

The *Ihi* Marriage among the Newars of Bhaktapur, Nepal: Spatial Connotations of an Initiation Ritual

The setting: Urban space – a stage for initiation rituals

By the end of the first millennium A.D. quite a number of settlements had developed within the narrow confines of the Kathmandu Valley. The bottom of the valley was a lake in prehistoric times, the deposits of which invited an extremely intensive form of agriculture with two yearly crops. Crafts and trade added to this natural wealth to allow the emergence of three large urban clusters as centres of royal power: Bhaktapur, Patan and Kathmandu (Gutschow 1982).

The clusters of earlier settlements somehow survived to become quarters (New. *tvaḥ*, Nep. *ṭol*) of a continuous urban fabric. The borders of these quarters are annually reconfirmed by processions of the Navadurgā troupe of goddesses and gods. On yet another level of spatial organization, the sections of the urban territory (*ilākā*) centre around non-iconic shrines dedicated to the nine protective Mother Goddesses, to Gaṇeśa or to Bhairava (Gutschow & Michaels 2005: 16–22). All of these shrines call for blood sacrifices. Each quarter or even sub-quarter has its own non-iconic Gaṇeśa shrine, which receives a variety of offerings (*pūjā*) during life-cycle or annual rituals prior to the enactment of the main event. In the case of *ihi*, Gaṇeśa is worshipped by the eldest woman (*nakhī*) of the lineage prior to the feeding of the girl (*ihimacā nakegu*) and prior to proceeding to the ritual site on the first day of the *ihi* ritual. The blood of a goat is offered to the deity presiding over the section in which the residence of the organizer of the *ihi* ritual is located, the goat's head being divided into nine pieces, which are then offered to nine privileged girls, the *navakanyā*. The goat is consumed as part of a feast held for the girl initiates on the first day of the *ihi* ritual.

During the first feeding of solid food to children at the age of five to eight months (*annaprāsana*, see Gutschow & Michaels 2008: 40–51) the ritual ends with the first outing of the child in the arms of its maternal uncle (*pāju*) to the deity of the *ilākā*, upon which occasion the child's head is touched the stone representing the deity. With this gesture the child takes the first step in a gradual process of becoming a social being. It has left the confines of the house to move within a defined area of urban space.

A few years later, girls explore a larger realm on the occasion of the *ihi* ritual when they visit the homes of those families into whose clan they will be admitted, whereas in the initiation ritual of boys (*vratabandha* or *kaytāpūjā*) the initiates have to be prevented from crossing the borders of the wider urban territory.

Plate 1 (opposite page): Bhaktapur, the urban sphere as experienced by Benita Basukala from the quarter of Byasi between mid-January and early May 2001. Routes are indicated which led Benita Basukala within the two weeks prior to her *ihī* marriage on 29 January to the houses of her paternal lineage (nos. 1, 2), her paternal great-grandmother's family (3), her paternal grand-aunts (4, 5, 6, 10) and their daughters (11, 12). Finally she visited her maternal grandfather (13) and the maternal uncle of her mother (14). The first offerings on the occasion of the *ihī* ritual and during the concluding visit to the Kaumārī shrine are dedicated to Chumā Gaṇeśa, the non-iconic protective deity of her quarter. The day after the *ihī* ritual she visited the shrine of Kaumārī, the third of the eight protective Mother Goddesses (Aṣṭamātrkā) of Bhaktapur, who presides over the south. On the day of Tadhi—two days after the Indestructible Third (Akṣaya Trītiyā) in early May—she offered a duck at the shrine of Kvathusubya, which houses the lineage deity, the *dugudyah* of her clan, to confirm her temporary membership.

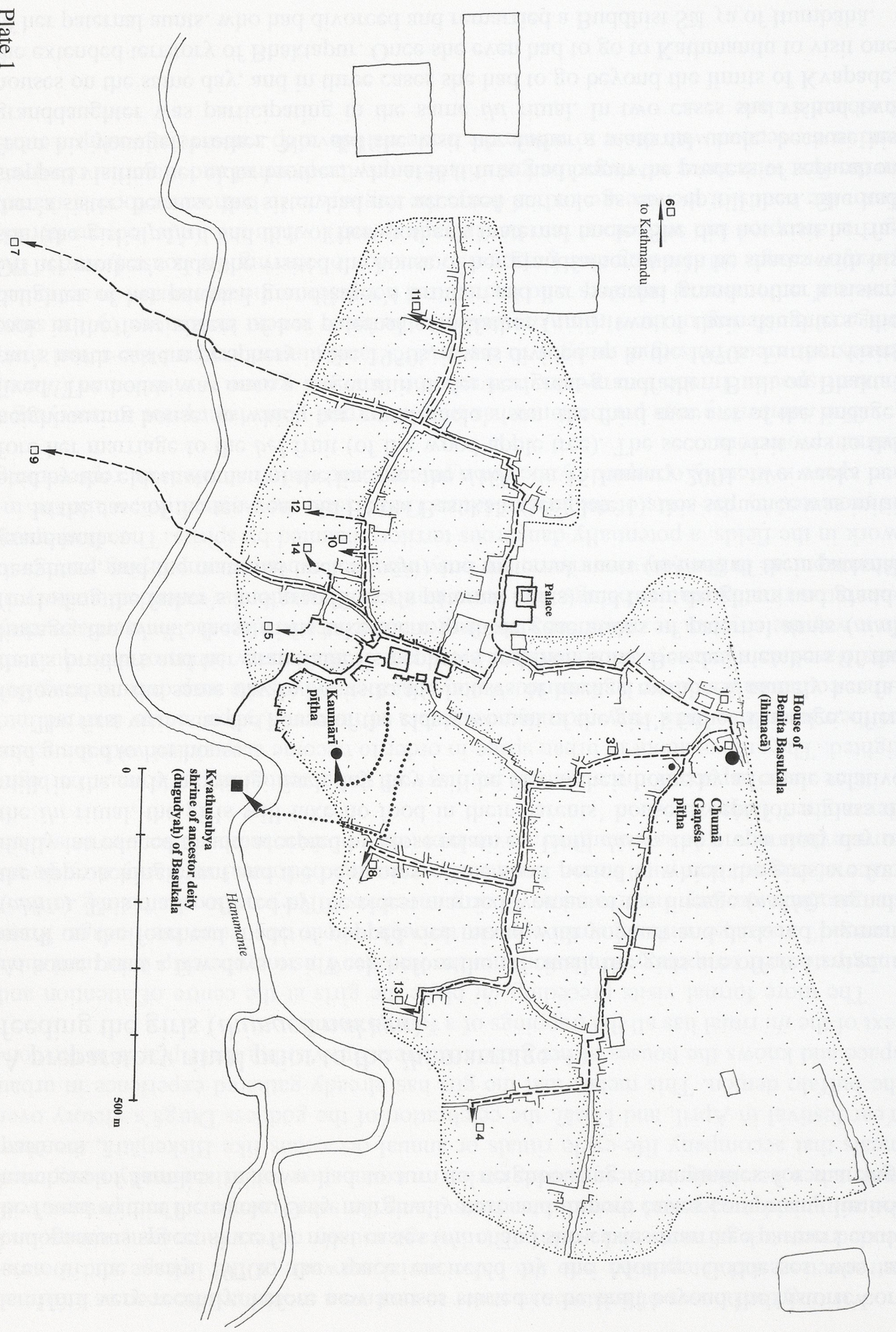
The Eight Mothers Goddesses (Aṣṭamātrkā) collectively protect the urban habitat: Their non-iconic shrines encircle the historic core, marking symbolically the cardinal and intermediate directions of the universe. The encircled urban space all but attains the quality of a *temenos*, the sacred territory of a temple (*templum*) which invites one to pause and contemplate (*contemplari*) (Assmann 2008). The city is indeed a realm or field (*kṣetra*) that is imbued with special qualities. Besides their place within the pantheon of the Great Tradition of Hinduism, the non-iconic deities of the *ilākā*, which demand blood sacrifices, function as the landmarks within a universal religion of place.

Prior to the *ihī* ritual, a ritual specialist (*ācāju*) worships the Nine Goddesses. Starting in the east he collects the power of these deities, materialized in soot produced in the course of a processional circumambulation of the urban centre prior to the ritual. Bhaktapur's power places convene, as it were, to witness the girls' admission to society. In a concluding rite, the *ihī* girl visits the shrine of the third of the Eight Mother Goddesses, Kaumārī (see plate 1), on the day after her marriage to the Golden Boy.

On yet another level, the notion of *deśa*, a territory between two rivers, plays an important role, distinguishing as it does an auspicious and pure continuum of space from a limitless and unordered, potentially chaotic one. In Bhaktapur, this territory is called Kvapade (*kvapa* – New. for Bhaktapur and *de* for Skt. *deśa*), the city's two rivers being the Hanumante in the south and the Kasankhusi in the north (Gutschow & Michaels 2008: 16–20). In the initiation rituals of boys the initiates have to be prevented from crossing these rivers. The two rivers thus mark the borders of a pure territory. Corpses, for instance, are taken across them for cremation beyond the confines of the *deśa* (Gutschow & Michaels 2005: 26).

The character of the *ihī* marriage as an initiation ritual is strikingly confirmed by the fact that the girls are allowed to feed the ancestors. The symbolic representations of these ancestors as non-iconic deities, collectively called *dugudyah*, receive the paraphernalia of the *ihī* ritual a few months later. Altogether 151 stones representing ancestor-deities have been identified beyond the urban centre, for the most part at the embankments of rivers and ponds (Gutschow & Michaels 2005: 73).

Plate 1



Until very recently, before new houses started to be built beyond the historic core area in the early 1970s, the space encircled by the Mother Goddesses was an endogamous space, since for most castes (*thar*) and sub-castes marriage partners could be found within the circle. Only marginally pure and impure castes comprising limited numbers of families in town had to turn to neighbouring communities for marriage partners.

A preparatory ritual prior to the *ihī* marriage – feeding the girls (*ihimacā nakegu*)

At some point a few days or a week before the *ihī* ritual, the girls are offered *svagā*, a mark on the forehead made of popped rice mixed with yoghurt and dark red pigment (*abhīr*). This mark, offered by the eldest married woman of the lineage (*nakhī*), signals the approaching event and the beginning of the short period in which the girls are formally introduced to and accepted by close relatives. Until *dusva*, the preparatory day of the *ihī* ritual, the girls will take no food in their parents' house except for a glass of milk in the early morning. Each day they will be met at their home by a female relative and guided to her house.

The first visit is to the house of the eldest woman of the girl's father's lineage, often followed on the same day by visits to the houses of lineage members, namely her father's brothers and her grandfather's nephews and their sons. Besides members of the lineage, the *phukī*, these visits take them to three generations of paternal aunts (*nini*) (including the father's and grandfather's paternal aunts) and their daughters and granddaughters, and the maternal uncles (*pāju*) and maternal aunts (*tahmā*) of their paternal grandmother.

In the case of the ten-year-old Benita Basukala (see plate 1), this sequence was initiated by the eldest woman of the lineage, the *nakhī*, on 15 January 2001, two weeks before her marriage to the *bel* fruit (of the wood apple tree). The second visit was to the neighbouring house, in which her grand-uncle's son, the third member of the lineage, lived. The house was once a larger unit under her great-grandfather. Built on Bhaktapur's north-eastern periphery in the 1950s, it was divided up in the 1970s. Further visits took in the four sisters of her paternal grandfather (*nini*), two of their daughters, the daughter of her paternal grandfather's brother and her paternal grandmother's sister. On her mother's side she visited the house of her grandfather, which he shares with his son (the girl's *pāju*), and that of her mother's maternal uncle. She did not visit her father's sister, because the sister had not accepted her role as *nini* up till then. She had stopped visiting her elder brother, who at that time had begun the process of separation from his younger brother. Nor did she visit her father's maternal uncle, because his granddaughter was participating in the same *ihī* ritual. In two cases she visited two houses on the same day, and in three cases she had to go beyond the limits of Kvapade, the extended territory of Bhaktapur. Once she even had to go to Kathmandu to visit one of her paternal aunts, who had divorced and remarried a Buddhist Śākya of Itumbāhā.

Visiting the houses of relatives in order to receive a meal must be seen as a formal introduction and integration into the close social network of the lineage and the extended network of aunts and uncles. The lineage usually covers three generations, and the aunts and uncles and their descendants cover the same number. Their parents will have taken her along to these houses earlier in connection with the ritually designated meals that accompany life-cycle rituals or annual occasions like Bisketjātrā, the New Year festival in April, and Dasāi, the celebration of the goddess Durgā's victory over the buffalo demon. This means that the girl has already gathered experience in urban space and knows the houses of her close relatives. But visiting these places in the context of the *ihī* ritual has all the trappings of a formal event.

The more formal visits preceding *ihī* place the girls at the centre of attention and anticipate their temporary admission into the lineage. This membership lasts until their "second" marriage with a human spouse, through whom they enter his lineage. From that moment on they are treated as "living ancestors." They no longer belong to their place of origin, their natal home. But in an expression of sororal solidarity they do return in their new role as a daughter, as an aunt (*nini*) of their brother's sons or as an "elder mother" (*taḥmā*).

One more aspect of the manifold journeys of the potential *ihī* girls must be highlighted. They move about in urban space in order to become acquainted with the realm of their later life. Until very recently, daughters of farmers (Jyāpu) never married into other communities of the Kathmandu Valley, but they did (as the map documenting Benita Basukala's journeys demonstrates) break out of the narrow limits of their quarter. In a way the city can be called the girls' larger home which, after the *ihī* marriage, they inhabit as ritually mature beings. The outer limits of Kvapade, the extended territory of Bhaktapur as defined by two rivers, are only breached when accompanying parents to work in the fields, a potentially dangerous territory haunted by spirits. The ritual space is protected by the seats of the Eight Mother Goddesses, the Aṣṭamāṭṛkā, while the inner space is literally occupied by the girl's paternal and maternal relatives, representing human protectors.

The *ihimacā nakegu* performance has its counterpart years later prior to marrying a human spouse. In the two weeks between the time the groom's middleman (*lhami*) hands out areca nuts (*gvē svaygu*) to the bride's family members and the actual marriage (the offering of the virgin, *kanyadāna*), the bride is sent invitations by the same paternal and maternal relatives who had invited her prior to the *ihī* ritual—an act called *penaja nakegu* (lit. feeding rice [*ja*] on the occasion of leaving the house [*pena*]). The girl is accepted and welcomed into her lineage (*phukī*), while the bride loosens herself from the bonds of the lineage and its deity, the *dugudyah*. In both cases food is shared, in the first with those to whom the girl still belongs, the paternal and maternal relatives, and in the second with those to whom the bride will develop a new relationship, i.e. her husband's clan.

Worshipping Bhaktapur's power places (*pīṭha*) on the first day of the *ihī* ritual – the urban territory as a sacred realm

In the early morning of the first day of the *ihī* ritual the acting *karmācārya* priest who, as a helper of the Brahmin priest, conducts all preparatory rituals heads for the Salā Gaṇeśa shrine in Tacapaḥ, the central quarter of the upper town. With him as his own helper is the *mhaynayah*, the eldest among the group of wife-takers, in this case a son-in-law of the organizer of the event. Salā Gaṇeśa is the most important Gaṇeśa shrine in town, and is regularly worshipped as the deity that shows the way forth on a journey. On the occasion of *ihī*, offerings to this shrine are mandatory by reason of the soot produced there from a small flame while worshipping. The soot accumulates on the surface of a shallow clay cup which almost covers a flame burning in another cup below it. The clay cup used to collect the soot is carefully placed in a basket together with *pūjā* material. This is the soot used for the empowering *mvahni* stroke of the *ihī* ritual. A streak of the black soot is applied to the pipal leaf that is handed to girls on the occasion of the “offering of the virgin”. Starting at the Gaṇeśa temple, the group undertakes a procession to the Aṣṭamāṭṛkā shrines, in the process encircling the urban realm. The path first leads to the easternmost of the “seats” (*pīṭha*) of the Eight Mother goddesses, Brahmayānī. From there it covers a circumambulatory route to the remaining seven shrines, and finally veers off to the ninth and central one, dedicated to Tripurasundarī, with the flame still constantly producing soot.

Visiting the shrines of the Aṣṭamāṭṛkā is a preparatory ritual observance that is mandatory for *ihī* and many other rituals and festivals. The fire is kept alive by adding mustard oil when the flame dwindles, allowing the soot developing on the surface of the clay cup to represent in all its fullness the essence of the urban habitat. The goddesses not only guard this space, they collectively represent the energy or *genius loci* which enables the urban society to function. The soot collected while circumambulating the space is used to mark the girls' foreheads in an invitation to them to become members of society. It graces the pipal leaves that are dedicated to Viṣṇu, while in the “offering of the virgin” it transmits the power of Durgā displayed in her eight manifestations.

From the eighth goddess, Mahālakṣmī, the path leads to Tripurasundarī (the ninth and central goddess) in Tulāchē, and from there to the Gaṇeśa, Bhairava or Māṭṛkā shrine of the locality in which the *ihī* ritual is to be enacted. This shrine is invariably one of the 21 non-iconic deities of Bhaktapur that accept blood sacrifices anytime, not just during *ihī*. Returning to the house of the organizer of the *ihī* ritual, the performing *karmācārya* priest and his helpers are received by the organizer and are served *khē svagā*, a symbolic meal consisting of a boiled egg, dried fish and brandy.

The concluding feast on the second day of the *ihī* ritual

After the girl is married to the *bel* fruit on the second day of the ritual, she returns to her parental home, where a feast is offered to the members of the lineage to whom she

now belongs and to all those from her mother's natal home (*thachē*) who had invited the girl for *ihimacā nakegu* during the days preceding the *ihi* ritual. Thus the round of feeding and being fed is brought full circle back to the distinct social group to which the girl now securely belongs. As a *kumārī*, she had been nothing more and nothing less than a representative of the female sex, with whatever positive, auspicious associations that involved. During and after the *ihi* ritual she remains a virgin, but she loses the specific quality of a *kumārī* once she enters the circle of the lineage and establishes firm links to the female world of her mother's natal home—a bond that will shift exclusively to her own natal home after her marriage to a human groom.

The third day of the *ihi* ritual – *kumārīpūjā*

Early in the morning the mothers of the girls for whom the ritual of the “offering of the virgin” was performed the day before head off to the Gaṇeśa shrine of their quarter to offer *pūjā*. Gaṇeśa is inevitably invoked at least once in every ritual event: at the very beginning or, in the case of ancestor worship (*śrāddha*), at an auspicious moment indicated by the Brahmin priest.

Having returned from the Gaṇeśa shrine, the mother will dress and make up the girl in the same way she did on preceding days. Fitted out in a special sari, the *ihiparasi*, which signals her new status, the girl is paraded from her house through the lanes and streets of the city to the seat (*pīṭha*) of Kaumārī, the third of the Eight Mother Goddesses who guard the urban space along its historic perimeter. The goddess is represented at her seat non-iconically by a stone, which was “discovered” there in the misty past. By now a few more stones have been added around it, which collectively represent the Eight Goddesses. Along with the remaining seven goddesses and the central Tripurasundarī, Kaumārī had been worshipped on the day preceding the *ihi* ritual by the *ācāju* as part of the *pīṭhapūjā* which confirmed the venue of the ritual within the sacred urban landscape. On the third day, however, this goddess is the sole focus, for she is identified with the seat of Kumārī, the virgin goddess. The offerings to the deity include ritual rice, popped rice, flowers, an egg and a particular kind of citrus fruit (*taḥsi*) which represents longevity and fertility. One of the three objects depicted on the block print fastened to the girl's forehead prior to the act of the “offering of a virgin,” this singular and remarkably sour citrus fruit is consumed exclusively on the day of *mhāpūjā*, the worship of the body on the first day of the Newar New Year (Nepāl Saṃvat) in November. In a decisive gesture of worship, the mother touches her forehead to the stone representing Kaumārī and asks her daughter to do the same.

As they return home, the mother throws a few grains of rice in the direction of the shrines and temples they pass. Passing the temple of Bhairava at Taumādhi Square, the mother turns to the tiny iconic representation of this powerful deity and asks her daughter to touch it with her head in a gesture of reverence. The route home never follows a straight line, but rather a prescribed ritual route, which takes in temples and shrines that



Plate 2: Bhaktapur, the third day of the *ihī* ritual, 24 January 2007 – For the second time in her life, Lipisa Lakhebindyo receives food from the eldest women (*nakhī*) of the lineage, including brandy (note the shallow earthen cup beside her dish). For the first time she offers food to the ancestors (*pitṛ*) before starting to eat. She places tiny heaps of food on a leaf in front of her plate.

are regularly worshipped by the families of their own particular quarter. Adults and children are taught early on to follow the “correct” route. Not that there is any notion of the direct route being “forbidden”; rather, going to and returning from rituals is quite simply such a frequent occurrence that movement within urban space on such occasions takes on a special quality, one different from what occurs when pursuing profane matters.

Worshipping the ancestors

Having returned from visiting the seat of Kaumārī, the *ihimacā* is offered a ritual welcoming meal (*samay*), which includes a boiled egg and a small dried fish (*khē svagē*), along with small pieces of buffalo meat, soybeans, raw ginger and garlic, flattened rice and, of decisive importance in a ritual context, brandy (*ailā*). The egg and brandy are offered with arms crossed; three initial sips of brandy and a few small bites of egg are compulsory. Often, deep-fried sweets (*jeri* and *nimki*) are added.

Still fully dressed, the girl receives the egg together with the fish and brandy (see plate 2) from the eldest woman of the lineage (*nakhī*). The girl had received the same

such ritual food on the occasion of her first being fed solid food (*annaprāśana*) to mark her crossing the first barrier on the way to becoming a social being. This time she achieves passage into a new world in which she will be acting as a member of the patrilineage. Equally important is the first offering of food to the ancestors (*dyah cayegu*) before she herself starts eating. She places tiny heaps of flattened rice and bits of egg and meat on a leaf in front of her.

Before *ihi* the girl was a child without social duties. Her marriage to the *bel* fruit has turned her into a member of society and, as such, of the lineage. From now on she shares her food with her deceased great-grandparents, who are still known by name.

The *ihi* girl's spouse – multiple identities

It is not too misleading to say that *ihi* expresses a certain respect for the female members of Newar social groups, although it should be added that this mainly applies to virgin girls. Indeed, Newars have preserved a special cult for the virgin goddess, the Kumārī (see Allen 1976). Rajendra Pradhan (1986: 111), who did his fieldwork in Kathmandu in 1982, points out one difference between a *kanyā* and a *kumārī*: “once they have performed *ihi* the girls are no longer *kanyās* but *kumārīs*.” Therefore, “only those who have performed *ihi* and become *kumārīs* are eligible to become members of their father's lineage and caste and to marry human husbands.” Fieldwork in Bhaktapur reveals a decisive difference there. There girls who have not performed the *ihi* ritual are virgins (*kanyā*), who on the occasion of the Dasāī festival participate in the *kumārī-pūjā*. They are treated and worshipped as *kumārīs*. Once the girls have participated in the *ihi* ritual, they are neither a *kanyā* nor a *kumārī* but a member of their father's lineage group, the *phukī*. After *ihi*, girls are no longer treated as an incarnation of a goddess (Kumārī) because, ritually and socially, they have now become adults.

It is also often stated that girls' sexuality is brought under control through the *ihi* marriage and that “*kumārīs* ... are considered dangerous unless their sexuality is controlled” (Pradhan 1986: 112). This view bespeaks an underlying male fear of female sexuality in Hindu societies. To be sure, in the Dharmaśāstra it is often stated that a girl has to be married before her menarche, and her not being married would be tantamount to the murder of an embryo. Levy (1990: 665) even says that the Newar Rājopādhyāya Brahmins started to celebrate *ihi* only after child marriage was banned in Nepal in 1951. However, it would be too simplistic to reduce a complex ritual—one that is basically rooted in parts of one ethnic community and probably older than the Dharmaśāstra rules—to the gender identity of the girl, who through *ihi* becomes a potential marriage partner.

The heavily disputed question about which deity the girls are married to is a great source of confusion (see, for example, Levy 1990: 764, n. 23). In a Hindu context, the majority favours Viṣṇu or Kubera, while in a Buddhist context Buddha or Jambhala, a Buddhist equivalent of Kubera (Gellner 1991: 112), is usually mentioned. The texts,

Plate 3 (opposite page): Bhaktapur – The venues of 19 *ihī* rituals for 924 initiates (*ihimacā*) performed in 2004/05 (VS 2061), from Akṣaya Tṛtīyā (22 April 2004) to Śrīpañcamī (13 February 2005). The Viśvakarma *guthi* of 11 Citrakār families performs the concluding *pūjā* at the shrine of Chumā Gaṇeśa. The worship of the Clay God (*alīdyaḥpūjā*) is invariably performed on Tālākva square.

Place, date, organizer and number of initiates (*ihimacā*): 1. Naraincok, Taumādhi, 21/22 April, Vaidyaguthī, 41 girls; 2. Khaumā, 27/28 November, house of Mahendra Sharma, 3 girls; 3. Khi-chē, 5/6 December, Tirnalal Karmacharya, 82 girls; 4. Itāchē, 8/9 December, Tulsi Bahadur Duval, 113 *ihimacā*; 5. Khaumā, 8/9 December, house of Mahendra Sharma, 13 girls; 6. Khaumā, 21/22 January, house of Mahendra Sharma, 10 girls; 7. Rāmghaṭ, 21/22 January, Tulsi Madhikarmi, 33 girls; 8. Mulḍhokā, 21/22 January, Punyaram Lavaju, 83 girls; 9. Paśubāhā, Kvathādau, 24/25 January, 31 girls; 10. Khaumā, 28/29 January, house of Mahendra Sharma, 10 girls; 11. Cvāchē, 29/30 January, Premlal Thusa, 60 girls; 12. Itāchē, 29/30 January, Mohan Duval, 30 girls; 13. Khaumā, 29/30 January, house of Mahendra Sharma, 10 girls; 14. Yātā, Golmādhi, 30/31 January, Lakshmi Bhakta Tajale, 137 girls; 15. Yāchē, 2/3 February, the local *samaj sewa samiti* 65 girls; 16. Naraincok, Taumādhi, 12/13 February, Śrī Tilamādhava Nārāyaṇa Bhajan Maṇḍal, 76 girls; 17. Bārāhīsthān, 12/13 February, Bārāhī Pīth Bikas Samiti, 99 girls; 18. Khaumā, 12/13 February, house of Mahendra Sharma, 16 girls; 19. Palikhel, Golmādhi, 12/13 February, Tejbahadur Pailikhel, 12 girls.

however, refer to Suvarṇakumāra, the “Golden Boy,” without specifying his identity. As already mentioned, for most Newars Viṣṇu is the marriage partner whom most believe to be present in the *bel* fruit, whereas others see him in the gold platelet that is fixed to the girl’s forehead, or in both. It is also said, or one can read (e.g. Levy 1990: 668), that the *bel* fruit represents Śiva or his son Kumāra, while the “image” (*pratimā*), the golden platelet, represents Viṣṇu, or else that Śiva is a witness during the marriage with Viṣṇu.

Ihī – a trans-familial ritual performed in urban space

Ihī, like all Newar life-cycle rituals, cannot be seen as an event focused on a single individual. Such events, rather, constitute links in a chain that runs through an individual’s life and connects him or her with other rituals and with the social group. *Ihī*, for instance, must be seen as a ritual that is bound up with the menarche rituals (*bārāhā tayegu*) and the marriage to a human groom, while also being a ritual that transforms the individual into a member of a clan (*phukī*) associated with a specific ancestor-deity (*dugudyah*) and mortuary association (*siguthī*).

It is striking that for most girls the *ihī* ritual takes place in public. Only for small groups is it performed in the house of the acting Brahmin (see plate 3: six occasions with 3–16 participating girls) or, for Buddhist groups, in a courtyard of a monastery (see plate 3: Dipaṅkarbāhā). *Ihī* is indeed a social event, not one performed for single individuals. It is an event that takes place on the street or in public places and is often organized by social organizations (see plate 3). For example, within the period between

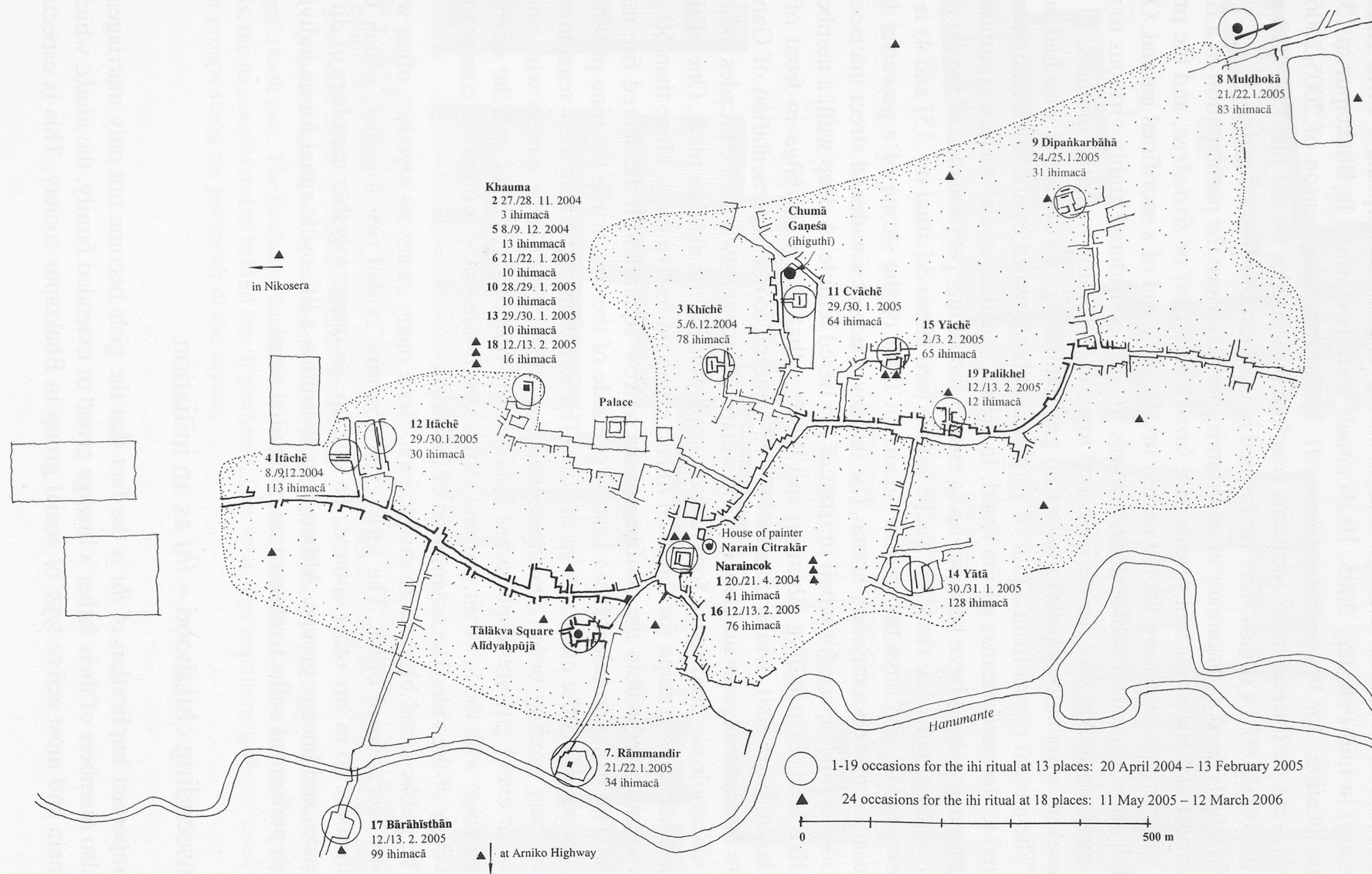


Plate 3

the Indestructible Third (Akṣaya Trīyā) in April 2004 and Spring's Fifth (Basanta Pañcamī) in mid-February 2005, 19 *ihī* rituals were performed in Bhaktapur in 13 different locations for 924 initiates (*ihimacā*). In the following season of 2005/2006, 24 rituals were performed in 18 locations (marked by triangles on the map) for 839 girls, and in 2006/2007 14 rituals were performed in ten locations for 685 girls.

Ihī rituals need an organizer or an organization to ensure the participation of a Brahmin priest and such assistant priests as a *karmācārya*, *joṣī* or *śivācārya*, and the provision of offerings necessary for the sacred fire (*homa*), and of a sacrificial animal. Often an individual organizer seeks merit (*punya*), for it is considered highly virtuous to support girls when they take the decisive step towards becoming potential mothers. In other cases an association (*guthi*) was set up generations ago by someone who had no issue. The annual return from a plot of agricultural land owned by the association is dedicated to the performance of the ritual. In recent decades "social service committees" (*samaj sewa samiti*) have been set up to ensure the annual performance of the *ihī* ritual on a public square. The ritual on Yāchē square (see plates 3 [ritual no. 15] and 4) is one such case. For two days the narrow square in front of the shrine of a powerful local Gaṇeśa serves as a temporary arena. The narrow space of a widened street intersection provides enough space for a bell in front of the tiered temple. A deep well, a number of god-like beings (including Bhīmsen and the Buddha) and a *śivaliṅga* in front of the god-house (*dyahchē*), which contains a free-standing iconic representation of Gaṇeśa, add to the rich religious ambience of the square. Moreover, two public arcades (*phalcā*) provide ample covered space for children to play or for the aged to meet. One of these arcades serves as a stage for the local music group on festive days. More than 50 girls have to be seated within the confines of the narrow square, with the sacred fire in the centre. The Brahmin priest faces east on one side of the fire, while the nine privileged girls are seated on the other side of the fire. The remaining girls take their seats in rows without any binding order. On the second day of the ritual large panels with photographs of every girl are displayed to facilitate the ordering of prints, and the day after the marriage with the *bel* fruit, parents visit a small video shop around the corner to order a copy of the video documentation of the ritual.

The public ritual blurs caste distinctions, since many castes sit together, often without any hierarchical order. The girls even consume boiled rice together, which they would never do in any other context. To sum up, *ihī* brings together members of different castes and lineage groups. Although by definition a life-cycle ritual for an individual, it is performed collectively as a trans-familial ritual.

Transcending childhood – *ihī* as an initiation

An important implication of *ihī* is the fact that the girls become not only marriageable but also members of their father's lineage group or extended family, the *phukī*, which is the main and most active type of social group in Bhaktapur society. This is especially

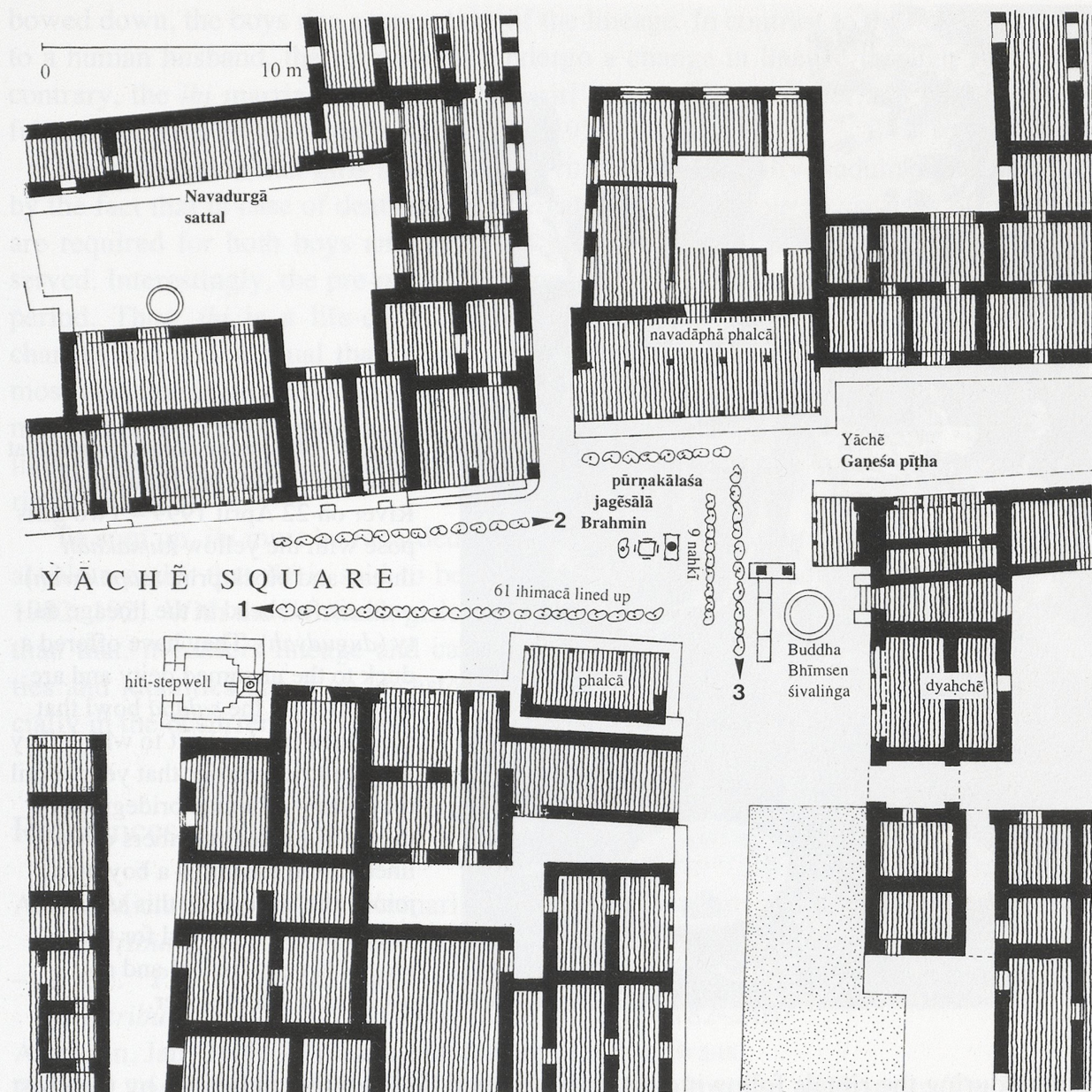


Plate 4: Bhaktapur, the *ihi* ritual on 2 and 3 February 2005 on Yāchē square – A typical square at the centre of an urban quarter, here with the non-iconic shrine (*pīṭha*) of Gaṇeśa and the adjoining god-house as the principal religious structures.

Since 2004 the local *samaj sewa samiti* (social service committee) organizing the event. In 2005 61 girls took part. The Brahmin, facing east, maintains the sacred fire, while the nine principal girls, the *navanakhī* seated behind the *pūrṇakālaśa*, face west. The remaining girls are lined up in four groups along the perimeter of the square.



Plate 5: Bhaktapur, *dugudyahpūjā* at Bisinkhel across the Hanumante River on 22 April 1999 – Two girls pose with the yellow *kumakhāḥ* thread and block print (*sāpākhvaḥ*) on their forehead at the lineage deity (*dugudyah*). They have offered a duck to the unnamed deity and are now offering the *salāpā* bowl that contained the *bel* fruit to which they were married earlier that year. Until they marry a human bridegroom they will remain members of the lineage. On the left is a boy who joined the lineage on this same occasion. He is shaved for the second time in his life and so becomes a full member.

evident during the rituals following the core *ihī* days, because the girls have by then lost their virgin (*kanyā*) status and qualify for membership in the lineage (*phukī*). The formal membership initiation takes place during the following joint worship of the lineage deity (*dugudyahpūjā*), at which time the girls offer a duck and hand over the *bel* fruit to the lineage deity (see plate 5).

Thus only after the *ihī* ritual do girls acquire membership in the lineage with all its rights and obligations. Seen from this perspective, *ihī* is more an initiation than a marriage rite. To be sure, girls are only members of the father's lineage for a few years, the period between *ihī* and marriage, at which point they become a member of their husband's lineage. Boys, on the other hand, become members of the *phukī* not only through *kaytāpūjā* but to a limited extent they are treated as such as soon as they are able to walk independently. They then go to the lineage deity and offer husked ritual rice (*kigaḥ*) and popped rice (*tāy*) and perform *darśana* (New. *bhāgye yayegu*, lit. "to bow down"). This ritual encounter with the *dugudyah* is called *dūp tayegu*. Having

bowed down, the boys rise as members of the lineage. In contrast to the “real” marriage to a human husband, the girls do not undergo a change in lineage through *ihi*. On the contrary, the *ihi* marriage “reaffirms the girl’s ties with her father and confers on her full membership of his caste” (Allen 1982: 192).

The assumption that girls after *ihi* are—ritually and socially—adults is strengthened by the fact that in case of death prior to *kaytāpūjā* and *ihi*, four to six days of mourning are required for both boys and girls, but after *ihi* the full period of mourning is observed. Interestingly, the pre-menarche ritual (*bārhā*) has no influence on this mourning period. Thus, *ihi* is a life-cycle ritual that celebrates not a biological but a social change; and it is a ritual that makes a girl not so much marriageable as bound to the most vital social group, the extended family and its lineage. This is overwhelmingly demonstrated by the offering of *vākijāki*, a mixture of husked and unhusked rice by both lineage members and the maternal relatives upon entering the house at the end of the ritual.

To sum up, *ihi* must be regarded much more as an initiation than as a marriage ritual. No wonder that *ihi* is said to be the girls’ *vratabandhana* or *upanayana* (cf. Allen 1982: 192). With the *ihi* ritual, girls take their first step towards womanhood. But more than that, it confers lineage and caste membership, enabling and strengthening social ties and identities based on ancestor and clan deity worship, commensality and, especially in the occurrence of death, ritual solidarity.

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