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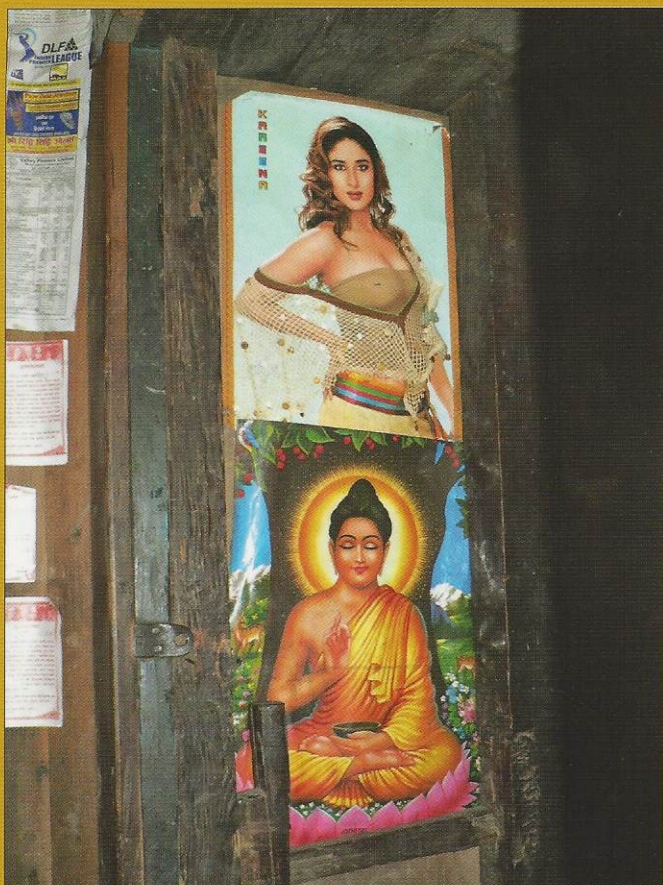
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Revisiting Rituals in a Changing Tibetan World



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PAST CONTINUITY AND RECENT CHANGES IN THE RITUAL
PRACTICE OF NEWAR BUDDHISM:
REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPACT OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM
AND THE ADVENT OF MODERNITY

ALEXANDER VON ROSPATT
BERKELEY

This paper is not a micro-study of a particular ritual or set of rituals and the changes in their performance. Rather, I want to share some more general observations regarding recent shifts in religious, particularly ritual, practice in the Newar Buddhist tradition of the Kathmandu Valley. My starting point is a brief overview of the ways in which Tibetans and Newars have interacted over the centuries when renovating¹ the Svayambhūcaitya, the most sacred shrine for the Buddhists of Kathmandu. I will argue that while the patterns of sponsorship of these renovations changed in significant ways, this does not apply to the rituals performed in their course, starting with the deconsecration of the dilapidated structure and concluding with the reconsecration of the rebuilt *caitya*. By contrast, the sociopolitical transformation of Nepal since the opening of the country in 1950 has had a profound impact upon Newar Buddhism. I will examine the changes that as a result have recently begun to emerge in ritual practice. I do this because many of the forces and mechanisms at play here are not particular to the Newar

¹ I use the term ‘renovation’ in a broad, non-technical sense. I prefer this to committing myself to a more specific term such as those used to identify the seven “levels of intervention” that James Marston Fitch (*Historic Preservation*, 1982) distinguishes “according to a scale of increasing radicality,” namely “1. preservation; 2. restoration; 3. conservation and consolidation; 4. reconstitution; 5. adaptive reuse; 6. reconstruction; 7. replication.” As I explain below, the ‘renovations’ of the Svayambhūcaitya were major affairs, involving the replacement of the central wooden axis and the dismantling of the entire superstructure above the dome as well as its reconstruction with new materials. They were hence rather radical forms of “interventions.” Since none of the seven terms as defined by Fitch adequately captures the case of Svayambhū, and since I am not aware of another technical term that would do so, I chose to use instead the unspecific term ‘renovation’, rather than opting for a more precise, technical term that would not fit accurately.

situation, but illustrate more generally how a premodern form of Vajrayāna Buddhism struggles to adjust to modernity, a struggle that surely forms also part of the changes Tibetan ritual practices have undergone since 1959.

As archaeological finds of Kuṣāṇa art bear out, the Kathmandu Valley, that is the historical Nepal, has for at least two thousand years been under the influence of Indic culture and civilisation. This influence includes its religious traditions, that is, since the latter part of the first millennium CE, Vajrayāna Buddhism and tantric Śaivism as well as other Hindu traditions. However, because of its location on the very periphery of the Indian mainland, Nepal was until 1950 (when the country opened up to the outside world) shielded from many of the momentous changes that occurred in mainland India. This does not only apply to the transformation of India brought about by British colonialism and the independence movement, but also includes the prior penetration of India by Islam and the changes of the religious landscape this entailed. As a result, many forms of religious practices survive in the Valley that have long since disappeared from the Indian mainland. In addition to Buddhism this includes archaic forms of Śākta Śaivism, such as the secret cult of the tantric goddess Kubjikā.² It would, of course, be a fiction to conceive of Nepal as a static place immune to change. The mentioned Indic religious traditions were shaped by autochthonous forms of religiosity and adapted to Newar society. Moreover, coexisting side by side in constrained urban spaces, Buddhism and the Hindu traditions deeply influenced each other—often blurring distinctions—and have many resulting commonalities. A good example in the sphere of ritual practice is the near-identical set of life cycle rites through which Newars of ‘pure’ caste pass. Furthermore, Nepal was not only exposed to Indic influences, but also to the cultures of the neighbouring people on the southern flank of the Himalaya, such as the Tamangs. Finally, reflecting its location along one of the major trans-Himalayan trade routes, there is a long history of interaction with Tibetan Buddhism.³

* * *

² Cf. Mark S.G. Dyczkowski (2001).

³ For an historical overview of Newar-Tibetan relations see Todd Lewis (1989).

It is with one important facet of this history that I want to deal in the first part of my paper, namely the Tibetan patronage and participation in the periodically recurring renovations of the Svayambhūcaitya of Kathmandu (or 'Phags pa shing kun, to use the Tibetan name), the most important shrine of Newar Buddhism. Indigenous Newar sources as well as Tibetan accounts, such as found in *namthar* (Tib. *rnam thar*), *karchag* (Tib. *dkar chag*) and pilgrimage guides, document that between the thirteenth and nineteenth century the *caitya* was renovated in a major way, on average roughly every forty-five years.⁴ These renovations entailed that the superstructure of the *caitya* above the dome was dismantled and discarded, that the dome itself was cut open in order to allow for the replacement of the massive wooden pole of more than twenty metres' length traversing the structure (Newari: *yaḥsiṃ* from Sanskrit *yaṣṭi*; Tib.: *srog shing*), and that the *caitya* was then—except for the better part of the dome—rebuilt with new materials. This was a very labour-intensive operation. It required the participation not only of a large number of qualified craftsmen, artisans and priests and their helpers, but also of hundreds of men to haul the massive new pole to the Valley—an operation that was normally spread out over more than a year because it is made of subtropical hardwood (*sāl*) that grows on the banks of the Trishuli Ganga and its tributaries, at an altitude some 3000 feet below the Valley. Besides labour, the *caitya*'s rebuilding required materials such as wood, bricks, copper and considerable amounts of gold for gilding the thirteen disks and the crowning structure above.

There was no endowment of land that could have covered these expenses and provided for the necessary labour. This is so because the *caitya* was not routinely renovated after a stipulated period of time, but only irregularly (as mentioned above, roughly twice a century on average) when the need arose after it fell into disrepair, and when a willing donor came forth. Besides, it would have been next to impossible to 'bank' the annual yield from endowment lands so that they would have built up over several decades into funds large enough to cover the enormous expenses needed. In the absence of a regular endowment varying

⁴ For details see my paper "A historical overview of the renovations of the Svayambhūcaitya at Kathmandu", *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre* 12 (2001: 195–241), as well as my forthcoming monograph *The Svayambhū Caitya of Kathmandu and its Renovations*. Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute.

sponsors backed the different renovations and took the initiative to lend support or even initiate a renovation. Often, it is difficult to reconstruct the details because the Tibetan and Newar sources tend to portray these renovations as almost exclusively Tibetan or Newar undertakings. Indeed, on the basis of the former sources it might be concluded that the *caitya* is a Tibetan shrine, while the latter sources ignore the Tibetan participants or portray them as mere bystanders of little consequence. All the same, a careful complementary reading of the pertinent sources gives some idea of the distribution of agency and the scope of cooperation at the different renovations. What emerges is that there was no standard, fixed pattern that was replicated over and over again. Rather, while the principal agents were generally the given donors, often Tibetans, the Buddhist Newar community of Kathmandu, which traditionally ‘owns’ this shrine, and the king of Kathmandu, the person *ex officio* ultimately in charge, the agency of these three stakeholders was contested at every renovation and their role newly negotiated. The sources do, however, suggest a trend, namely that the Tibetans (who themselves had a varied background and differing school affiliations) often played a significant role as donors, and even instigators, in renovations undertaken between the thirteenth century (no such information is available for renovations performed before then) and the end of the sixteenth century. Starting with renovation commenced in 1591 the Newars started to take care of the renovations largely on their own. They did so in a concerted collective effort, with particular localities and caste-based communities assuming responsibility for particular parts of the *caitya*, for specific stages in the construction work and for the rituals on certain days of the reconsecration. However, this system started to disintegrate towards the end of the Malla era when the Valley faced the threat of Gorkhali conquest. As a result the renovation completed in 1757 depended upon the active engagement and material support of the Tibetan Rnying ma lama Kaḥ thog Rig ’dzin tshe dbang nor bu (1698–1755) and his students. Crucially, without that lama’s diplomatic skills it would have been impossible to procure the *sāl* tree from the banks of the Trishuli river, which at that time was under the control of the Newars’ great Gorkhali adversary Pṛthvī Nārāyaṇa Śāha. At the subsequent renovation concluded in 1818 the traditional Newar system of collective sponsorship had been further eroded. Instead a few prominent Newar traders with close ties to Tibet emerged as new sponsors who, together with Tibetan donors, shored up the operation and helped

to ensure the successful conclusion of the renovation. This trend continued at the next renovation a hundred years later, which was financed almost exclusively by Tibetan contributions and the funding of one particular Newar merchant who had made his fortunes in the trade with Tibet and China. At the most recent renovation, which was undertaken from 2008 to 2010 and dedicated to the new application of gold to the gilded copper parts that cover the *harmikā* and the rings, the exclusive sponsor was the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center located in Berkeley, California.⁵ This renovation was motivated by the desire of a particular individual, namely Tarthang Tulku, to newly guild the *caitya*, and not necessitated by its disrepair. Hence, it cannot be concluded from the latest renovation that the tradition of Newar sponsorship for Svayambhū has come to a complete end.

As borne out by this brief overview of Tibetan participation in the renovations of the Svayambhūcaitya, the scale and nature of Tibetan sponsorship varied at each renovation. It depended upon a complex set of factors, such as the Tibetans' relationship with the king of Kathmandu, the size of the Tibetans' donations and their agenda and ambitions, the degree to which contributions were forthcoming from the Newar community, etc. It is noteworthy that the changes in Tibetan sponsorship and the resulting fluctuation in the agency they enjoyed at given renovations did not have a significant bearing upon the Newar Buddhist rituals performed at these renovations. Rather, the Newar chronicles recording the rites performed in the cause of particular renovations document that basically the same set of rituals was performed over and over at all renovations. They start with the 'journey to the forest', the *vanayātra*, undertaken in order to cut a tree for replacing the central wooden pole, as well as with the transference of the divine essence of the *caitya* into a water vessel and with other rites of deconsecration performed ahead of the building work. After most of the old structure has been dismantled and the massive pole replaced, the rituals continue with the rebuilding of the *caitya* by installing on each level of the structure a version of the Five Buddha *maṇḍala* in the tradition of the *Sarvatathāgatataṭṭvasaṃgraha*. The rituals conclude with the remarkably complex reconsecration of the *caitya*, which includes the infusion with the divine essence that has been kept for the time of the

⁵ Cf. Tsering Palmo Gellek and Padma Dorje Maitland (eds), *Light of the Valley. Renewing the Sacred Art and Traditions of Svayambhu*. Cazadero, California: Dharma Publishing, 2011.

renovation in the aforementioned water vessel into which it was transferred at the outset. The chronicles also document that through the centuries all these rites were performed according to the same prescriptions without notable innovations or deviations. In other words, irrespective of the sponsorship of a given renovation the officiating priests followed the same standard procedure that is outlined already in the *Kriyāsaṃgrahapañjikā* (probably late twelfth century) and related works. To be sure, the series of complex rites performed in the course of a renovation has never been reenacted in identical form. Rather, these rites allow for a certain amount of variation and digression, and accordingly details in the specific performance of these rites at a given renovation vary, reflecting the particular situation and historical context in which they are set. However, this does not impair the conclusion that over the period considered here there is an evident continuity in ritual practice that is in marked contrast to the vicissitudes of sponsorship and agency.

It is noteworthy that even at renovations where the Tibetans seem to have been principally in charge, the necessary rituals were apparently performed separately by both Tibetan and Newar ritual specialists, thus allowing for the mentioned continuity in Newar ritual practice. This bears out that, despite their intimate historical links and identical origins in Indian Buddhism, the Tibetan and Newar traditions have evolved separately, so that they have come to perform the same rituals in different form⁶ and idiom—unlike the Tibetans, the Newar Buddhists have never stopped using Sanskrit as their sacred language for the performance of rituals.

Though very little detailed research has been done on the history of Newar Buddhist ritual practice (which is best known through recent anthropological studies), it seems fair to surmise that what holds good for the rites performed on the occasion of renovating Svayambhū holds good for Newar Buddhist rites in general: despite the changes in the fortunes of the Kathmandu Valley since the beginnings of the Malla era in the late thirteenth century, most ritual practices were transmitted without major changes. However, this picture of continuity has begun to change dramatically since the middle of the twentieth century when

⁶ A pertinent example for divergent developments is the Buddhist consecration ceremony, which in the Newar tradition alone has come to include the performance of the ten (originally brahmanical) life-cycle rites of passage (*saṃskāra*). For details see my paper “Remarks on the consecration ceremony in Kuladatta’s *Kriyāsaṃgrahapañjikā* and its development in Newar Buddhism” (2010).

Nepal opened to the outside world, and it is these changes that I want to turn to in the second part of this paper.

* * *

As mentioned, because of its peripheral location Nepal was never subjected to Muslim rule, nor later to colonisation by the British Empire, which—apart from the stationing of a permanent resident—did likewise not extend to Nepal. It should be added that until the end of the Rana regime in 1950 the closure of the country also sealed Nepal from the spread of western ideas of democracy, political freedom, social and gender equality, etc. that had gained ground in India with the independence movement. However, there was some indirect exposure to these ideas through the Nepalese who were studying or trading in India, notably in Calcutta, Benares and Kalimpong. In their circles, such western ideas took root and some individuals availed themselves of the printing presses within their reach in India to produce pamphlets and other literature that was circulated clandestinely in Nepal. More importantly, it was in the milieu of these expatriate intellectuals that the Nepalese Theravāda movement found the necessary support that allowed for its formation. However, the full impact of Indian-mediated western ideas, and of the reformist Theravāda movement could only unfold when the country opened up to the outside world. It is difficult to overestimate the consequences of this opening for traditional Newar Buddhism, and hence the momentous date here is not, as in the case of Tibet, 1959 but 1951, when the Rana regime and with it the country's isolation came to an end.

For a start, the collapse of the Rana regime allowed the first Newar converts to Theravāda Buddhism to return from exile to the Valley and operate without hindrance. The roots of this movement lie with a Tibetan lama commonly known as Kyangtse Lama.⁷ This figure created a furor when he arrived in the Valley in 1925, having covered much of the way from Tibet by prostrations (*daṇḍavat*).⁸ In the Valley he set up residence in Kindol Bāhāḥ,⁹ a long-abandoned small monastic complex located atop the enchanting hillock of Kindol just south of

⁷ For details of the life of Kyangtse Lama see Satyamohan Jośi's monograph [1990].

⁸ See Levine and Gellner (2005: 38–41).

⁹ On this monastic complex, see Locke (1985: 401ff.).

Svayambhū, where he started to preach Mahāyāna Buddhism. Many Newar Buddhists were inspired by his popular teachings of the principal ethical tenets of Mahāyāna Buddhism and felt disillusioned with their own caste-based tradition, which had long since lost the institution of celibate monasticism (see below). Among their numbers a handful decided to seek a supposedly more authentic form of Buddhism outside their tradition. After having first been ordained in the Tibetan tradition, they eventually made their way to India. There they were re-ordained in the Theravāda tradition under the tutelage of the Venerable U Chandramani, a charismatic Burmese teacher resident in Kushinagar, the sacred site where the historical Buddha had passed away. In India they also came under the influence of the newly established Mahābodhi Society.¹⁰ However, just as Kyangtse Rinpoche and his followers had been expelled from the Valley by the Rana regime, so also the few newly-converted Theravāda monks were barred from the Kathmandu Valley by that regime, which perceived their teachings as a threat to the established social and religious order and took issue with their practice of collecting alms, which was alien to the Newar tradition and violated caste restrictions on food. Since the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1950, however, the Theravāda movement has established its presence in the Valley and, operating unhindered, has grown steadily in strength, so that by now it counts more than two hundred monks and female renunciants, and many more lay supporters. It recruits predominantly from the upper Newar Buddhist castes, and rather than challenging all of Newar Buddhist ritualism (the unsuccessful strategy it initially pursued), it came to offer its own alternatives to the major life-cycle rituals—alternatives that are less elaborate and expensive and more accessible than the complex and, to the uninitiated eyes, arcane rites Newars traditionally perform in the local tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism.¹¹ In

¹⁰ The eventful lives of these early converts are treated in LeVine and Gellner (2005: 41–45).

¹¹ For details see Levine and Gellner (2005: 65ff.) and Gellner (2008). The most prominent example is the *bārāḥ tayagu* rite, when girls, prior to the onset of their first menstruation, are confined for ideally twelve days in a dark room; cf. Gutschow and Michaels (2008: 173–87). A popular Theravāda alternative is the *ṛṣiṇī ishini pabbaja* when girls assume a quasi-monastic status and live for a number of days in a nunnery. However, I have not been able to confirm Gellner's claim that "the vast majority of Buddhist families" nowadays chose this option over the *bārāḥ tayagu* (Gellner 2008). By contrast, my enquiries in 2008 suggest that this traditional rite is still frequently performed, though the duration of confinement is often shortened to a few days or even a single night.

general, the Theravāda movement's claim to represent a more authentic form of Buddhism has gained much ground and come to undermine the authority of traditional Newar Buddhism.

A similar, though lesser, challenge is posed by the presence in the Valley of Tibetan Buddhism, which has grown dramatically since the occupation of Tibet in 1959 and the exodus of refugees in its wake. Again, Tibetan lamas with their intact tradition of monasticism and celibacy are perceived as representing a more authentic kind of Buddhism whose very presence challenges Newar Buddhism. The effect of this is felt particularly among members of the trader caste with historical connections to Tibet, who have always maintained some relations with Tibetan Buddhism. They readily view Tibetan lamas as an attractive alternative to Newar Buddhist priests and often commission them to perform such rituals as breaking the ground for building a new house or purifying it, though not rites of passage which are social in character and hence still require the services of a traditional *vajrācārya* priest (or at least a Theravāda monastic). A further effect of the recent spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the Valley is the mushrooming of new Tibetan *gompa* (Tib. *dgon pa*) and the increased encroachment upon the major sacred places of Newar Buddhism. To turn to Svayambhū as an example, the trend since the middle of the eighteenth century, observed above—namely the steady increase of influence of Tibetan sponsors—has gained dramatic momentum in the last ten years. Under the guidance of Manangis and with the wide support of Tibetan donors from all traditions, the base of the entire hillock has been encircled by a procession path (Tib. *skor lam*). Besides the prayer wheels, it is dotted with huge *chöten* (Tib. *mchod rten*), *lhakhang* (Tib. *lha khang*) with and without giant prayer wheels, Buddha statues, etc. At the western end, where it meets the ring road, the *korlam* (Tib. *skor lam*) has given rise to the so-called Buddhapark with three giant statues, which were completed in 2006, namely of Amitābha flanked by Śaḍakṣarī-Lokeśvara and Guru Rinpoche, each some twenty metres in height.¹² The new *korlam* has no historical precursor and effectively changes the face of the site of Svayambhū, with the base having become entirely Tibetan in appearance, while the top of the hillock with the *caitya* itself remains largely in hands of the Newars. This dramatic change entails the obliteration of the traditional sacred topography at the base of the

¹² The dramatic recent changes of the site of Svayambhū are the subject of an article by Bruce McCoy Owens (2002: 269–316).

hillock.¹³ The Newar shrines traditionally located there have either been simply covered by the *korlam*, or moved, or have become inaccessible. It is tempting to construct this as an example where the Tibetan colonisation of Newar sacred space obstructs and threatens traditional Newar ritual practice. However, the mentioned shrines played a very minor role in contemporary practice, so that the new *korlam* only seals the loss of a particular cult that appeared doomed to perish anyhow. It would be wrong, however, to ignore the impact of the Tibetan activities and the transformation of their role from external sponsor to resident partial owner. Whether they just fill a vacuum left by the retreating Newar tradition, or whether they expand in a more contested and forcible way—a case in point would seem to be the (unsuccessful) attempts to construct a *gompa* on the grounds surrounding the ancient Cābahīl *caitya* to the west of Kathmandu, close to Paśupati—they undermine traditional Newar Buddhism and contribute to its sense of marginalisation.

The Theravāda movement and the increased presence of Tibetan Buddhism only have so threatening an effect because Newar Buddhism is under siege anyway. One principal reason for this is economic. Most of the land endowed for religious purposes over the centuries has been possessed by the state or misappropriated by others, thereby depriving Newar Buddhism of the material basis that traditionally secured the continuation of its cults and practices and the upkeep of its monasteries, temples, *caityas* etc. This trend already commenced under the Ranas, but took a decided turn for the worse when the government put all non-private *guthi* lands under central administration in accordance with the Guthi Sansthan Act of 1964, and when, in a further particularly catastrophic step, transactions involving such lands became possible under the Guthi Sansthan Act of 1976.¹⁴ The latter Act has facilitated the encroachment upon endowment land by both individuals and institutions, with the result that the landholdings under the Guthi Sansthan's control are constantly dwindling. For this and other reasons the Guthi Sansthan has been unable to raise the necessary funds from the lands under its administration in order to guarantee the continued upkeep of the religious practices that these lands were originally meant to fund.

¹³ For details of the sacred topography of the hillock see my forthcoming monograph.

¹⁴ A recent court ruling has tried to put a halt to this practice, but it remains to be seen how effective this juridical ban is. Cf. the article “[S]upreme Court halts transactions in Rajguthi land,” published on January 24, 2008 in the *Kathmandu Post*.

This tendency has been aggravated by the fact that, in accordance with the Act of 1964, the Guthi Sansthan has to use part of the dwindling revenue in order to pay for its own expenses, including salaries. As a result of these developments the yield from particular endowments is disbursed in cash without proper adjustment for inflation, which means the *guthi* lands have effectively lost most of their value and can no longer pay for the purpose for which they were dedicated.¹⁵

There are two other equally important and related reasons for the crisis of Newar Buddhism, namely the exposure to globalisation, spear-headed by tourism, delivered by cable TV and access to the internet, and also mediated through the vast number of Nepalis nowadays working abroad, and secondly the momentous changes that have occurred in the last decades in the Valley, such as a manifold increase of the population largely through immigration, recently accelerated by the influx of refugees from the Maoist insurgency, urbanisation on an unprecedented scale,¹⁶ etc. Traditional Newar Buddhism has always been an integral part of the social fabric of a premodern, caste-based society. It is a very strong strand, a strand on which much is centred and a strand that holds much together, but it is also a strand that is itself in need of the fabric into which it is woven. Hence, as the social fabric of Newar society has begun to unravel, traditional Newar Buddhism, too, is beginning to unravel and in need to adapt to a new situation where old certainties can no longer be taken for granted, and where new religious sensibilities and needs have to be catered to. It is the effect on rituals of the process of adaptation to this new situation that I want to turn to in the following section.

* * *

One defining aspect of Newar Buddhism is its accommodation to a highly complex and stratified caste system and the resultant restriction

¹⁵ For a complaint of the resulting situation see, for instance, Dev Kumar Sunuwar, "Guthi land encroachment poses threat to cultures," *The Kathmandu Post*, Oct. 20, 2008.

¹⁶ The U.N. reports that in 2007 Kathmandu was the fastest growing city in Asia with populations of 750,000 or more. Cf. Catherine Donaldson-Evans, "Experts: World Population Will Explode by 2025 with Influx of 'Megacities' of 10 Million People or More," *Foxnews.com*, December 20, 2007.

of access to particular forms of practice on the basis of caste. Most importantly, monastic ordination is a privilege reserved for male members of the uppermost caste, the *sākyas* and *vajrācāryas*.¹⁷ However, in this tradition ordination does not serve as a soteriologically motivated act of renunciation, but, by contrast, as a rite of passage undergone in childhood (the boys disrobe only three days after their ordination) that confirms the caste status of the boys and binds them to society. Even so, since this ordination (which is known in Newari as *bare chuyegu*) makes the boys life-long members of the monastery and *saṃgha* to which they belong by patrilineal descent, it bestows upon them a permanent monastic status and the concomitant prestige (and by the same token obliges them to take turns as ritual officiants in the cults of the monastery). Within this caste of hereditary monastics there is a further differentiation because only a small subset is, again by the principle of patrilineal descent, entitled to the *vajrācārya* initiation that transforms them into tantric masters (or *rdo rje slob dpon* to use the equivalent Tibetan term). The *vajrācārya* initiation (*ācāryābhiṣeka*, Newari: *ācāḥ luyegu*), too, serves in most cases simply as a rite of passage that confirms the boys' membership in this most prestigious status group, but some initiates later indeed become practising ritual masters who act as family priest and perform rituals on the behalf of others.

Access to tantric initiation is, however, not restricted to these hereditary *vajrācāryas*, as there is a separate tradition of imparting secret (*guhya*) initiation into the cult of Cakrasaṃvara and related Buddhist deities of the Yoginītantras.¹⁸ This far more elaborate form of initiation is not a life-cycle rite of passage that is tied to caste status. Rather, it is predicated upon a special religious commitment and accordingly taken as a matter of choice. It is open to all monastics and also to the uppermost lay castes without inherited link to monastic communities. Since the highest tantric initiations in principle require the participation of a partner, they are typically taken by couples and hence are open to women. They are not treated as mere consorts, but as initiands in their own right and receive esoteric mantras and instructions enabling them to engage as independent subjects in tantric practices. Accordingly it is

¹⁷ For details see von Rospatt (2005).

¹⁸ For details of this complex procedure see Gellner (1992: 266–81).

possible for women who don't have a (willing) partner to be initiated on their own.¹⁹

While high caste Buddhist Newars have traditionally enjoyed at least some access to the highest and most prestigious forms of Newar Buddhist teaching, the majority of castes have always been precluded from such practices. In their stead, Newar Buddhism offers a range of exoteric practices, devotional activities and religious customs that are accessible to all pure caste Newars. The so-called impure castes, the butchers (*nāy*) and sweepers (*poḍe*), however, are excluded also from most forms of exoteric practice. They may not participate in *vratas*, that is day-long devotional observances dedicated to particular deities and usually performed collectively in public at particular shrines. More seriously, they cannot enlist the services of *vajrācārya* priests, who perform for pure-caste Newars the rites of passage (*saṃskāra*) that structure and sanctify life. Even though they may resort to a different officiant to have matching rites performed, this restriction largely excludes them from the realm of mainstream Newar Buddhism. On the other hand, the castes considered impure have their own complex rites and traditions, about which little is known since they are typically shrouded in secrecy and have hardly been researched.

It is not surprising that the outlined restrictions of access on the basis of caste and gender have come under attack. Whether due to the teachings of the Theravāda movement with its root in the Buddhist Modernism promulgated by the Mahābodhi Society,²⁰ or whether due to a traditional indigenous understanding of Buddhism, it is nowadays commonly understood that the Buddha was opposed to making differentiations on the basis of caste. The perception that the caste-based

¹⁹ My informal inquiries suggest that there is a growing number of singles taking tantric initiation, and that among them women have begun to outnumber men. However, the singles do not receive the three highest tantric *abhiṣekas* (starting with the *guhābhiṣeka*) since these are predicated upon sexual intercourse and require the participation of couples, even if no explicit sexual acts are performed. (Though taking initiation collectively with couples, the singles are barred from witnessing these higher initiatory rites, which are performed behind a blind.) It is conceivable that the comparatively large number of singles taking tantric initiation is a recent trend, reflecting a certain popularisation of these initiations among the eligible castes. More specifically, I suspect (but do not have the data to prove it) that the strong prominence of single women taking tantric initiation is a novel development, in line with the greater role that women have recently come to play also in other arenas of religious practice (see below).

²⁰ For a brief portrayal of Buddhist Modernism see LeVine and Gellner (2005: 1–19), where the authors use the less common (but arguably more appropriate) term 'Modernist Buddhism'.

restrictions in Newar Buddhism are wrong is, moreover, strengthened by western notions of equality, which have become an unquestioned ideal underlying practically all political discourse and socioeconomic thinking in modern Nepal. However, the mentioned restrictions in Newar Buddhism follow from the structure of a caste-based society and cannot simply be undone by the stroke of a pen. Rather their removal is dependent upon a general change in attitudes and sentiments. This holds good in particular for the exclusion of the ‘impure’ castes. As long as they are considered as intrinsically polluting, people will feel reluctant to share religious practices with them, if only because they fear that it compromises their own status in the eyes of others. Hence, what we can witness as part of a concerted effort to vitalise and shore up Newar Buddhism is not radical reform and attempts to do away with caste restrictions, but rather a tendency to compensate for them.

The most interesting example for efforts to address, but not do away with, caste-based restrictions is the limitation of access to ordination. Starting in the summer of 1996, some of Kathmandu’s most prominent *vajrācāryas* joined hands under the leadership of Badri Ratna Bajracharya and started to perform ordination rituals for candidates who are not *sākyas* or *vajrācāryas*, that is, members of the uppermost caste, who alone are traditionally eligible to be ordained. The targeted candidates include also boys (and men) who are not of mixed-caste marriages with one parent being either a *sākya* or *vajrācārya*, a group for which some accommodations have long been made. These new ordination rituals are performed as they are for *sākyas* and *vajrācāryas*, including the three-day period of monkhood and the subsequent ritual disrobing. Even so, they do not translate into membership of a historical monastery and its *saṃgha* and the associated status of monastics. In order to address this shortcoming and find a suitable venue for these ordination rites (which were first performed in one of the courtyards attached to Jhvā Bāhāḥ, one of the eighteen principal monasteries of Kathmandu) a new monastery with a *saṃgha* that in principle would be open to all was founded at Vairocana-tīrtha to the west of Kathmandu. However, the fact that the foundation of this monastery and its *saṃgha* was only motivated by providing a context for the temporary ordination has proved too little, and by all accounts this newly founded monastery has not become a functioning and meaningful monastic institution. Its *saṃgha*, the so-called Jinasaṃgha, seems to be largely a construct that exists on paper alone. However that may be, belonging to this *saṃgha*

can in any case not be compared to the membership in one of the traditional monasteries. It does not entitle and oblige the initiates to serve in the monastery as ritual officiants, and it does not bestow the status and prestige that goes along with membership in a *saṃgha* made up of *śākyas* and/or *vajrācāryas*. Accordingly, unlike their counterparts from traditional monasteries, the initiates of the Jinasaṃgha are not considered as eligible recipients of monastic alms (*bhikṣā*), such as offered by the Buddhist community on the occasion of the annual *pañjādān* and the *samyak* festival, celebrated every four years in Patan and every twelve years in Kathmandu.²¹ Even so, the foundation of this new monastery and the (unsuccessful) steps to institutionalise its *saṃgha* are a serious attempt to compensate for the exclusivism of traditional monasticism, which itself goes unchallenged. (Incidentally, this strategy of setting up a new monastery is not new, but corresponds to one way in which the monastic Newar community was originally enlarged.) This new initiative to offer temporary ordination to Newars who would have been traditionally barred has become possible because it was supported from the beginning by some of the most respected and influential *vajrācāryas*, and because it does not challenge the established order of hereditary monkhood. Indicative of the moderate ambition, the new rite of ordination is in practice not open to members of the ‘impure’ castes.²²

This new form of temporary ordination is likewise not open to females. This ban, however, does not follow so much from a deliberate exclusion of females from (temporary) monastic status, but rather from

²¹ For details on *pañjādān* (which, though etymologically wrong, is commonly known as *pañcadān*) and the *samyak* festival see Gellner (1992: 180–86).

²² Though so far a singular event, it is worth adding that in October 2008 a western student of Newar Buddhism underwent the *bare chuyegu* rite in Patan. A group of widely respected leaders of the Buddhist Newar community of Patan performed and sponsored this ritual and took care of its organisation. During his three days of monkhood, the initiate visited a number of Newar monasteries in Patan, where he was welcomed by locals and received traditional offerings of rice grains and coins. As in the mentioned case in Kathmandu, the ordination could not take place in a traditional monastery (which remain closed patrilineal units). Instead it was performed in Viśvaśānti Mahāvihāra, a complex that was constructed in the 1950s at the site of an ancient monastery called Gā Bāhāh, which had since long disappeared together with its *saṃgha* (cf. Locke 1985: 232). Viśvaśānti Mahāvihāra has no *saṃgha* of its own, and hence the foreign student underwent the *bare chuyegu* rite without becoming a member of a functioning *saṃgha*. Even so, to my knowledge this is the first time that a westerner has received ordination in the Newar Buddhist tradition. This bold move is indicative of a general softening of attitudes towards outsiders and the realisation that their support may be useful for strengthening Newar Buddhism.

the character of the *bare chuyegu* rite, which functions traditionally as a rite of passage for boys and not for girls, who instead have their analogous rite of passage in the form of the *ihi* ritual that sanctifies the girls and contains many elements of the wedding ceremony ahead of their ‘real’ marriage to a human. In other arenas of religious practice, there is, however, a tendency to open up certain forms of religious practices to females. A conspicuous example is the public participation of females in musical groups. What would have been unusual only fifteen years ago has now become a common sight, namely girls playing drums in public side by side with their male counterparts on religious occasions, such as the daily veneration of the Svayambhūcaitya in the month of *guṃlā* during summer. Another notable example is the recent innovation to have *gurumās*, that is, wives of *vajrācāryas*, recite the *Pañcarakṣā*. This sacred scripture is often recited as part of rituals in order to invoke the five protector goddesses of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the Pañcarakṣās. The recitation, however, is traditionally restricted to *vajrācārya* (and *śākya*) males, and it was accordingly a big event when in 2005 for the first time one hundred and eight *gurumās* publicly recited the *Pañcarakṣā* in Jana Bāhāḥ, one of the most prominent monasteries of Kathmandu, as part of the performance of the *saptavidhānuttara*, an elaborate protective ritual frequently performed in public (on which more below). While the wives of priests have always played an important role in rituals, they do so, with a few important exceptions, as assistants. Hence this newly found role as reciters of sacred texts (for which they practised for some six months under the guidance of Yagyamanpati Bajracharya, a prominent and influential priest on whose activities see the appendix) signifies a marked departure from established practice by putting females, in public, in charge of the ritual use of a sacred tantric scripture. However, this reform, too, does not challenge the established order, since it is controlled by male *vajrācāryas* and builds upon the traditional caste-bound role of their partners. Even though Newar Buddhism remains male-controlled and continues to exclude women from monastic ordination and priesthood, there is a real change in the opening up of some forms of practices for females from which they were previously precluded. This opening is different from the attempts to compensate for caste restrictions without challenging them. It seems Newar society finds it easier to show some flexibility regarding gender than to soften traditional caste barriers, which continue to be deeply engrained.

A final example for the slow opening up of restricted forms of religious practice concerns the practice of tantric initiation. There is a new movement to give lesser forms of tantric initiation to members of lower castes who traditionally do not qualify for the higher esoteric initiations. For instance, Naresh Man Bajracharya, another protagonist at the forefront of efforts to invigorate Newar Buddhism, initiated in 2005 a big crowd of several hundred enthusiasts in a converted movie hall in Patan into the cult of Avalokiteśvara and his six-syllable mantra *om maṇi padme hūṃ*. However, while this unprecedented event used the traditional idiom of secret initiation, it only opened up a form of exoteric mantra practice that had been available long before to all, and hence it did not challenge the established caste restrictions relating to advanced forms of tantric initiation. This is a further instance where new forms of practice are initiated that compensate for caste exclusions occurring in other contexts, but leave the principle of such exclusion unchallenged. This approach is symptomatic of the reform initiatives in general. They are perpetuated by conservative figures of the Newar Buddhist establishment, and are not meant to challenge the existing structure. Rather, they are viewed as corrective actions that are meant to compensate for a defect of the tradition by returning to an imagined better, less corrupt past when access to Buddhist practice was supposedly more egalitarian. This way of advancing innovations in the name of a conservative return to a glorious past is typical of the way in which Indic traditions have always renewed and reinvented themselves.

* * *

A second major shift in recent reform efforts concerns the practice of rituals. These efforts do not aim to change the rituals *per se*, but instead address what is perceived to be a widespread neglect with which they are performed. This concerns in particular the recitation of the Sanskrit text to be enunciated as part of a given ritual. Normally (but, of course, not always) priests race through this text and in the process neglect to fully pronounce the longish Sanskrit words and compounds, a neglect that comes quite naturally as Newari is essentially mono-syllabic and has an innate tendency to shorten loan words. Not surprisingly, the recital of a text in this way threatens to become incomprehensible, but

this is normally not a matter of concern because it is commonly recited for its own sake as a self-contained ritual act and not because it conveys a particular meaning. Of course, this technique of recitation may at all times have invited criticism, particularly if its defects extended to the mantras embedded in the recited text. However, what is new is the systematic efforts with which some reformers of Newar Buddhism have addressed this and other supposed shortcomings in the performance of rituals. Most importantly, they have instituted new teaching programs in both Kathmandu and Patan that are generally directed at a new generation of *vajrācāryas* and train the students in the punctilious performance of rituals, including the well-articulated and un-truncated recitation of Sanskrit passages.²³ These training programs include the systematic explanation of these rites and their meaning. Related to these training programs, there have been numerous initiatives since the late 1980s dedicated to educating the Newars about Buddhism in general and their own tradition in particular.²⁴ These initiatives have also led to the institutionalisation of Buddhist Studies as an academic discipline at various universities in the Valley.²⁵ Moreover, there has been a profusion of publications on Buddhism in Newari. Besides innumerable booklets containing materials for practice, such as ritual handbooks (see below), collections of songs and hymns (*stotra*), etc., and besides numerous books and journals about Newar Buddhism and its history, there are also translations of major Mahāyāna works (*sūtras*, *avadānas*, etc.) from Sanskrit into Newari. Again, these translation efforts have their correspondence in the Theravāda fold where the major part of the *suttapiṭaka* has been translated from Pali into Newari.

²³ For brief notes on these teaching initiatives in Kathmandu and Patan see the appendix.

²⁴ For details see again the appendix.

²⁵ The teaching of Buddhism at a university level started in the 1990s at Mahendra Sanskrit University with Badri Ratna Bajracharya and Naresh Man Bajracharya offering courses on ritual practice (cf. the appendix). On the initiative of the latter, a department of Buddhist Studies was established at Tribhuvan University in 2000. It offers a postgraduate degree in Buddhist Studies. Moreover, in 2006 the Lotus Academic College was opened in Patan (again see the appendix). It is affiliated with Tribhuvan University and likewise offers postgraduate courses in Buddhist studies. Outside the fold of Newar teachers, there is also a Centre for Buddhist Studies, offering postgraduate (and undergraduate) courses, at Kathmandu University. It was set up in 2002 on the initiative of Chökyl Nyima Rinpoche (Chos kyi nyi ma rin po che) at his *gompa* in Bodnath, on the eastern outskirts of modern Kathmandu, as an independent unit of his seminary, the so-called Rangjung Yeshe Institute.

From the reformers' perspective their efforts to revitalise the performance of rituals and imbue them with meaning address what are perceived to be symptoms of degeneration of a tradition in decline. However, to my mind these efforts also indicate a certain alienation from the way rites have normally been performed as a matter of course, simply as acts carried out for their own sake. This alienation is rooted in a modern worldview as instilled by western education and perpetuated by the media, and it is also fed by the criticism of these rites leveled by people inside as well as outside the tradition who view them as outdated practices that are of uncertain religious meaning. Thus the reform efforts are also a response to external criticism and have an apologetic component.

The new concern with meaning also shows in other contexts. A good example is the performance of the principal rite of passage of boyhood performed for pure caste Newar Buddhists without inherited links to monasticism, i.e. boys who come from trader, artisan or farmer castes. This rite, known as *kaytā pūjā*, is largely modeled upon the upanayana, the Hindu rite of passage (*samskāra*) par excellence, which introduces boys to the Vedas. It is even named after a central element of this rite, namely the girdle (Newari: *kaytā*; Skt: *mekhala*) that the boys put on as outward sign of their new role as students. Even though the *kaytā pūjā* is performed by a Buddhist priest and embedded in a ritual dedicated to the common pentad of Vajrayāna Buddhas (i.e. Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha and Amoghasiddhi), the initiatory rites as such are only to a limited degree adapted to a Buddhist setting. Most significantly, the rites as traditionally performed do not entail that the boys take refuge in the Buddha, his teaching (Dharma) and the monastic community (*saṃgha*), let alone that they take the five vows of a lay practitioner (*upāsaka*).²⁶ Though not prescribed in the handbooks, this

²⁶ Although they do not take the triple refuge, the boys do at least worship the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and *saṃgha* as part of the *kaytā pūjā*. Still, this often happens only in a covert manner as part of the *gurumaṇḍala* that the boys are made to offer. Since they (and most participants other than the priests) have little idea of the content of the *gurumaṇḍala* liturgy, which is recited on their behalf by the officiating priest, they are not aware that it entails the worship of the Three Jewels at least in this perfunctory way. However, at times—for an example see the Bhaktapur practice documented by Gutschow and Michaels and the handbook they reproduce (2008: 235–36)—the boys are, in addition to the *gurumaṇḍala*, made to venerate the three jewels in a more explicit and extensive manner. For this they worship each of the three jewels by way of a *maṇḍala*. The configuration of the three *maṇḍalas* employed is standard. It is used for the same purpose of venerating the three jewels also in the ordination rite, the *bare chuyegu*.

has prompted *vajrācārya* priests to add to the *kaytā pūjā* the explicit triple refuge that is pronounced by the boys themselves and thereby allows them to actively express and affirm their Buddhist identity, just as this happens as a matter of course when the *bare chuyegu* ordination rite for *sākyas* and *vajrācāryas* is performed. This innovation is not only a further example of the new relevance of meaning, but also reflects the modern concern to clearly demarcate Buddhist from Hindu forms of practice, something which is indicative of the importance that religious identity has gained in the recent past.

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The third factor transforming ritual practice that I want to deal with here is the trend towards standardisation. This partly follows from the newly set up teaching programmes mentioned above, but it is also, and more significantly, a consequence of modern printing technology and the distribution of the principal ritual manuals in the easily accessible form of printed booklets, a movement that was initiated in Kathmandu as early as the sixties by Amoghavajra Bajracharya of Gaṃ Bāhāḥ. Traditionally, a priest would use a hand-written text that he had either inherited from his forefathers or procured himself, or that he himself had compiled on the basis of other works at his disposal.²⁷ Since there are various junctures in the rituals that do allow for choice—for instance which *stotras* to recite in praise of the worshipped deities—this meant that there was considerable variety in practice, reflecting different preferences and ritual traditions. The standardising effect of the newly introduced printed handbooks is not an unintended consequence, but a clearly articulated agenda.²⁸ To its end these handbooks tend to be ceremoniously released in the presence of large parts of the

²⁷ For a concrete example see my brief description (von Rospatt 2010: 208, n. 26) of those ritual handbooks in the personal collection of the late Ratnakaji Bajracharya of Kathmandu that deal with consecration rites.

²⁸ Cf. Naresh Man Bajracharya's preface to Badri Ratna Bajracharya's Commentary on the Dharmasaṃgraha (2005: xxix), where he praises the effect of Bhadri Ratna's publications of "ritual instruction manuals" with the following words: "The publication of his [i.e. Badri Ratna's] works brought uniformity in ritual performing task at least in Kathmandu".

vajrācārya community, who on this occasion receive their free copies. The standardising effect of these handbooks is reinforced by the fact that rituals are often performed in unison by a team of *vajrācāryas* from different monasteries with the result that all participating priests, including those who prefer to resort to their own handbooks, make use of these printed versions. This new way of circulating ritual handbooks, therefore, allows their authors to gain much more control over common practice than they would have traditionally been able to achieve. For the reformers of Newar Buddhist practice this serves as an important tool to ensure the dominance of what they consider to be the correct way to perform particular rituals. Whatever the perceived advantages, this does entail a genuine shift in attitude. Instead of the traditional tolerance for variety and deviation in practice, there emerges a new standard to which all are expected to conform. It should be noted that the ritual traditions of Kathmandu and Patan are, despite their far-reaching similarities, still too different to allow for homogenisation. Therefore, the standardising effect mentioned above only applies to ritual practice within either the Kathmandu or Patan ritual tradition. Overstepping the boundaries between these two distinct ritual traditions invites controversy, as happened recently when a performance of the highest tantric initiation in Patan was criticised by a *vajrācārya* of Kathmandu as deficient, thereby inviting the anger of the officiating priests and other members of the Patan *vajrācārya* community.

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In addition to the aforementioned three ways in which ritual practice has been transformed, I want to finally consider a further recent development, namely a deliberate revivalism in ritual practices that is motivated by the desire to invigorate Newar Buddhism. A typical example is the worship by groups of devotees at the twelve sacred sites (*pīṭha*) spread over the Valley. While this is a tradition that is already attested in the *Svayambhūpurāṇa*, a text dating possibly from the fifteenth century,²⁹ it seems to have gained new prominence in recent years as some

²⁹ Cf. von Rospatt (2009: 53–55).

popular *vajrācāryas* from Patan and Kathmandu began to perform *pīṭhapūjā* together with their respective students and followers, visiting a different *pīṭha* each month over the course of a year. A related phenomenon is the recent proliferation of the aforementioned *saptavidhānuttara* rite. While this has always been an important protective rite with a focus on the propitiation of the classical pentad of transcendental Buddhas,³⁰ in recent years this rite has been performed with great frequency by different organised groups of *vajrācāryas* not only in various parts of the Valley, but also at sacred places outside the Valley, such as Lumbini (where the final 365th such rite, concluding a year of daily performances, was carried out on March 6, 2001) and even Bodh Gayā in India. It seems that the performance of this elaborate, non-esoteric rite with its hundreds of decorative offerings, and with the officiating *vajrācārya* priests dressed in colourful robes and adorned by traditional headdresses has come to be regarded as an ideal public expression of Newar Buddhist identity. A further, quite different example concerns the cult of the esoteric tantric deity Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa (the name under which Acala is usually worshipped). While this deity has always been part of the Newar Vajrayāna tradition, it has in the recent past only played a minor role in religious practice, particularly in Patan, which at present does not seem to have an active tradition of initiating into the cult of this deity. Apparently independently from each other, two *vajrācāryas* from Kathmandu, namely Naresh Man Bajracharya and Yagyamanpati Bajracharya have in the last years started to give initiations into the cult of this deity. While the latter priest confines himself in his activities to Kathmandu, the former priest has performed initiations also in Patan and Bhaktapur. Both priests do not restrict themselves to the mere transmission of the mantra, but also provide accompanying teaching that informs about the doctrinal background and introduces to the yoga of generating the deity in mental practice. This, too, may be viewed as a revivalist move because at least in the recent past higher tantric initiations did not include such teachings.

In all the cited examples (and in numerous similar cases that need to go unmentioned here), particular forms of ritual practice are revived and fostered with the explicit agenda of strengthening Newar Buddhism. This agenda is not only anchored in religious sentiments,

³⁰ The *saptavidhānuttara* rite as performed in Patan has been the subject of a recent PhD thesis. Cf. Manik Bajracharya (2007).

but also owes to the fact that traditional Newar Buddhism has come to be seen as an expression of Newar ethnic identity. Hence, the urge to preserve and revive Newar Buddhism also has a political component. It follows from the perceived marginalisation of the Newars (a perception that has been reinforced by the huge influx of outsiders into the Valley in recent years, something that has transformed the Newars into a minority in their own homeland) and is characteristic of the ubiquitous ethnicisation of politics (*janjāti*) in contemporary Nepal.³¹ To perform the mentioned (and other) rites with the deliberate agenda of strengthening Newar Buddhism is of course in marked contrast to the past when these rites were performed as a matter of course, without such ulterior motives. It betrays a certain alienation from these rites, an alienation that in its most extreme form could result in the “folklorisation” of ritual practice, when rites are performed for no other reason than to maintain a tradition with which one has lost touch.³² To be sure, this point has not been reached. The mentioned revival and reform initiatives have arisen from within the living tradition, and it is, at this point, not the case that the rites in question are merely staged in order to enact a tradition that in truth has already been lost.³³

³¹ It would be interesting to examine whether similar sentiments of identity play a comparable role in the importance Tibetans tend to attach to the practice of their religious tradition.

³² Cf. Toffin (2006: 71), where the author observes that the mask dances staged at Indra Jātrā express “a certain folklorization” that can give way to an outright “touristification,” when the dances are solely staged for paying tourists. It is tempting to deride this practice of “touristification” as the commoditisation of a tradition that has all but been lost. However, as the case of the Buddhist tantric dances (*caryānṛtya*) staged at the Vajra Hotel, Kathmandu, and other venues shows, this would be too simplistic and ignore the aspirations of the figures at the forefront of such practices. They are typically motivated not so much by monetary gains as by the wish to preserve and revive traditional practices they identify with and deem endangered. In my opinion, Richard Widdess’ study of the tantric dances and the modern practice of staging them for an audience (2004: 7–41) does not engage sufficiently with this aspect and as a result does not do full justice to the complex adaptation of these dances to a modern context.

³³ A first sign of the folklorisation of Newar religion and culture may be seen in the exhibitions that are organised with increasing frequency in order to display religious objects and other traditional Newar artifacts. A good example is the extensive exhibition that was staged in one of the courtyards of the royal palace complex at Mangal Bajār (as well as in the attached gardens behind) on the occasion of the Yele Mahotsava celebrations held at the end of September 2008 in Patan. The exhibits included a vast array of ritual objects, traditional music instruments, jewelry and clothing, as well as footwear and headgear, bedding, kitchen utensils, a wide spectrum of clay, metal, wooden and reed vessels, prepared food items of all sorts, artisan tools and products,

It is remarkable how important a role rituals play in efforts to reform and revitalise Newar Buddhism. Rather than being phased out, rituals are key and continue to define religious practice and sentiments, even after the advent of modernity and the exposure to the forces of globalisation. The early Theravāda activists experienced this when their criticism of Newar ritualism alienated many potential supporters, forcing them to offer alternative rituals instead of the rites they had first rejected. This is symptomatic of the continued great relevance of rituals in Nepalese society more generally. To give a prominent example, reference may be made to efforts to legitimise King Gyanendra's ascension to the throne after the palace massacre in 2001. In addition to the regular *samyak* festival, celebrated every twelve years in Kathmandu, an optional (*aicchika*) *samyak* festival was celebrated in January 2002.³⁴ This festival is dedicated to the cult of the prehistorical Buddha Dīpaṃkara and the ritualised cultivation of generosity. It accords an important role to the king as the leader of the civil community hosting Dīpaṃkara and the *saṃgha*. The last time such an optional *samyak* had been celebrated was after the overthrow of the Ranas and the assumption of royal power by King Tribhuvan. Just as then, so also in 2002 this ritual clearly served political ends. This is confirmed by the official news broadcast covering this event. It portrayed the king as Bodhisattva ruler who receives worship by the Buddhist community in recognition

agricultural implements and produce including an enormous variety of grains, fruits, vegetables and legumes, pulses, roots etc., and so on. The exhibition was hugely popular and thousands of Newars, dressed in the same clothes that were on display passed by the mentioned exhibits most of which still form part of their everyday life, saw an extensive display of the very life-cycle rites they still perform at home, viewed the live production of rice liquor (*aylāh*) which is still routinely made in the same way in their own households, and so on. The exhibition attracted hardly any non-Newars, and it was really for their own consumption that the Newars staged and celebrated their own culture. It functioned as an assertion of their identity (something that has become an acutely felt need in contemporary Nepal), but at the same time it also betrayed an awareness of their culture as something not naturally given, but special and in need of protection and preservation. While the Newars may view such cultural exhibitions as an expression of the value and vitality of their culture, they are, therefore, also indicators of a looming folklorisation of Newar culture and religion. To be sure, this folklorisation has not yet happened, but it looks imminent at least among a section of the better-to-do and more westernised Newars.

³⁴ A brief photo report of this optional *samyak* festival can be found in Tejratna Sindurākār: *Jhinidamya samyak mahādāna* 2061. Kathmandu: Sugataratna Sindurākāra, 2004. The author also hints at the political context when he says that this *samyak* festival was staged in order to further peace.

of his role as protector of country and people.³⁵ Similarly, in the fold of brahmanical Hinduism, a massive fire ritual with nominally one *koṭi* (= 10 million) oblations was performed at Kāṣṭha Maṇḍap in the center of Kathmandu. The political agenda accompanying this ritual was advertised on banners decorating and surrounding the ritual arena. Besides a large banner wishing the king's and queen's government success (*jaya jaya jaya*), citations of such mythical figures as Cāṇakya, the classical authority on statecraft, or Lord Rāma were on display. They served as a backdrop for proclamations by Nepalese kings of the Śāha dynasty, starting with Pṛthvī Nārāyaṇa Śāha, the founder of the modern Nepali nation state, continuing with Tribhuvan, Mahendra and the late queen Aisvarya,³⁶ and ending, most importantly, with a lengthy quote of the (then) new king Gyanendra, in which he declared it to be his destiny to make the Nepalese people happy, caring for their prosperity and delivering justice.

It would be easy to add many more examples that would demonstrate the continued relevance of rituals in the public and other spheres of life. What matters here is that, far from becoming obsolete, rituals have proven to be remarkably resilient. This, of course, does not mean that they are immune to change. By contrast, the possibility of adapting rituals to changed circumstances is precisely the reason why they have been able to continue to thrive and be relevant.

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³⁵ Excerpt of my transcript of the official English language news that NTV broadcast at 10 PM on January 15, 2001: "... the religious *aicchik samyak mahādāna pūjā* was offered to his majesty the king. It is also a special occasion when his majesty the king is worshipped as bodhisattva or incarnation of a Buddhist god. ... Deemed that monarch (!) is the protector and source of inspiration for the people and the country, the Buddhists observed the *samyakmahādān* as per their tradition. The *mahādān* was observed wishing for peace, happiness and wellbeing of Nepal and all Nepalese after the interval of fifty years..."

³⁶ Of the kings of modern Nepal since the end of the Rana regime, only the late king Birendra, the slain brother of Gyanendra, did not feature. In his stead there was a citation of Birendra's wife Aisvarya. This choice may reflect a deliberate choice, for hearsay has it that Gyanendra and Aisvarya were united in their opposition to Birendra, when he ceded power to the forces of democracy in 1990.

I have identified four areas of change, viz. 1) the easing of restrictions governing access, 2) the attention to meaning, 3) the standardisation of practice, and finally 4) the deliberate revival and proliferation of certain rites in a conscious effort to strengthen Newar Buddhism. This is an insufficient summary of the many changes that have taken and are taking place, but I hope that it captures something of the way in which Newar Buddhist ritual practice has been fundamentally impacted by the momentous transformations taking place in the Kathmandu Valley before our very eyes.³⁷ The fact that the political vicissitudes and concomitant shifts in sponsorship in premodern Nepal did not have a similar effect on ritual practice shows how much more fundamental the current transformations are.

Tibetan Buddhism has to wrestle with many of the same forces and challenges, but it is clearly faring much better than Newar Buddhism. Paradoxically, it may be precisely the occupation of Tibet in 1959 and the resultant need to reform Tibetan Buddhism that prepared it already then for the confrontation with modernity and globalisation and now puts it in a far better position. Most importantly, Tibetan Buddhism successfully opened itself to the outside world and started to welcome western and other non-Tibetan practitioners. This has invited enormous patronage without which Tibetan Buddhism would presumably be struggling for survival, and this has also given rise to a new generation of learned practitioners who, though not ethnically Tibetans, help perpetuate the tradition. Compare this with Newar Buddhism, which due to its caste restrictions is open only to a small segment of Newar society and as a consequence does not attract support from the outside.

³⁷ It is worth noting that the archaic form of tantric Hinduism characteristic of Newar religious practices has been undermined much more seriously by the forces of modernity than Newar Buddhism has. Many of the Śaiva Śākta tantric traditions have already fallen into oblivion, and others seem on the brink of extinction. A decisive factor seems to be that while for Newar Buddhists the perseverance of their tradition is a question of their religious and social identity, this is not so for Hindu Newars, or at least not to the same degree, since they can adapt the *parvatīya* mainstream form of Hinduism prevalent in most parts of Nepal without putting their religious identity in question. Religious and ethnic identity are intimately connected in Nepal, and it is no accident that ethnic *janjāti* sentiments are much stronger among Buddhist than Hindu Newars, and, related to this, that Hindu Newars are more prone to abandon Newari as their principal language than Buddhist Newars are.

APPENDIX

Brief Account of Recent Teaching Initiatives among the Newar Buddhists of Kathmandu and Patan

The following is not an exhaustive survey, but a short, preliminary account that focuses on the main initiatives undertaken in the last two decades in Kathmandu and Patan in order to teach the essentials of Newar Buddhist ritual practice. It does not capture the traditional transmission between *vajrācārya* priest and disciple, but records new initiatives with some degree of institutionalisation that aim at a (slightly) larger audience and try to address the perceived weakening of traditional transmission and the resultant shortcomings in training and learning. I first deal with Kathmandu and then move to Patan. These are the principal centres of Newar Buddhism, but there are also active communities in Bhaktapur, Thimi and elsewhere, which I do not cover here.

In 1979 Badri Ratna Bajracharya (who is the most active and widely respected *vajrācārya* of present-day Newar Buddhism and since fall 2008 also the head of the Dharmodayasabha, a body uniting the principal Buddhist traditions present in the Valley) founded the Vajrācārya-adhyayana-maṇḍala in Kathmandu in order to train *vajrācārya* youths (a few students were also *sākyas*). This innovative programme was hugely popular and in 1990 led to the institutionalisation at the Mahendra Sanskrit University of a course on *bauddha-karmakāṇḍa* with its own textbook designed by Badri Ratna Bajracharya (*Nepālko Bauddha Karmakāṇḍa*. Kathmandu: Mahendrasaṃskṛtaviśvavidyālayaḥ, 1992). In the first year alone there were—according to Astamuni Bajracharya (1998: 76)—135 students enrolled in the elementary course. These numbers were obviously not sustainable, and nowadays the courses are no longer taught in this way, but have reverted to their original format and are taught informally at the home of Badri Ratna. Even so, there have been by now, in the words of Naresh Man Bajracharya, a prominent disciple of Badri Ratna, “hundreds” of students who have learnt at least the basics of *vajrācārya* rituals from the latter (see the former’s preface to Badri Ratna Bajracharya 2005: xxx).

Naresh Man Bajracharya himself has become a leading practising *vajrācārya* of the younger generation. He joined his guru’s teaching efforts at the Mahendra Sanskrit University upon his return from India,

where he had earned a doctorate in Buddhist Philosophy from Delhi University. With Korean backing Naresh Man has also set up an organisation in Kathmandu (JGO, Nepal Youth Buddhist Association) and another one in Patan (Paramparāgata Buddha Dharma Saṃgha), which undertake various activities for promoting Newar Buddhism, including supporting young *vajrācāryas* studying Buddhism, by providing them with a moderate stipend.

Though the focus is not on the technical details of the rituals that *vajrācārya* family priests (*purohita*) typically need to perform, mention may also be made of the classes that the aforementioned Yagyamanpati Bajracharya has been teaching since 2004. These classes provide more general interpretations of Vajrayāna Buddhism and its rites, often with a philosophical slant. They also engage with esoteric forms of tantric yoga practice, such as the so-called *trisamādhi* dedicated to the mental generation of Cakrasaṃvara. A particular focus is the teaching of tantric songs chanted as a form of worship, especially in higher tantric rituals. As mentioned, Yagyamanpati's classes are not targeted at actual or potential family priests, but draw a more aged, male and female, educated middle-class audience that comes largely from the *vajrācārya* and *śākya* caste, but also includes a few *tuladhars*.

Yagyamanpati's regular classes, which meet twice a week at a private home in Iku Bāhāḥ in Kathmandu, started informally as gatherings of his students. By now they have grown in size and momentum, and the name Bauddhadarśana-adhyayaṇa-pucaḥ (Buddhist Doctrine Study Group) has been attached to this initiative. According to Yagyamanpati, in 2008 there were sixty-eight 'graduates' of the thirty-six week course typically taught. Yagyamanpati has also introduced classes that are specifically aimed at young urban professionals in their twenties, whose western education may have distanced them from their tradition. By 2008 Yagyamanpati had taught two batches of such students, one of twenty-two and one of eighteen students. As alluded to above, outside regular classes Yagyamanpati has initiated more than fifty of his students into the cult of Caṇḍamahāroṣana. Recently, he has, moreover, begun to introduce a few members of the *śreṣṭha* caste (who are nominally Hindus) to the ritual practice of offering the *gurumaṇḍala*. The group of Yagyamanpati also organises performances of public rituals, such as the *saptavidhānuttara*. These may be rather grand affairs, as for example in the fall of 2006 when twenty-five priests performed the *saptavidhānuttara* at Svayambhū, and *sava lakh pañcopacāras* were

offered, consisting of 125,000 metal bowls (*gulupāḥ*) holding flowers and incense, and the same number of butter lamps (*devā*), flour cones (*gvaḥā*) and metal saucers with water.

The most important organisation currently teaching the basics of priestly Vajrayāna rituals in Patan is the Vajrācārya-pūjāvidhi-adhyayana-samiti (“Committee for the Study of the Rites of Worship of Vajrācāryas”), which has its offices in Nyākḥacuk. The Vajrācārya-pūjāvidhi-adhyayana-samiti grew out of the so-called Nepāla-bauddhasaṃskṛta-adhyayana-kendra, which was founded for the study of Sanskrit in 1986 at Akṣayeśvara Mahāvihāra, Patan. In 1993, graduates of this programme established the Bauddha Saṃskṛta Vidyārthī Saṃgha at Nyākḥacuk. It paid particular attention to the training of priests, which eventually led to the foundation of the Vajrācārya-pūjāvidhi-adhyayana-samiti in 1998. Its principal instructor is Buddha Ratna Bajracharya, who, charged by the Vajrācārya *guthi* of Kvā Bāhāḥ, had taught a first training course as early as 1978 and then a further one in 1990 (cf. LeVine and Gellner 2005: 254). For further details see the paper “Vajrācārya Pūjāvidhi Adhyayana samitiyā Paricaya” [Introduction to the Vajrācārya-pūjāvidhi-adhyayana-samiti] published in *Śrī Dharmadhātu Vāgīśvara Vrata Lumanti Pau* (2007).

The Vajrācārya-pūjāvidhi-adhyayana-samiti’s elementary course lasts three months. It is followed by a second course of three months that introduces students to the most important life cycle rituals (*saṃskāra*). A further course, lasting six months, covers more complex rites including the remaining *saṃskāras*. While these courses are directed at young *vajrācāryas* with an inclination to officiate as priest, there is a shorter course for the wives of priests (*gurumā*), introducing them to the preparation of ritual items and the rites that they themselves have to perform such as the ritual welcome (*lasakus*). In addition to these courses the Vajrācārya-pūjāvidhi-adhyayana-samiti is also active in other ways in order to strengthen Newar Buddhism. For instance, it regularly organises *vrata* ceremonies, dedicated to either Tārā or Dharmadhātuvāgīśvara. These daylong observances tend to attract a large number of participants. Moreover, it organises performances of the elaborate *saptavidhānuttara* rite. The committee also coordinates group initiations for girls, both for the mentioned *ihī* marriage ceremony and for the subsequent rite of *bārāḥ tayagu* mentioned above in n. 11.

More general courses on Buddhism with a focus on the basic teachings of the Mahāyāna were offered since 1988 by Min Bahadur Shakya, with the aim to educate the Newars about the doctrinal foundations of their own tradition (cf. LeVine and Gellner 2005: 256–62). He did so under the auspices of the so-called Nagarjuna Institute of Exact Methods that he had founded already in 1980 with the purpose of spreading knowledge about Buddhism. This Institute also publishes the journal *Buddhist Himalaya*, monographs dedicated to Buddhism in general and Newar Buddhism in particular, as well as translations of Sanskrit and Tibetan works (often prepared on the basis of English translations) into Newari. Particular attention is paid to Tibetan Buddhism, which is viewed as a closely related tradition that is thriving in the Valley and hence has the potential to invigorate the Newar tradition. Moreover, the Institute has also administered the (now depleted) funds of the Taiwanese-backed Himalayan Buddhist Education Foundation, which were inter alia used to support the aforementioned courses of the Vajrācārya-pūjāvidhi-adhyayana-samiti and a closely related initiative, the so-called Vajrayānacārya-adhyayana-maṇḍala (it currently meets at Aki Bāhāḥ), which was set up in 2000, principally for instruction in tantric songs.

Though it is not primarily dedicated to teaching, mention should also be made of the Lotus Research Centre, which was founded in 1988 in Patan with Japanese financial support on the initiative of the Rev. Shucho Takaoka, an enthusiastic student and well-wisher of Newar Buddhism. This centre has published seven of the nine principal sacred Mahāyāna scriptures of Newar Buddhism, the *Navagrantha*. It also publishes a journal called *Palesvan* that is dedicated to particular aspects of Newar Buddhism. More importantly, the centre has been active documenting and recording Newar Buddhist practice, and a large digital archive (which remains sadly underused) has been built up in the process. An ongoing funding crisis has led to the Lotus Research Centre branching out and establishing, in 2006, the Lotus Academic College mentioned above. This College is affiliated with Tribhuvan University and offers evening courses in a newly-established postgraduate degree programme in Buddhist Studies (see Bhadra Ratna Bajracharya 2008).

It should finally be noted that among the Newars there are similar initiatives that have a Theravāda orientation. For instance, for more than thirty years learned Theravāda lay supporters in Patan have been

organising Saturday schools, principally for school children but also for adults. These are modeled upon the Theravāda Sunday schools prominent in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Another example is the “Young Men’s Buddhist Association, Nepal” that was set up in Patan in 1970 by Pavitra Bahadur Bajracharya, in order to reach out to the laity. Its weekly Saturday programmes, which feature talks and are dedicated to the practice of *vipassanā* meditation, attract both men and women of all ages. Though this association is principally inspired by and supportive of Theravāda Buddhism, it also lends some assistance to traditional Newar Buddhist events, such as medical aid for participants of the annual *matayā* procession, taking place two days after the full moon day of the month of *guṃlā* in August or September.

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