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Initiation as a Site of Cultural Conflict among the Newars*

The meanings and uses of initiation

Rituals of initiation have loomed large in the anthropological imagination. They are among the most dramatic of rituals that anthropologists encounter in the field. Initiation rituals frequently challenge or invert the conventions and expectations of normal life, thereby both drawing attention to those conventions and breaching them. At the same time, such rituals play a crucial role either in creating new social units or in recruitment to, and the perpetuation of, existing units.

As Van Gennep was the first to point out, the three-phase structure of initiation rituals—separation, liminality, and reincorporation—helps to create new persons. Whether the liminal phase simply reinforces existing rules, or actually opens up the possibility of change and resistance, has been an important line of debate and development within anthropology. Thus Victor Turner's interest in the ritual and symbolism of the Ndembu developed later into a theory of *communitas* and an interest in pilgrimage. Some, such as Kapferer (1997) and Grimes (1991), have seen in the liminal nature of ritual potentials for innovation and creativity. Others, such as Kertzer (1988) and Tilly (2004), have seen the same in new political uses of ritual.

Initiation rituals have also been at the centre of Bloch's attempts (1986, 1992) to define ritual as such. His global theory is built on the examples of Merina circumcision and the frightening initiation of the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea: in his view *all* ritual is built on "rebounding violence", i.e. the revitalizing force that initiates come to embody, once they come out the other end of the experience, thanks to being subject to, and going through, the process of the ritual.¹ In a radically different approach, Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) have outlined a sophisticated theory of ritualization based on a very different kind of ritual, the Jain practice of *pūjā* in Rajasthan. Finally, in the new cognitive anthropology of religion, Harvey Whitehouse argues that frightening initiation rituals form one of two major poles or ideal types of religion, the other being

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1 I have criticized Bloch's theory for being overly monistic, i.e. for forcing all types of ritual into the Procrustean bed of Durkheimian, community-focused rituals, among which festivals and life-cycle rituals are the most common (Gellner 1999).

routinized or, as he calls it, doctrinal religiosity.²

The problem with all these anthropological approaches is that the empirical basis on which they are built is too narrow. They all are illuminating so far as they go, but they illegitimately generalize insights about one kind of ritual to all ritual. I believe that one must recognize at least three fundamentally different kinds of ritual action, namely, 1) soteriological, 2) social or communal, and 3) instrumental. Each kind of ritual has a characteristically different intentional stance. Soteriological ritual is undergone as a kind of training or discipline, social or communal ritual in order to carry out one's obligations and/or to achieve a social result, and instrumental ritual in order to bring about some advantageous change in the material world. Another way to put this is to say that the three types of ritual are oriented respectively towards 1) the other world and transforming the self, 2) society, and 3) nature.

From this point of view, one must ask whether Humphrey and Laidlaw's characterization of *the* ritual stance—action that is intentionless, in which the normal relation between intention and action is “disrupted”—provides a good model for all types of ritual, or whether, rather, it fits their soteriological example, but is less appropriate to the other two types. Likewise, Bloch's model is based on the example of a violent initiation ritual, and he struggles to apply the model to Japan (which lacks animal sacrifice) as well as to other, less obviously communal rituals. Finally, Whitehouse's model, though it has the virtue of positing two types and not just one, is, in my opinion, too simple, and too Judaeo-Christian in its assumptions, to grasp the full complexity of ritual types.

In the present case, I shall be considering boys' and girls' initiation rituals among the Newars, leaving to one side other kinds of initiation, such as *dīkṣā* (tantric initiation).³ These sacraments are, or at least were, considered essential for all “clean”-caste Newars, and no one could be married without having been through them. There were prescribed methods of going through them, all of which required the presence of a priest, either a Brahman or a Vajrācārya. Some were normally carried out in large groups, others in small groups or singly. All involved at least some expense for the household of the child. For most households they did not trigger an extravagant feast, as with weddings, but a trend towards large-scale celebrations of initiations has been observable for some years. These rituals are—for the boys—cast in a soteriological idiom, for all that they are paradigmatic social-communal rites. For the traditional girls' rituals, by contrast, the dominant metaphor is that of marriage. It is surely no coinci-

2 What Whitehouse's theory may not capture is the way in which initiation rituals are highly routinized in South Asian culture, and therefore are not particularly traumatic for those who go through them. The means by which their exegesis is passed on is closer to doctrinal religion than to imagistic religion, in his terms, and thus there is a thorough muddling of the types and not the tendency in complex ritual systems that he predicts for them to be “attracted” to one pole or the other; presumably he would explain this by saying that “lay versions of the world religions [often] migrate away from both of our modal attractor positions and settle around more easily acquired, intuitive concepts and practices” (Whitehouse 2004: 74). The problem here is that most of learned and Sanskrit Hinduism becomes a “lay version” of a world religion.

3 On the latter among the Newars, see Gellner (1992: ch. 9) and Levy (1990: 314–7).

dence that the main re-modelling in the modern period should involve the introduction of a girls' initiation rite that is also in a soteriological idiom.

In addition to flagging up the obvious and important gender contrast, one must note that we are dealing here with a hierarchical world. In this world, the divide between gods and humans is far from absolute—in the terms that Eriksen introduces for the discussion of ethnicity, the divide is analogical rather than digital, a question of more or less rather than either/or (Eriksen 1993: 66–7). But while the cosmos is seen in this essentially graded and hierarchical form (cf. Levy 1990), the purpose of initiation rituals is often either to create a clearly bounded social group (so that people are unambiguously either in or out) or clearly and unambiguously to establish belonging to a pre-existing social group on the part of the individual passing through the rite. In other words, ritual is used to impose digital precision on an analogue universe. Some are made unambiguously to belong; others are left unambiguously as excluded. Thus Dalits, deprived of high-caste priestly services and denied the opportunity to go through Sanskritically legitimated initiation rituals, are condemned for being “without *dharma*” and are correspondingly viewed, traditionally, as being non-persons or lesser persons.⁴

Ritual among high-caste Newar boys

A striking aspect of initiation among the Newars is its connection to social status. The form of the ritual, i.e. by whom it is done and in what ritual idiom, is determined by the caste of the parents. None the less, there is a sense in which the ritual is an individual matter, conferring adulthood, but not of itself granting membership in any collectivity beyond the household. Thus the sons of lower-caste mothers were entitled to the same kind of initiation, but simply going through the ritual does not of itself confer membership in the lineage organizations of the father. That membership is conferred by the combination of the ritual *and* the acceptable status of the mother. For most Newars the ritual takes place at home and the question of belonging will be decided elsewhere, at the annual worship of the lineage deity or similar ritual. By contrast, for Śākya and Vajrācārya boys, the fact that initiation normally takes place within the father's monastic complex (*vihāra*, colloquially *bāhā* or *bahī*), means that these two social events—symbolic entry into adulthood and joining the descent-based socio-religious guild of the father—occur through a single ritual event. For this reason, sons of a Śākya or Vajrācārya man by a lower-caste woman may not go through the initiation ritual in their father's *bāhā* or *bahī* but must do it elsewhere, either at a convenient *caitya* or, nowadays, in a Theravāda *vihāra* instead, a procedure which is understood to “make the boy a Buddhist” but which confers membership in no social grouping.

Because of this overwhelming need to belong to an established *bāhā* or *bahī*, Śākya and Vajrācārya families, until the end of the Rana period in 1951, used to trek at enormous expense in time and money, from all over Nepal, in order to have their boys initi-

4 See Levy (1990: 366–71), Gellner (1995b).

ated at their ancestral *bāhā* in the Kathmandu Valley. This was despite the fact that, because they lived at such a distance, they could never avail themselves of the practical benefits conferred by membership in the *bāhā*, such as attendance at *bāhā* feasts or claiming a share of offerings to the *bāhā* gods (nor were they in a position to fulfil their regular duties to the *bāhā*, such as taking their turn as the “god-guardian”, *dyahpāhlā*). Although lineage deities (*digudyah*) could be “pulled” from one place to another, evidently, at least during the Rana period, it was not considered possible to establish a new *bāhā*, and the risk of outcasting, were the boys not initiated, was considered too great. A glimpse of the strong resentments that this engendered can be had from a short piece published in the magazine *Dharmodaya* in 1950, just before the collapse of the Rana regime:

Letter to the editor:

Because the economic situation of Buddhists living in Tansen is weak, there are many Gurujus and Barejus who are incapable of going to their ancestral (home) in order to perform *cūḍākarman*. For this reason this year on 21st and 29th Baisakh all the Gurubhājus of Tansen held a meeting. The meeting made four decisions:

1. All Buddhists would cooperate in order to make a new *bāhā* in order to carry out their *cūḍākarman* ritual, inviting priests (*guruju purohit*) from Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur, so that everyone could be initiated according to the Buddhist practice of their own place.
2. Because of Barejus’ and Gubhājus’ contemporary economic misfortune, they would no longer be able to continue to observe *cūḍākarman* spending huge amounts of money (*dolaṃdo dām kharca yānāḥ*).
3. Nowadays Gubhājus and Barejus without resources (*anāth*) are selling, pawning, or mortgaging their houses, land, jewellery, etc., in order to go to the Kathmandu Valley (*nepā*) and carry out their sons’ life-cycle ritual. The children of those poverty-stricken Barejus and Gubhājus who cannot even raise the money to go to Kathmandu and do that are living in wayside shelters.
4. The poor Gubhāju and Bareju living in Palpa Tansen in the west and Bhojpur in the east have up till now been able to do what is necessary to preserve their caste and ancestry (*kul*). But if the Vajrācārya Sthavira Gurubhājus of Kathmandu (*nepā*) do not show compassion and mercy to this state of poverty it is not possible to say that this will continue.

This special announcement is being addressed to the Buddhist scholars (*ācārya*) and elders (*ājupim*) of Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur through *Dharmodaya* monthly magazine. We believe it would be excellent if everyone could pay attention to this issue. We have full confidence that *Dharmodaya* monthly will

publicize our request that the senior Vajrācāryas, having compassion for our poverty, should consider the issue of whether it is permissible or not to make a new *bāhā*.⁵

Surjelal Bajracharya, Purnaman Shakya, and the Buddhists of Tansen.
(*Dharmodaya* 3.9, July 1950, p. 256)⁶

This resentment against traditional Newar Buddhism was surely a strong factor predisposing Śākya and Vajrācāryas resident in hill-top bazaars outside the Kathmandu Valley to the new Theravāda, and this, I would claim, is part of the explanation for their prominent role in the early years of the movement.⁷

The position for other (non-Buddhist) Newars who had emigrated from the Kathmandu Valley to the hills or Tarai was much easier. In the absence of Newar Brahmans they simply made use of local Parbatīyā Brahmans. This is one reason, among others, for their faster assimilation to Parbatīyā culture and quicker adoption of the Nepali language, when compared to the Śākya and Vajrācāryas. Switching priest, and thereby switching the idiom in which the household's life-cycle rituals were performed, was, of course, an old practice, one that the upwardly mobile had always practised. In the Newar case this was carried out most within the Valley in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century by those who wished to be seen as Shresthas.⁸ It may be surmised that at an earlier period, middle castes who wished to express alignment with the Hindu court adopted *karmācārya* (*ācāju*) priests, as for instance in the village of Tokha north of Kathmandu or in Bhaktapur and surrounding villages.⁹

During the 1980s, when I first did fieldwork in the Kathmandu Valley, it was a matter of frequent complaint by articulate and politically aware Buddhists that the number of Buddhists in the census was declining. They knew that traditionalists would not countenance the initiation of "half-caste" boys inside monasteries, so they eventually founded a new monastery in Teku where such boys were initiated on more than one occasion.¹⁰

Buddhist activists explained the decline in Buddhist numbers by citing both government influence on the census-takers and processes of Hinduization (likewise encouraged by the government). The fact that the percentage of Buddhists jumped from 5.3 in 1981 to 7.8 in 1991 (back to the level of 1971) would seem to justify their complaints.

5 According to Kedar Shakya, as cited by Bhikshu Kondanya (2007: 21–2), in 1951 Bhikshu Amritananda (himself from Tansen), Bhikshu Shakyānanda (from Bhojpur, but based in Tansen), and Bhikshu Subodhanand (from Bhojpur) all went to intervene with King Tribhuvan in order to get permission for Newar Buddhists to be initiated outside the Valley and in their home towns.

6 My translation from Nepal Bhasa. From a literary point of view what is remarkable is the number of different words for poverty and suffering that are used in this short letter: *durbal*, *durdasā*, *anāth*, *bicarā*, *nirdhan*, *daridratā*, *garibā*.

7 See LeVine & Gellner (2005: 33–4, and 312, n.19 & n. 20).

8 On this process, see the foundational article by Rosser (1966), and the qualifications to his thesis made by Quigley (1995, 1996).

9 See Levy (1990: 356–7) and Shrestha et al. (2004) for the position in Bhaktapur.

10 The *bāhā* is described in Locke (1985: 413–4).

When it jumped yet again to 10.7% in 2001, it seemed that the pressure to Hinduize had finally been lifted. (The figures also disproved the wilder claims about the true percentage of Buddhists made by some activists.)

Support for the Theravāda movement certainly came, right from the very beginning, from those who felt that the traditional Vajrayāna Buddhism had become overly influenced by Hinduism: that it had adopted too many of the outer ritual forms of Hinduism and that it had forgotten the simple, renunciatory message of Buddhism's founder. However, most of the early Theravādins were not modernists: they did not reject Vajrayāna lock, stock, and barrel, as some do today (see Leve 2002; LeVine & Gellner 2005: 282–3); rather they sought, much like the founders of celibate monasteries among the Sherpas (Ortner 1989), to revive Newar Buddhism. However, whether they intended it or not, their movement became the conduit for Buddhist modernism and the vast majority of reformist effort, with some notable exceptions, was channelled through Theravāda Buddhism.¹¹

The Theravāda movement was initially concerned with establishing monasteries, initiating novices, monks, and *anāgārikās*, and building a supportive lay community. Gradually the services that they supplied to that lay community expanded to include the provision of alternative life-cycle rituals. The first boys' initiation was held in 1956 (girls' rituals are dealt with below). It began to be used by those who wished to avoid the expenses of the traditional ritual, by the mixed-caste parents as a more inclusive alternative to the Vajrayāna option discussed above, and by those who were on bad terms with (or simply lacking) the mother's brother who plays a key role in the traditional ritual.

Somewhat later, from 1974, the notion that adults might ordain temporarily as a special practice also began to gain ground (through the Burmese and Thai examples, where ordination for a short period, e.g. the rains retreat, is widely practised). In November 1985 seventy-three Śākya men took temporary ordination in Kirtipur for the 73rd birthday of the Thai Sangharaja. The birthdays of respected figures within the Nepalese *saṅgha* began to be observed in a similar way (e.g. at Pragyānanda's 85th, Ashwaghosh and Kumar Kashyap's 77th, and Dhammawati's 70th birthdays: LeVine & Gellner 2005: 93, 206; Kondanya 2007: 21). Similarly, large-group temporary ordination as a Theravāda novice became a part of the annual Buddha Jayantī celebrations in Lalitpur from 2001 (LeVine & Gellner 2005: 121). It also became common for children to take temporary ordination during their long winter holidays and to stay, learning meditation, at the International Buddhist Meditation Centre in Shankhamul, or in other monasteries.

A final and important aspect of the Theravāda temporary ordination ritual is that it is offered to all who are willing to accept the universal Buddhist idiom in which it is offered. As such, it has become part of Janajāti politics. Some Tharu, Magar, Gurung, and Tamang activists have seen in Theravāda Buddhism the most acceptable and conve-

11 For this argument, see LeVine & Gellner (2005); for the comparison with Ortner on the Sherpas, see in particular pp. 285–7, 289–91.

nient tool with which to reverse centuries of Brahman and Hindu influence and domination.¹² Among the Tharus, it is primarily an elite movement, encouraged by landlord intellectuals from the eastern Tarai, primarily former Attorney General Ramananda Prasad Singh (1933–2008) with his claim, first aired in 1988, that the Tharus are the descendants of the Buddha's tribe, the Śākya (Singh 1988). Among the Magars there has been a much wider, deeper, and more “bottom-up” acceptance of the movement, which has led to the creation of a new class of lay Buddhist officiants seeking to replace all Brahman-run rituals by “their own”.¹³ All these modernist Buddhist activists are certainly following the lead of Bhimrao Ambedkar. However, not wishing to advertise any connection to Dalits, they avoid making any prominent acknowledgement of this fact.

The success of Theravāda Buddhism has led to attempts by the leaders of Vajrayāna Buddhism to respond. The introduction of the Pañcabuddha dance at Svayambhu on Buddha Jayantī was an early such response. The move by Badri Ratna Bajracharya, and later by his pupil Naresh Man Bajracharya, to offer the monastic initiation (*bare chuyegu*) ritual to all comers, is a direct imitation of the Theravādin rite. It is defended by Naresh Man as a reformist and progressive thing to do (see Appendix). There is no question, however, of allowing it to be performed inside an established monastic compound, thereby giving membership of its *saṅgha*. Nor is there any question of opening up initiation as a Vajrācārya to anyone other than boys from a pure Vajrācārya background.¹⁴ Many decades after the idea was first mooted and some decades after a preliminary attempt was struck down by the Supreme Court of the state, the Tamil Nadu government, in May 2006, passed an order that anyone, of any caste, should be allowed to become a temple priest, i.e. that the job should not be restricted to certain Brahman sub-castes.¹⁵ A similar move would appear to be a long way off in Nepal, though given how rapid social and political change has been there in the last twenty years, it would be rash to make any predictions.

Initiations for Newar girls

Initiation for girls might be expected to be less contentious, and in fact it is here that there has been the greatest innovation. Upper-caste Newar girls traditionally went through two separate initiation rituals, first the “marriage to a *bel* fruit”, known as *ihī* (a

12 On the adoption of Buddhism by Janajātis, see LeVine & Gellner (2005: 140–1, 234–6), Krauskopf (2001), Letizia (2006).

13 Among Magars, these new lay officiants are called *uāpā* and among the Tharu *thāru paṇḍit* (Letizia 2006: 64, n. 34).

14 This blind spot among Newar Buddhist activists is discussed in LeVine & Gellner (2005: 266).

15 As with many anti-Brahman measures in Tamil Nadu, this is likely to remain a very largely symbolic move, since implementation would require non-Brahmans to want to train as temple priests, *pāṭhaśālās* to be willing to accept them as students, and temples to be willing to take on the graduates. See Fuller (2003) on the politics of temple priesthood in Tamil Nadu.

one-day procedure), and second *bārhā tayegu*, or “placing a barrier”, in which girls sometimes singly but often in a group, have to spend eleven days confined to a room from which the rays of the sun were excluded and no men were allowed to see them (Allen 1982; Vergati 1982; Toffin 1984: 401–5; Pradhan 1986: 110–42). Interestingly, it is in the latter ritual that the most radical change has occurred. The overwhelming majority of Buddhist households, and a significant number of others, now no longer perform *bārhā tayegu* in the traditional way. Instead they have replaced the *bārhā tayegu* ritual with a newly invented, or at least newly imported, ritual, *rikhini* (or *ṛṣinī*) *pabbajjā*. This was started when the Venerable Dhammawati returned from Burma in 1963. Modelling the rite on the temporary girls’ ordination that she had seen in Burma, she introduced it as a substitute rite in 1966 and it quickly caught on. The arguments typically put forward for doing the ritual this way are that the old way of observing the ritual was “superstitious” and “a waste of time”; and that this way is both cheaper, quicker, and educational, since the girls at least learn some Pali and start to understand something of Buddhism.

Initially it was indeed very cheap, since the nuns did not charge anything for the girls staying in the nunnery, though families would of course have felt obliged to make some kind of donation to cover the expenses of the stay. In subsequent years, a fixed charge has been introduced to cover some of the extras that the girls expect. It is now carried out at many different monasteries and nunneries. In the early years *rikhini pabbajjā* always lasted for twelve days, in imitation of the *bārhā tayegu* ritual that it replaced, but subsequently it has frequently been shortened to five days or even fewer.¹⁶

The question arises, and was well put first by Kunreuther (1994), why should this ritual have caught on so well, when other proposed rituals, that the Theravāda monastics were willing to put on, did not? Why was *bārhā* replaced when *ihi* has not been? A combination of factors seems to be at play here. The Theravāda movement has succeeded in establishing a widespread “common-sense” discourse, according to which Newar Buddhism is deeply Hinduized. This makes many Newar Buddhists apologetic about their traditions. Many rituals can be defended in terms of Newar culture, if not in terms of their Buddhism, but *bārhā tayegu* was particularly vulnerable, since it had no discernable Buddhist rationale and at the same time was transparently similar to the non-Newar, Parbatiyā ritual of *guphā rākhne*, which is also concerned with dealing with the problem of female menstruation. Combined with this is the rising middle-class obsession with education and the constructive use of time. The new Theravāda ritual taps in to this, since it replaces eleven days of play and indulgence with study and learning moral rules. The cost issue also raises its head, because by sending the girls to a monastery a family could avoid the expense of a feast, if they so wished.

16 Christoph Emmrich informs me that such foreshortening happens also sometimes with performances of *bārhā tayegu*. Furthermore, apparently some modern performances of *bārhā tayegu* now incorporate study on the Theravāda model; contrariwise, some of those who send their daughters to Theravāda nunneries, take them on the final day to Gaṇeś shrines, as if it were a performance of *bārhā tayegu*. In short, the two kinds of ritual are coming closer together (personal communication, 25/6/08).

Michael Allen interpreted both the traditional girls' initiation rituals in terms of adaptations of an initially "tribal" society to Hindu norms. It cannot be denied that the *bārḥā* confinement rite and the *ihi* mock marriage do indeed enact Hindu norms. The most common justification given for the *ihi* ritual is that it means that Newar girls will never be a widow. It is certainly right that by performing this ritual, Newars are therefore acknowledging Hindu norms that ban widow remarriage, but reinterpreting them. However, as I have pointed out in a previous publication (Gellner 1991), not all Newars observe the *ihi* rite. In fact, it is precisely those who are most relaxed about widow remarriage—low castes, Maharjans in outlying villages—who do not perform the *ihi* ritual, whereas those who do not allow widows to remarry and do indeed regard them as stigmatized and inauspicious—namely high castes—are precisely those who perform the ritual. In other words, the ritual seems singularly unable to create the very empowerment that is claimed for it.

Part of the problem may lie in the assumption that rituals do straightforwardly accomplish particular social ends. Low castes and rural Maharjans do not need a ritual that is "about" widowhood, because they have (or had) no aspirations to high status in Brahmanical terms. It is precisely because high-caste Newars do share, even if only partially and with caveats, the Brahmanical worldview, that they "need" a ritual. It is paradoxical, of course, and ironic, that, because of their commitment to that Brahmanical worldview, the ritual mostly does not seem to accomplish what is so often claimed for it (removing the stigma of widowhood).

In part what I was objecting to in that earlier article was the crude, essentialist, and unhistorical use sometimes made of models that posit an unchanging "Hinduism" to which, in teleological fashion, all cultural change in the past, before the advent of "modernity", must have been tending. I was also objecting to the designation of Newars as "tribal" since their culture was and is the very opposite, from a sociological and cultural point of view, of what is normally meant by that term in South Asia; many Newars themselves are and have been unhappy with the designation of Newars as Janajātis for that very reason (cf. Gellner 1995a: 30–4; 2003: 93). In fact, Hinduism, as of course the slightest reflection must acknowledge, is itself a changing phenomenon, with changing ideals and changing models of what counts as "proper Hindu behaviour", so that what might now be seen as "low" or "un-Hindu" (e.g. widow remarriage) was at one time perfectly respectable.

Christoph Emmrich (2008) has thrown new light on these girls' rituals by paying attention to the chat that surrounds them as they are performed. He points out that at *ihi* men joke about the girl taking her "husband", i.e. the *bel* fruit, home, rather than the other way around; mothers joke with their daughters about the qualities of the fruit, which are supposed to reflect those of her future human husband. There is an even more marked difference between the ways in which men and women talk about

bārḥā.¹⁷ For men it has to do with educating girls about menstruation. Women denied this and said it was about training girls for daily ritual, and also getting them accustomed to the fasting and denial of performing *vratas*.¹⁸

Conclusion

When Bhikshu Sudarshan set out in 1998 to list all the things that Theravāda Buddhism had contributed to Newar culture and society, he came up with eighteen items, including establishing Buddha Jayantī (a.k.a. Wesak) as a major holiday, introducing sermons, initiating pilgrimage to Buddhist sites in India, reviving Lumbini as a holy site, encouraging meditation and caste-free recruitment to the *saṅgha*, and providing a religious role for women.¹⁹ The one thing he did not mention was the introduction of Theravāda life-cycle rituals. The reason is, no doubt, that both Theravāda monastics themselves and reflective laypeople are somewhat uneasy at the thought that the monastics are coming to resemble Vajrācāryas—that is to say, that their main *raison d'être* is the performance of ritual services for lay people. In their view Theravāda Buddhism is not about providing priestly services, and in this they are certainly true to long-established views within Theravāda Buddhism, a point which has not always been properly understood.²⁰

None the less, in the struggle to reform Newar Buddhism, and in the move to distinguish Buddhism as far as possible from Hinduism, the provision of alternative life-cycle rituals was a key step, just as it was a key step in the survival of Newar Buddhism in a Hindu environment in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This move—using life-cycle rituals to define a separate and to some extent oppositional social identity—is a strategy that is now being followed, quite consciously and deliberately, by other ethnic groups, such as the Magars, who have no verifiable history of Buddhist practice at all. It is entirely consonant with the egalitarian ethos of modernizing Buddhism, and the stress on female empowerment, that an older ritual with a symbolic focus on marriage and the dangers of menstrual impurity should be replaced by a renunciatory ritual with a message of hard work and book study, one that parallels the rituals for boys. It is perhaps a sign of a continued attachment to much of traditional Newar culture that girls continue to go through the other female initiation rite, namely mock marriage to a *bel*

17 Emmrich also notes that *bārḥā* is often identified in handbooks with *garbhādhāna*. Ancient commentaries differed on whether *garbhādhāna* is to be performed for the unborn embryo (and therefore has to be done frequently) or for the woman, in which case it is done just once after she is married. If *ihī* is the marriage, then *bārḥā* is *garbhādhāna*.

18 The remarks he cites about *riṣiṇī pabbajjā* and *sāmaṇerī pabbajjā* (where the girl shaves her head and undertakes 10 precepts, not just 8), bear out the interpretation I have given of motivations for replacing the traditional way of doing *bārḥā*.

19 See Sudarshan (1998) and LeVine & Gellner (2005: 283–4).

20 See Gombrich (1995). I discussed the opposition between monk and priest in the Newar context in Gellner (1989).

fruit. In other words, discourses of “superstition” are mobilized contextually and rarely systematically.

Both the traditional forms of these initiation rituals and the new modernized adaptations must be seen primarily as expressions of identity—in the first case of particular caste and religious identities, in the latter of new understandings, and contestations of older attributions. In the case of the traditional girls’ rituals it was a question of taming powers (of sexuality), rather than of using liminality to imbue vitality as Bloch would have it. In the more soteriologically oriented boys’ rituals, based on values of renunciation, once again the symbolic load is not obviously to do with violence or the incorporation of sources of vitality. In all of them it is a question of transforming the child into a particular kind of adult in a highly structured and plural society. Where there is a social unit into which the boy is being initiated, as with Newar Buddhists, there are plenty of other social forces supporting and reinforcing that identity: the group does not need to be created by the inherent power of the ritual; in those cases where a large group of boys are initiated together, no specific bond is created between them, other than that they all belong to the monastery where the initiation takes place. There is no need for the ritual to be particularly dramatic or traumatic in order to impress itself on the boy’s memory forever—though becoming a monk for four days, or an ascetic for one day, is a dramatic and unusual enough break from everyday routine that it is hardly likely to be forgotten. In short, the pressures which would push the initiation ritual in the direction of what Whitehouse calls imagistic religion are also largely absent. What there is instead is a public demonstration of the religious allegiances of the child and their household. Given that religion is a highly salient aspect of identities in Nepal, it is not surprising that these rituals have, just as religion has, been subject to considerable modification, change, and substitution in the last fifty years. Naresh Man’s use of the *bhikṣu luyegu* ritual is a response to and an imitation of the Theravādins’ temporary *pabbajjā* rite, which is itself a response and potential replacement for the Vajrācāryas’ traditional *bare chuyegu* ritual, which in turn is an ancient adaptation of monastic initiation going back almost to the Buddha’s time.²¹ Naresh Man’s innovation is thus one more link in the on-going debates between Buddhists over the meaning of renunciation and over the consequences of the ritual of renunciation for relationships with significant others.

Other Buddhist rituals, such as the *chuyegu* ritual, are also subject to change and substitution. The *chuyegu* ritual is a response to and an imitation of the Theravādins’ temporary *pabbajjā* rite, which is itself a response and potential replacement for the Vajrācāryas’ traditional *bare chuyegu* ritual, which in turn is an ancient adaptation of monastic initiation going back almost to the Buddha’s time.²¹ Naresh Man’s innovation is thus one more link in the on-going debates between Buddhists over the meaning of renunciation and over the consequences of the ritual of renunciation for relationships with significant others.

21 I owe this observation to Chiara Letizia. On the *bare chuyegu* ritual, see Locke (1975), Gellner (1988), Lewis (1994: 12), Letizia (2000), and von Rospatt (2005).

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Appendix: Naresh Man Bajracharya's use of *bhikṣu luyegu* to reform Newar Buddhism

...However much the country's political situation may oppress us, as long as Svayambhū, Sīghaḥ [Śrīghaḥ], and Khāsti [Bauddha] *caityas* remain upright, as long as people continue to perform the *chāy hāykegu* ritual to [Hārītī] Ajimā, as long as Janmādyah's chariot is pulled, as long as Asaṃmaru Ajimā remains in Asan, as long as *cacā* [*caryā gīt*] are sung, as long as the sound of the Guṃlā music is heard, as long as the *dhimay*, *koṃcākhiṃ*, and *pacimā* drums are played, as long as the sound of the *kotāḥ* and *peṃytāḥ* are heard, as long as the Pañcabuddha are painted at every doorway, as long as new daughters-in-law are welcomed with the pouring of the *siphaḥ* measure, as long as people eat from the ceremonial *thāybhū*, as long as people observe all classes of festival (*nakhaḥ cakhaḥ*), as long as there are priests (*guruju*) and patrons (*jaymām*), whatever ill wind comes, our traditions and culture will not be lost. But our Newar Buddhist traditions and culture, while ascending the steps of progress have reached a final limit (*caram sīmā*)...

In our Newar Buddhist society, [we need] to recognize deformations and to start the process of removing them: Urāy (Tulādhars etc.), Jyāpu (Maharjans etc.), Puṃ, Khusaḥ, Nau, Kau, Sāymi, Thaṃhiti Syasya (who are connected to Mhaypidyaḥ), Kocheṃ Syasya (who have Svayambhū *caitya* as their lineage deity), Thanbahi Paḥmā

(Pradhān),²² etc.—the sons of all these groups have their topknot cut in *kaytāpūjā*, and this is a corruption. Thus, just like Gurujus and Barejus they should become *pravrajit* in *bāhā* or *bahī* and have their topknot fully shaved off, and thereby made to belong to the Buddhist *saṅgha*. This would be a big reform, as is fully recognized by intellectuals both in Nepal and abroad. An organization called the Nepal Bauddha Dharma Sangha has decided that it will shortly be proceeding to give *pravrajyā sambara* to the sons of its lay supporters.

(Naresh Man Bajracharya “Newar Buddhist Culture: Deformations and Reform”
Vishwabhoomi 8, 131, p. 2, 22/4/96)

Just over a year later the same newspaper carried an interview by Basanta Maharjan with Naresh Man on the occasion of his third performance of *pravrajyā samvara pradān* (proferring the vow of renunciation) glossed as *bhikṣu luyegu* (literally “lustration as a monk”):

This is a campaign to give this initiation to all Buddhist *jātis*, and if possible even to convert non-Buddhists into Buddhists. It is against carrying out the *kaytāpūjā* sacrament... This tradition has been there from the beginning. There is a lineage of Maharjans in Kathmandu’s Pyamgaṭhām whose elder has been having it continuously. This elder is called the “Phū Bare”.²³ Still today there is a tradition among the Paḥmā (Pradhān) gentlemen of the Śreṣṭha caste, who belong to Tham Bahi, that one of their number is initiated in this way so that he may stay with the main deity (*kvāpādyah*). The four *varṇa* system was established by King Jayasthiti Malla, which means that before that time it didn’t exist. So we can see that it was only after that that ordination of a monk (*bhikṣu luyegu*) ritual was limited to Śākyas and Vajrācāryas... I wouldn’t say that there is absolutely no one who sees it negatively, but anyone who is a progressive Newar won’t see it in that light. Our main aims in carrying out this ritual are three: 1) to get rid of corruptions, 2) to lessen caste distinctions, 3) to preserve and develop Buddhist customs. In this connection Bhikshu Amritananda remarked that it was the tradition of *bare chuyegu* that was responsible for the preservation of Buddhism in Nepal.

(“In Order to get Rid of Corruptions in Buddhism, Let’s Ordain Monks”, Basanta Maharjan, interview with Naresh Man Bajracharya, *Vishwabhoomi*, 6/7/1997, p. 3)²⁴

22 This is a list of Newar castes with Buddhist priests. On Tham Bahi and its unusual Pradhan Sangha, see Locke (1985: 405–13).

23 On the Phū Bare, see Locke (1985: 257–8).

24 My translations from Nepal Bhasha.

