raw cotton, mustard seeds, a flower and rice are all offered in order to destroy evil and to remove sins and obstacles. It is touched and then brought to the threshold stone (*pikhālākhū*). This is again followed by various purifying rites—among them *svagā*. The climax is of course the binding and worship of the loincloth (22–23), followed by various strengthening and purifying rites such as *pratiṣṭhā* (27, 32), in which popped rice is thrown over the boy by his relatives, and *siphārati* (31), where a light (Skt. *ārati*) is waved with a *sukūda* lamp (in front of an image or person) together with a wooden measuring vessel (*siphā*).

The ritual is concluded by various rites that are characterised by again purifying and blessing the boy and the participants, as well as by paying the *brāhmaṇa* priest (33–48).

### *Daśakarmavidhi*<sup>2</sup>, *mekhalābandhana* section

#### 1. *atha mekhalāvandhana.*

Now the binding of the girdle (*mekhalā*).

#### 2. *vidhithem kalasa tiyeke.*

Prepare the sacred vase (*kalaśa*) according to the rules.

#### 3. *vrāhmanena vidhivat kalaśārcanaṃ kuryāt yathākarmatvaṃ.*

The Brahmin should worship the sacred vase at the auspicious time.

2 No title page, anonymous author. Handbook of Hari Sharan Rajopadhyaya, Lalache, Bhaktapur. No date. Nepali paper, 84 fols., incomplete. Size: ca. 28 x 9 cm, 17–19 lines per folio, Devanāgarī script, black ink, occasional underlining of the mantras with yellow (*kumkuma*) and red (*haridrā*) colour, some marginalia. The manuscript has been edited by Gutschow & Michaels (2008: 227–35).



4. *thamkāli nāyakanam kumāra lāsālāhayē svastikāsana taye. om (a)sura-ghneti*<sup>3</sup>.  
The *thakāli* or head of the family (*nāyaka*, New. *nāyaḥ*) should bring the boy by the hand and make him sit on a seat with *svastikā* and (recite) *om asura-ghnam...* (RVKh 2.4.1)
5. *nirma[n]chanādi, om raksohaṇam valagahanti, adhy avocad adhi iti, om tejo si*.  
Purifying etc. (reciting) *raksohaṇam valagahanam...* (VS 5.23), *adhy avocad adhi...* (VS 16.5) and *tejo 'si...* (VS 22.1).
6. *salim milā pikhālamkhu choye*.  
Send the clay cup with fire to the absorbing stone (*pikhālākhu*).
7. *arghapātrayā lamkhana hāye, om devasya tvā*.  
Sprinkle water from the *arghyapātra* (reciting) *devasya tvā...* (VS 1.10).
8. *si pene, om tava vāyu vṛhaspate*.  
Throw pieces of fruits<sup>4</sup> (reciting) *tava vāyav ṛtaspate...* (VS 27.34).
9. *kumārana kalaśayāke ke tānake*.  
The boy should worship the sacred vase by throwing rice.
10. *mata pha tācā pūjā. om agnir mūrdheti, om trātāram indram avitāram indram have have suhavam sūram indram hvayāmi śakraṃ puruhūtam indram svasti no maghavā dhātva indrah*.  
Worship the lamp, the (wooden) measuring vessel<sup>5</sup> and the (iron) keys (reciting) *agnir mūrdhā divaḥ...* (VS 3.12) (and) *trātāram indram...* (VS 20.50).
11. *svagana bīye. om yad adya ka, om tvam yaviṣṭha dā, om dadhikrāvṇo, om yā phalini*.  
Give *svagā*<sup>6</sup> (reciting) *yad adya kac...* (VS 33.35), *tvam yaviṣṭha dāśuṣo...* (VS 13.52), *dadhikrāvṇo...* (VS 23.32) (and) *yāḥ phalinīr...* (VS 12.89).
12. *siphārati yānāvali lusi dhene*.  
Let the nails be pared after having performed *siphārati*<sup>7</sup>.
13. *ninina lusi phaye*.  
The father's sister should collect the nails.
14. *khau sarvoṣadhi, tayā kumāra snāna yācake*.  
Let the boy take a bath after anointing the body with *khau*<sup>8</sup> and *sarvoṣadhi*<sup>9</sup>.
15. *lā sālāva nāpāyā thāyasa duta yene*.  
Take the boy back inside holding his hand and make him sit on his previous place.

3 *a-* is added to *suraghneti* by a second scribe.

4 Meaning unclear, possibly derived from *si* "fruits" and *pene* "to spread".

5 New. *pha*, a measuring pot for 8 *mānā* of rice (Nep. *pāthi*).

6 Nep. *sagūn* i.e. a mixture of rice, red powder, flowers etc. for *ṭikā*.

7 *Ārati* using a mixture of fruits with dried fried rice (*lasa*).

8 A kind of soap, pulverised oil-cake.

9 Available in local shops.



16. *nimamchanādi*.  
(Again) purifying etc.
17. *matā pha tādacā, svagonanam tvāye*.  
(Again) waving with (a plate of) *svagā* and the lamp, the (wooden) measuring vessel and the (iron) keys.
18. *kumārayā lāhatisa svasti coye*.  
Draw a *svastika* on the hands of the boy.
19. *pātayā kastā<sup>10</sup> tayā svagona biye*.  
Give *svagā* together with a silk-made loin cloth (*kaytā*).
20. *velā julānāva thakālinam kaetā cike*.  
The *thakālī* should fasten the loin-cloth at the proper (i.e. auspicious) time.
21. *veda, om yenendrāya vr̥ha(spa)ti vāsaḥ paryyadadhād amṛtaṁ tene tvā pari-dhanyāyuṣe dīrghāyastvāya valāya varccase*  
Recitation of the Veda:<sup>11</sup> *yenendrāya...* (PG 2.2.7).
22. *gramthi ja vasam lātake*.  
Put the knot on the right side (of the boy's hips).
23. *gramthi pūjā*.  
Worship the knot.
24. *snāna*.  
Ritual bath.
25. *candana svagona*.  
(Give *tikā* of) sandalwood (and) *svagā*.
26. *puṣpaṁ nama*.  
Salutation (with) flowers.
27. *patiṣṭhā<sup>12</sup>, mano jūti*.  
(Throw) popped rice (on the boy reciting) *mano jūtir...* (VS 2.13).
28. *thvate dhunanāva suyāgu kaetā vasa tayā svagona biye uthe*.  
After finishing this, give *svagā* together with a stitched loin cloth (*kaytā*).
29. *vasa hlāye veda, om vasoḥ pavitram asi, dīrghāyustvāya*.  
(In the same way<sup>13</sup>) hand over the dress, recite the Veda *vasoḥ pavitram asi...* (VS 1.3, and) *dīrghāyutvāya...* (KS 3.9.6).
30. *vasa tiyeke*.  
Put on the dress.
31. *siphāratī*.  
(Perform) *ārati* with *siphā*.
32. *pratisthā*.  
(Throw) popped rice.

10 Read New. *kaytā*; according to DCN *kastā* is “a kind of garment”, here it is the loincloth.

11 Although the boy is not entitled to receive the Veda, the main actions are liturgically accompanied by Vedic verses.

12 Read *patiṣṭhā*.

13 He should give *svagā* reciting “*om yad adya kac...*” (VS 33.35) etc. as before.



33. *annasaṃkalpa*.  
Ritual decision for the gift of food (to the priest).
34. *devadakṣiṇā*.  
(Give) *dakṣiṇā* to the deities (i.e. the *kalaśas* etc.).
35. *vrāhmaṇādi sarveṣāṃ dakṣiṇā*.  
(Give) *dakṣiṇā* to the Brahmins etc. and all other (ritual specialists?).<sup>14</sup>
36. *vācanaṃ, svasti bhavamto me brūtām svasti*.  
Blessings (*vācana*) (reciting) *svasti bhavam*...
37. *trir ācamya*.  
Sip three times water (from the palm of the hand).
38. *nyāsa līnam*.  
Dissolve the mental commitment (*nyāsa*).
39. *kalasavisarjanaṃ, ud vayaṃ tamasvaḥ iti*.  
Remove the sacred vases (reciting) *ud vayaṃ tamasas*... (VS 27.10 = 20.21).
40. *jvalānhaskanasa kalasayā laṃkhana hāye jvalānaskanasa*.  
Sprinkle water from the sacred vase over the pots of vermilion and the ritual mirror.
41. *ghaḍiyā laṃkha tayā abhiṣeka, om devasya tvā*.  
Ritual washing (*abhiṣeka*) with water from the clock water pot (*ghaḍiyā*)<sup>15</sup> (reciting) *devasya tvā*... (VS 1.10).
42. *camdana, om yad adya ka*.  
(Give a *tikā* of) sandalwood (to all participants reciting) *yad adya kac*... (VS 33.35).
43. *simdhūra, om tvam yaviṣṭha dā*.  
(Give a *tikā* of) *sindūra* (to all participants reciting) *tvam yaviṣṭha dāsuṣo*... (VS 13.52).
44. *svagoṇa, om dadhikrāvṇo*.  
(Give) *svagā* (to all participants reciting) *dadhikrāvṇo*... (VS 23.32).
45. *āśīrvāda, om dīrghāyuṣ ta 'oṣadhi*.  
(Give) blessings (reciting) *dīrghāyus ta oṣadhe*... (VS 12.100).
46. *sakalastam biye*.  
Give (this blessing) to everybody.
47. *sākṣi thāye*.  
Release (the sun etc.) as the witness(es).
48. *iti mekhalāvandhana samāpta*.  
Here ends (the chapter on) the binding of the girdle.

14 *Jośi, ācāju* etc.

15 According to the tradition, one *jośi* should tell the accurate ritual time (Nep./New. *sāit*) using a clock water pot and the water from that pot should be used for the *abhiṣeka*.



## Sanskrit, Pseudo-Sanskrit or Newar Hybrid Sanskrit?

The tendency in Classical Newari to borrow from other languages, especially from Sanskrit, has often been noted (Joergensen 1931: 12, Kölver & Śākya 1985: 27). Estimates of the proportion of *tadbhava* and *tatsama* loan words range between 10 and 25 percent (DCN, p. xii). This inclination towards Sanskrit is even stronger in ritual and more recent texts: “However, as we come to later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts there is a marked tendency to borrow, and use learned vocabulary—so much so that very often only the grammar of the text is Newari, the lexical items nearly all from loanwords” (DCN, p. xiii).

The *mekhalābandhana* section of this *Daśakarmavidhi* is no exception to the rule and confirms what can be observed in similar texts: the language of these ritual handbooks differs from Sanskrit *paddhatis* or *vidhis* through a number of linguistic peculiarities. The following is a (partial) list of such features:

### 1. Syntactical characteristics

- Words are separated without following the *sandhi* rules (similar to Jaina-Sanskrit: see Maurer 1962: 136–7, Balbir 1982: 53–5): *gram̐thi pūjā* (23) or *mekhalāvandhana samāpta* (48).
- Vernacularisation of verb forms for the ritual instructions: preference for Sanskrit nouns and Newari verbs.
- Associative use of mantras: See, for instance, the use of the Ṛgvedic mantra *dadhikrāvṇa* (RV 4.39.6, VS 32.32) together with New. *svagā* (*saguna*), i.e. diluted yoghurt (*dadhi*), although this mantra from the *Ṛgveda* is related to the *Dadhikrāvan* horse (cf. Deshpande 1996: 416).

### 2. Lexical characteristics

- Bilinguality: use of vernacular languages such as Newari and Nepali together with Sanskrit; the Newari portions have been underlined in the sample given above.
- Sanskritisation of Newari words: *svagoṇanam* (perhaps instrumental case in Newari if read as *svagoṇanam*) for *svagā*.

### 3. Morphology

- Absent or corrupt case suffixes: *kalasa* (2), *snāna* (24), *candana* (25), but, for instance, *puṣpam* (26); *samāpta* (48).
- Arbitrary or Newari case suffixes in Sanskrit words: *vidhithem* (2), *arghapatrayā* (7), *kumārana* (9), *kumārayā* (18); this phenomenon goes along with a nasalisation of Sanskrit words, especially when combined with *-them*, *-tvam* or *-thyaṃ*.

### 4. Orthography

- Inconsistency or spelling “mistakes”, probably due to the background of the Newari script, such as the mixture of sibilants: *saṣṭi* (11), *abhiseka* (17), *āsirvāda* (12, 18), *candana* (25) and *caṃdana* (42); (cf. also Gutschow & Kölver & Shresthacarya 1987: 11).



- Frequent interchanges (see Brough 1954: 354): *a* and *ā*; *i* and *ī*; *u* and *ū*; *e*, *ya* and *ye*; *o*, *va* and *vo*; *ja* and *ya*; *jña* and *g(n)ya*; *ṭa* and *ta*; *śa* and *sa*; *ṣa* and *kha*; *va* and *ba*, etc.

Given these and many other features,<sup>16</sup> is this Sanskrit “a jargon born of ignorance of ‘good’ Sanskrit” (Salomon 1989: 285)? Or is it an independent Sanskrit, which can be compared with Buddhist, or Jaina Sanskrit? Should it be called vernacular or colloquial Sanskrit? It is certainly not the Sanskrit of a closed community, school or sect; it is also not to be regarded as vernacular Sanskrit or dialect. And nor is it a Sanskrit that is developing into a kind of middle-Indian language. It is, I would argue, a language that could and should be called Pseudo-Sanskrit or, better, Newar Hybrid Sanskrit, because the text consists of calques from standard Sanskrit texts and mantras. However, despite its Sanskrit title and appearance, the text remains in its syntactical and contextual structure a Newar and a Newari text.

The *mekhalābandhana* portion of the *Daśakarmavidhi* has 256 words, but only 94 are in Newari. In the *ṣaṣṭhījāgarāṇa* section the relation is 127 to 21. This clearly shows a dominance of Sanskrit. However, on closer inspection it appears to be a text in Newari because nearly all the Sanskrit words are nouns, if one leaves out the mantras and words like *atha*, *iti*, *yathā* etc. The grammatically important instructions for the ritual actions are in Newari or given implicitly in the Sanskrit nouns (e.g. *snāna*, *pūjā* etc.).

Such use of ritual terms or specialised ritual language is widespread. The Latin liturgy in Christian services is perhaps the most prominent example. Likewise in the Indian or South-Asian context one encounters a frequent change between sacred and vernacular languages. Thus, flowers, water or rice become ritual flowers, ritual water or ritual rice just by a terminological change: *pāni* (“water”) becomes *jal*, *mūthai* (“sweets”) becomes *naivedya*, *phul* (“flower”) becomes *puṣpa*, *bati* (“light”) becomes *dīp*, *camal* (“rice”) becomes *akṣetā* (Skt. *akṣata*) (cf. Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 120). However, the use of a leaning word should not be confused with language proficiency. For reasons of prestige the language of the text is adapted to Sanskrit but not *vice versa* (cf. Salomon 1989: 286). In this way a collection of Sanskrit words and Vedic mantra quotations give the pretence of a Sanskrit text that essentially retains its Newari structure. I will return to this point later.

## The Newarisation of the ritual

The hybridity of the language corresponds to the hybridity of the ritual. What on the surface looks like a Brahmanical *upanayana* or *vratibandha(na)* ritual (cf. Michaels 2004: 71–110; Zotter 2009) triggered by several Vedic recitations, is in reality a rural and localised event enriched by ritual elements from the Great Tradition.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., to substitute singular for plural, neuters for masculines, and many features regarding verbs (see Kölver 1999 describing the language of the *Svayambhūpurāṇa*).



Thus, in an *upanayana* ritual that follows the common Gr̥hyasūtras or modern ritual handbooks, the central elements are the tonsure, including the binding of the tuft (*śikhā*), the girdling with a *muñja* girdle, the investment with the sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*), the Vedic instruction, especially the teaching of the *sāvitrī* hymn, the lighting of the fire, the commencement of study (*vedārambha*), the *deśāntara* rite, and the ritual conclusion of the study period (*samāvartana*). Except for the tonsure, none of this is found in the Newar *kaytāpūjā* or *mekhalābandhana* rite.

It seems that the *kaytāpūjā* is an initiation that has transported ritual elements from the *upanayana* into a context dominated by special Newar rites. To give but a few examples:

- The cutting of the nails (*lusi dhenegu*): lit. “to pare the nails”: the ritual or symbolic paring of the toenails by a barber’s wife is part of the body purification prior to any life-cycle ritual. It is often accompanied by colouring the feet with red colour (*alah*).
- *kisli* (var. *kisali*): from *ki*, “rice” and *salī*, “small clay saucer”; offering of a small clay saucer with rice, a areca nut and a small coin, often placed on the *kalaśa* or hung from the ceiling or offered to a deity that invokes Mother Earth (represented by the clay pot), Dhānya-Lakṣmī (grains), a minister (nut) and the king or the population (coin) as witnesses to the rituals. *Kisli* is an essential part of *mimicā*.
- *mimicā*: small tray, a small flat plate made of reed with *kisli* as well as oil in a clay saucer, flour, *svāvā* (“flower rice”) and a coin and sometimes meat; given to the barber.
- *matā-phā-tācā-pūjā*: lit. “worship with lamp, measuring vessel and iron key(s)”: purifying worship with lamp (*matā*, often *sukūḍā*), a measuring vessel (*phā*) and iron key(s) (*tacā*), often held together by two hands.
- *nīrājan* or *nirāñjan(a)* *yāy(e)gu*: from (Skt.) *nīrājana*, “making bright” or (Skt.) *nirāñjana*, “spotless” (cf. Gellner 1992: 361, n. 17): waving with a small clay saucer with burning coals in which a lit wick of raw cotton, mustard seeds, a flower and rice are offered in order to destroy evil, to remove sins and obstacles. It is touched and then brought to the threshold stone (*pikhālākhu*). See also DCN s.v. *nirmmachanādi*: “a ritual act of putting yellow mustard seed and reddish brown mustard seed in a small clay pot and make hands warm and then touch one’s eyes”.
- The sending of a share of the sacrificial gifts to the ritual absorbing stone (*pikhālākhu*) in front of the house.
- *chvāsaḥ*: protective stone with a defined catchment area of households, which absorbs ritual waste and impure material, e.g. impure food, left-overs, the umbilical cord, and the dresses and beds of a dead person which are later collected by ritual specialists, e.g. the Jugīs. The stone is sometimes also called *kalādyah* (although some insist that this concerns a different place), a non-iconical female deity whose name is derived from *kalamka*, “unclean, impure things, left-overs.”



However, it is often unclear which deity resides in the *chvāsaḥ*. It is often regarded as a female mother or grandmother deity (*aji*, *ajimā*), often also called Chvāsaḥ Ajimā, but it is also believed that the ancestors (New. *pitri*) and ghosts (*piśāca*) reside there (cf. Toffin 1984: 486, Gellner 1988: 107).

- *siphāratī*, *siphā luyegu*: lit. “to pour (ritual fruits) from the wooden measuring vessel (*siphā*)” (from Skt. *śrī* and *phala*, cf. Skt. *puṣpavr̥ṣṭi*, “rain of flowers”): pouring of small pieces of ritual fruits and flowers over the heads of the participants, often done with a *sipha* (mod. New. *siphā*), “a wooden measuring vessel,” with a mixture of any fruit pieces and popped rice (*lāvā*), flowers, coins etc. In Buddhist rituals, it is generally poured from the bell.
- The ritual welcoming (*lasa kusaḥ*) at the threshold of a house or a courtyard, often performed by the elderly women before or during a ritual. The received person has their hands washed with added broken flattened rice (*cvakā baji*).
- *svagā*, *sagā*, *svagoṇa*, (Nep.) *sagūn*, (Skt.) *saguna*—“well-wishing food” (lit. “with good qualities, with virtue”): presentation of certain items such as new dresses and rice, dried fish, red powder, flowers, boiled eggs, coins, liquor (*aila*), ginger, soybeans etc. when giving the auspicious *tikā*; in the Parbatīya tradition, *sagūn* is sometimes just a *tikā* with yoghurt (cf. Gellner 1988: 108).

None of these ritual elements are described or listed in the traditional Gr̥hyasūtra texts on initiation. Nor are they limited to initiations, for they are often seen in further life-cycle and other Newar rituals.

However, the main point is that *kaytāpūjā* follows the Sanskritisation pattern by imitating the loincloth element and using Vedic mantras, but in its structure it remains a Newar ritual which originally probably followed other models. It lacks the educational and the sacrificial aspect. It is Brahmanical by the fact that Brahmin priests conduct major parts of it, but in most parts other ritual specialists such as the *joṣi*, *tini* or *karmācārya* as well as the eldest of the clan (*nāyaḥ*), the barber, the father’s sister (*nini*) or the *pāju* etc. take over the performance of the ritual. We can therefore see that the Newarisation of Hindu initiation rituals entails a great number of specific linguistic and ritualistic elements that are likely to be overseen if one looks at such rituals from the purist’s point of view.

## The functionality of ritual languages

As Sheldon Pollock has shown in his book *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (2006), the claim to grammatical and linguistic correctness has much to do with (royal) power and prestige as well as claims to exclusivity and membership of an elite. The Brahmanical administrators of the Sanskrit language effortlessly disregarded grammatically corrupt texts. Indologists, too, tend to depreciate hybrid forms of Sanskrit. Thus while editing and brilliantly analysing a series of Newari documents, Bernhard Kölver and Hemraj Śākya (1985: 27)



spoke of “much distorted” Sanskrit texts with “morphological malformations”, “syntactical clumsiness” or “clumsy expansions of the standard text”.

However, such texts, simple as they may be, reveal valuable information on ritual survivals—“Überlebsel” as Hillebrandt (1897: 3) called them—or on local practice and terminology that is missing in other texts. In other words, many ritual elements or regional specialities can only be found in the personal handbooks of the priests, or by observation of the rituals in the field. In vain one looks, for example, for a myth that explains the *ihī* marriage of girls to the *bel* fruit, sometimes called Suvarṇakumāra, who Hindus regard as Viṣṇu or Śiva, Buddhists, however, as Buddha. It is only in a text called *Pāṇigrahaṇavidhi* (ed. Gutschow & Michaels 2008: 258–63) that we find a passage which declares this “marriage” to be an initiation (*upanayam*, sic!, read: *upanayanam*) of the girls, thus opening it to another interpretation than the one usually assumed.

Moreover, the notion of the purity of Sanskrit mostly overlooks socio-linguistic aspects and linguistic developments.<sup>17</sup> “We find in it [i.e. classical Sanskrit, AM]”, says Emenau, “no dialects, no chronological developments, except loss and at times invasions from the vernaculars of the users, and no divergences” (cited after Deshpande 1996: 401). Modern ritual handbooks are texts, characterised, as we have seen, by the fact that Vedic Sanskrit and classical Sanskrit mixes with vernaculars and even dialects; but they are not second-class texts. However, influenced by Pāṇinian ideas of Sanskrit as an ideal, eternal language, quite a few scholars remain sceptical about non-standardised texts. This attitude “turned us”, as Ramesh (1984: 44) said, “blind to changes and development of a living language and trained us to dismiss all of them as mistakes resulting from ignorance or half knowledge.”

Deviations from Pāṇinian Sanskrit do not make for an ungrammatical text. It has been demonstrated by Richard Salomon (1989: 284) and others that from early on, Sanskrit has been a living language that has adapted to local situations and conditions. And it has done so without giving up the claim to be a sacred language by maintaining the formal and technical aspects, as well as the recitations, in a more or less unchanged form, while expressing the operational and pragmatic aspects in vernaculars. However, it is precisely this that makes for a loss in language competence, and this is why I propose to speak of Newar Hybrid Sanskrit and the Newarisation of such rituals.

Quite assuredly, Newar Hybrid Sanskrit is legitimate Sanskrit, because correct and wrong Sanskrit only exists when the authors demonstrate that they master correct Sanskrit.<sup>18</sup> This is not the case with the personal handbooks used by most Newar Brahmin priests (in Bhaktapur). In which case we are dealing more with what Ramesh calls “functional Sanskrit” than right or wrong Sanskrit.

17 Exceptions to this view are expressed in Brough 1954, Ramesh 1984, Salomon 1989, Deshpande 1993.

18 Examples are given by Salomon 1989.



## Conclusions

I could not conclude better than with the final observations of Richard Salomon in his seminal article “Linguistic variability in post-Vedic Sanskrit”. Salomon first remarks that Sanskrit, even if it is the language of the elites, must maintain a certain degree of flexibility when it is used for practical, ritual and learned purposes. For these aims it sometimes is necessary to exclude the problem of correct or wrong Sanskrit: “Given this approach, it is undeniable that the degree of variability in Sanskrit as the language was actually used through history was much greater than it is usually realized, and that the search for linguistic perfection was more an ideal than a reality. While Sanskrit is indeed notably resistant to dialectical variation, it was nonetheless inevitably subject to various forces of linguistic change, which the traditional models could only retard and minimize but never wholly suppress” (Salomon 1989: 291).

I would add to this that Hindu ritual handbooks are not only related to the authority of the Veda and the sacred Sanskrit language, but also to another “language”, i.e. the language of the ritual and its peculiar grammar (Michaels 2007), or to the dynamic and ever-varying process that intertextually frames the rituals.

Viewed intertextually, ritual handbooks must be regarded as a corpus with various windows—to the Vedic context, the ritual practice, forms of recitation, the participants and audiences, as well as to the participant observers. Without these contexts the text of a ritual handbook is almost incomprehensible. Ritual objects, paraphernalia and items, ingredients, objects or specialists that often are not even mentioned in the text must be considered—to the extent that some rituals can only be understood when they are observed.

It then often becomes obvious that the ritual handbook also has a demonstrative function that makes the Brahmin a special ritual specialist. The book is his sign of status—in distinction to the drum of the shaman (see Oppitz 1986). Frequently the Brahmin arrives at the ritual place simply with his book wrapped in a newspaper or plastic bag. He brings it and shows it even when he does not use it.

Given this, ritual handbooks appear not as a separate but as an essential part of rituals. Their domain lies in the representational and procedural structures. They constitute only one side of a narrative, to which many ritual specialists and participants contribute. This perspective often includes orally transmitted practical knowledge as an ineluctable part of rituals.

Thus, in rituals Brahmins and their texts might have a higher authority than other specialists, but only when it concerns their domain, i.e. the Veda and the (Sanskrit) book, but not because of the logocentric dominance of certain material. If such sources are not privileged one truly encounters the often claimed confluence of Indology and anthropology (Dumont). And then the real ritual text reveals itself in its intertextual dimensions.

To sum up, I have tried to confirm that Hindu initiation rituals and their handbooks are not, in the Newar context, linguistically or ritually corrupt forms of a longstanding ritual Brahmanical tradition. On the contrary, by complex processes of ritual transfer



and invention, and of merging and supplementing ritual and textual elements, various ritual specialists, not only Brahmins, create a new and specific form of Hindu initiation that deserves to be treated—in Don Handelman’s words—“in its own right”.

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