

8 Girls' Pre-Puberty Rites among the Newars of Kathmandu Valley

IN THIS CHAPTER¹ I describe two unusual rites performed by the Newars of Kathmandu Valley; an elaborate two-day ceremony in which a large group of pre-pubertal girls are given in marriage to a non-mortal spouse and the seclusion of girls in small groups in a dark room for eleven days shortly prior to menarche. The first rite falls into that general, though un-common, class of mock-marriages of which the *tali*-tying ceremony of the Nayars of Kerala is the best known in the ethnographic literature; the second, which may be

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described provisionally as a mock-menstruation rite, is, so far as I am aware, unique to the Newars and Nayars. The problem that I am concerned with can be stated simply: Why do these peoples have such rites and why do they differ from the more common ritual treatment of Hindu girls prior to the establishment of conjugal relations? I shall first give a brief outline of the principal similarities and differences between the orthodox ritual complex and the Newar/Nayar version. I shall then describe and analyse the Newar rites. In the final section I return to the comparative problem and put forward a number of explanatory hypotheses.

The Brahman pattern and the Nayar/Newar deviation

Throughout Hindu South Asia the traditional Brahmanical ritual treatment of pre-pubertal girls focused on the performance of elaborate marriage ceremonies prior to the occurrence of first menstruation. At menarche the girls were, and in some cases still are, secluded for three days and then a short while later initiated into sex with a consummation ceremony (Walker 1986 i:250–1). This sequence was found only in elaborately caste-structured communities and was most fully developed in those orthodox castes deeply committed to Brahmanical ideals of purity maintenance. In such communities the sexual and reproductive functions of women, though valued in terms of lineage continuity and size, were also devalued as antithetical to male ascetic ideals and the maintenance of purity. The solution to this apparent conflict in ideals lay in the doctrine of male control of female sexuality. The *Laws of Manu*, an ancient classical compendium of Hindu custom, especially concerning the rules of purity maintenance, graphically spells out the importance accorded to this doctrine:

2. Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families) and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control.

3. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in her youth, her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. (Bühler 1969:327–8)

Still today, a high value is commonly accorded to women's reproductive capability, provided such control is exercised. But outside the parameters of male control female sexuality is likely to be thought of as an explosive and dangerous force that may threaten not only the health and strength of men, but also the very basis of social order, above all the rank order of castes. It follows from this that an unmarried yet sexually mature girl is both an anomaly and a potential danger to all those who interact with her. A man who has failed to marry-off his daughter prior to her first menstruation is said to have committed the sin (*pāp*) of embryo murder, and her presence in his household is thought to endanger the purity of all of its adult residents, especially males. Hence, the pre-pubertal marriage of girls must be understood as an institutionalized response to the dangers believed to be associated with female reproductive sexuality outside the confines of marriage. This institution, in conjunction with the control of sexually active women by their husbands, as well as the strict prohibition against the re-marriage of widows, together ensure that men both gain access to and impose rigorous constraints on female sexuality and reproductivity.

The Newars² of Kathmandu valley, and also the Nayars of Kerala in south India, conform to this orthodox pattern to the extent that girls of 'pure' caste are required to go through both a form of pre-pubertal marriage and a period of seclusion that has some connection with menarche. But they differ in that the girls are not married to their future conjugal partners and the period of seclusion is prior to rather than at menarche. They also, and more importantly, differ in the extent of their departure from the other components of the restrictive Brahmanical pattern, especially the ease with which post-pubertal conjugal relationships are dissolved, the high status and degree of autonomy accorded to women, and the absence of any prohibition against widow re-marriage.

To those familiar with the Nayar ethnography (see Gough 1955, Dumont 1961, Yalman 1963 and Fuller 1976) the parallels are indeed striking—instead of the usual orthodox Hindu child-marriage

² For background anthropological information on the Newars see Allen (1973, 1975 and 1976), Fürer-Haimendorf (1956 and 1964), Gellner 1992, Greenwold (1974a 1974b), Hodgson 1874, Lévi 1908, Levy 1990, Nepali 1965, Rosser 1966, Sharma 1973 and Toffin (1975, 1976 and 1984).

followed by a strict prohibition against divorce we find instead a ritually elaborate mock-marriage during childhood followed by the formation of relatively easily dissolved post-pubertal conjugal relationships. But whereas the Nayar rites have, in part, been interpreted as a functional correlate of the importance of their elaborate matrilineal descent system, no such explanation can apply to the patrilineal Newars. On the contrary, I maintain that the two sets of unorthodox marriage customs must be understood by reference to a parallel structural departure from the ideal model of an orthodox Hindu social system and its associated ideology of purity maintenance, especially as regards the status of women and the control of female sexuality and reproductivity.

The *ihī* rite

*Ihī*³ is the most highly regarded and sacred of all Newar domestic rituals and the officiating priests are always either high-caste Buddhists (Gubhāju/Vajracāryā) or Hindus (Dyāḥ Bhāju/Brahman). The rite is held whenever a sponsor is prepared to meet the considerable expenses involved. As Vergati (1982:273) noted, '[g]enerally it is financed by a man who has no kinship links with the girls involved but who wishes to acquire merit (*punya*)—a preoccupation very widespread among the Hindus and Buddhists alike'. Though a number of girls are always jointly initiated, the scale can vary from just a few members of the same caste to as many as three or four hundred drawn from a wide range of castes. As a number of authors (Levy 1990:669 and Vergati 1982:273) have observed, *ihī* is unique amongst Newar domestic rituals in that it is not only possible but also highly desirable to bring together

³ When I first wrote an account of these rites (Allen 1982) the only other published description was in Gopal Singh Nepali's monograph on the Newars (Nepali 1965:106–111). Though there is a broad similarity between our two descriptions, there are some differences in detail. I attribute many of these to the fact that whereas my informants were Buddhists, Nepali's were Hindus. Since then a number of additional accounts have been published, most notably those of Vergati (1982), Toffin 1984:401–5, Pradhan 1981:110–42, Levy 1990:665–73 and Kunreuther 1994. In revising the present manuscript I have incorporated (and acknowledged) some additional information from these later sources, most especially concerning the Hindu version of the rite (cf. Vergati, Pradhan and Levy).

participants from as wide a range of 'pure' castes as possible. Indeed, most other domestic rituals are confined not only to the members of one caste but also to one clan (*thar*) or even to one lineage (*phuki*). Vergati especially stressed this feature of the rite with the observation that

... [b]oth Hindu and Buddhist informants emphasise the collective aspect of ritual marriage. Its celebration usually involves between five and forty girls who are, in no way, linked by kinship. It is the domestic priest (*purohit*), who knows the local community very well, who draws up the lists of girls of the right age to undergo the ceremony. (Vergati 1982:273)

Ihī is widely regarded by Newars as uniquely their ritual, and informants are quick to point out that unlike most other life-cycle rituals, (*samskāras*), which are mostly specific to particular castes or caste-categories, not to mention religion also, *ihī* is practised by all Newar castes, other than untouchables and also, traditionally, the Dyāḥ Brahmans. Since these two polarized caste categories constitute less than 10 per cent of the total Newar population, *ihī* is an institution shared by the great majority of Newars. Indeed, many of my informants regard both untouchables and Brahmans as relatively recent additions to Newar society who entered the valley not so many hundreds of years ago in the wake of immigrant dynasties fleeing from Muslim invasions in north India. Furthermore, though the Brahmans, as orthodox Hindus, themselves traditionally practised child-marriage rather than *ihī*, they have nevertheless for a long time been prepared to act as the officiating priests at their clients' ceremonies. And now, for the past thirty or more years, most Newar Brahmans have themselves begun to require their daughters to undergo the *ihī* initiation.

Ihī is usually held in conjunction with some other ceremony, such as an old-age ceremony, a stage in the sequence of normal marriage rites, the 'life-giving' ceremony for a new religious structure, monument or image, or the performance of the classic fire-offering ritual known as *yajña*. Frequently three or more of such events are simultaneously performed in a single complex ritual sequence. In the following account I rely on observations made at two Buddhist performances held in 1973, one in which 24 girls of Gubhāju

(Vajrācāryā) and Bare (Śākya) castes were initiated, and the other in which the 16 girls were all of Gubhāju caste. The first ceremony, which was accompanied by both the old-age *rite de passage* of a 77 year-old woman and the empowerment of a metal image of a *devī*, was held in Khusi Bahī and the second, which was accompanied by an important part of an actual marriage ceremony, was held in Kwā Bāhāh³, both in Kathmandu.

The first day (*dusala kriyā*)⁴

Early in the morning of the first day the girls prepare at home with a purificatory bath and nail-paring and then dress in smart new clothes, preferably with red as the dominant colour, and perhaps also wearing a few simple items of traditional wedding jewellery. From now until the end of the ceremony the girls must abstain from all *āme* food. *Āme* is a very broad category of food that is, from the orthodox Hindu point of view, impure (*aśuddha*) and hence prohibited, but from the Tantric point of view is ritually prescribed as power conferring. *Āme* food includes such 'strong' items as meat, fish, duck egg, tomato, brinjal (eggplant), beancake, black lentil, ginger, garlic and onion—all of which figure prominently in the diet of most adult Newars. The girls assemble, each accompanied by a senior woman of her father's lineage, at the entrance to a previously purified courtyard where the priests have already begun the *yajña*⁵ and other standard worshipping rites. One girl, usually the daughter of the ceremony's principal sponsor, is chosen as their *nakim* (New. 'the oldest married woman of the household'), and as such she leads them in procession and sits at the head of the line of girls during the course of the ceremonies.

Throughout the two days of ceremonies three elderly Gubhāju sit in front of the sacrificial fire. In the centre is the *cakreśvara guru*, to

⁴ The rites held on the first day of most important *saṃskāra*, including the initiation of boys, are also referred to as the *dusala kriyā*—the preparatory rites (Locke 1975:4).

⁵ The *yajña*, or fire offering ritual, is a classic Hindu ritual that has its origins in the Vedic period. It is an integral part of an orthodox Hindu wedding ceremony in Nepal. Some strict Newar Buddhists refuse to perform this rite on the grounds that it was introduced into their ceremonies by the iconoclastic Hindu reformer Śaṅkarācārya in order to distort Buddhist rituals. Some purists perform *kalaśa pūjā* instead. Locke (1975:20) discusses this *pūjā* in some detail.

his left the *thakāli jajmān* and in the centre the *upādhyāya betāju purohit*. The *cakreśvara guru* is the seniormost practising Gubhāju of that *bāhāh* which traditionally provides the officiating priest for the members of the host *bāhāh*. As Locke (1975:4) noted, the *saṃgha* (initiated male membership of a *bāhāh*) has an hereditary relationship with the priests of another *bāhāh* who act as *purohit* in all *saṃgha* community rites. The *thakāli* fills the role of *jajmān* or client and is the seniormost male member of the host *bāhāh*. The *upādhyāya betāju* is the next most senior practising Gubhāju of the officiating priest's *bāhāh* and he acts as assistant with the main duty of reciting the appropriate *sūtras* from the holy books placed in front of him. The three men are also said to represent the three jewels of Buddhism; the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṃgha.

One of these priests, assisted by his wife, meets the girls outside the courtyard and after a series of purificatory rites leads them in to their allotted places. They sit in a neat line around the edge of the courtyard with an elaborate array of ritual paraphernalia in front of each and either a paternal aunt or the mother nearby ready to help. The chief ritual items are a tray of standard *pūjā* objects (water, oil, flower petals, seeds, curd and incense), a beautifully painted clay bowl known either as *solapā* (New.) or *ihipā* (New.) and a swastika *maṇḍala* drawn on the ground with white chalk.

Purification

Over the next couple of hours the girls' priest, with the help of his wife, takes the girls through a sequence of ritual actions the main import of which is purification—the five sacred products of the cow (*pañca gavya*), the sacred water of the Vishnumati river and various seeds and flower petals sprinkled over the head, are all used to purify the body; a small rice-moulded *caitya*⁶ and a burning wick are carried around each girl in order both to remove all past sins and to show the way for the attainment of wisdom, and a variety of Vajrayāna *sūtras* are pronounced in order to effect mental purification. It should be noted here that despite the multiplicity of

⁶ A *caitya* is a Buddhist funeral monument or reliquary which represents the universe—it is perhaps the most commonly encountered religious structure in Nepal and can vary in size from a tiny rice mould to a huge hemispherical object, 50 metres or more in diameter.

Hindu type purificatory ritual, the idiom is throughout quite explicitly Buddhist.⁷ To give just one example I freely translate the final and most important *sūtra* of this initial purificatory sequence:

We girls, having been born after a long period of suffering, gather here and pray for the blessings of the Buddha, Dharma, Saṃgha, Prajñāparamitā and Karuṇāmaya whose enlightened wisdom is in the form of the *sukunda* lamp here shown to us. To you we pray our humble homage, knowing that you are the *gurus* of men, gods and devils, highly revered by all. We pray for your presence in our *ihī* rite.

The *sūtras* are read in Sanskrit by the priest while he clangs his bell and his wife sprinkles cooked rice, dried fruits and flower petals from a wooden pot over the heads of the girls. During this opening phase of the ceremony the girls themselves also worship Gaṇeśa, and their supreme *guru*, the *bodhisattva* Mañjuśrī.

The measurement

Thus far the rites have been standard purificatory and worshipping types found in a wide range of ceremonies. The second stage, the main event of the day, is quite specific to *ihī*. Each girl is carefully measured by either the wife of the seniormost male of the leading girl's agnatic lineage (*thakāli nakim*) or the *gurumā* (the wife of the senior presiding priest) from head to toe with a six-stranded yellow thread which is then multiplied eighteen-times (nine times from head to toe and back again to head) making an auspicious total of 108 single-stranded-body lengths. The thread (*sāt bhinna ka* - New.) is placed on the clay bowl (*solapā*) where it remains until the next day. According to one of my Vajrācāryā informants the thread represents the Buddha's yellow cloth—and hence has clear purity or celibate overtones. Others referred to a story in which a Newar girl of Sankhu town once garlanded the prince to whom she was betrothed with the thread necklace which she was herself wearing at the time. In like manner, the girls in *ihī* will on the second day garland the *byā* fruit and then a short while

⁷ Locke (1975:18), in discussing the boy's initiation rites (*bare chuyegu* and *ācaḥ luyegu*, New.) made a similar observation 'Even such a brief survey of these rites shows their authentically Buddhist character'.

later wear it themselves. Vergati also noted that in Hindu versions of *ihī* the same

... yellow 'necklace' will be given to the girl's human bridegroom on the occasion of her second marriage and will constitute proof that the girl had already accomplished the *ihī* ceremony. (Vergati 1982:277)

I was also told that in Hindu versions of the rite the girls place the garlands around their own necks immediately after the measurement and then wear them themselves for the remainder of the first day.

When the girls are reseated the priest (*cakreśvara guru*) leads them in a worshipping ritual directed towards a beautiful gilt image of Suvarna Varna Kumāra, the golden bachelor son of Śiva who stands near the centre of the courtyard. With the priest reciting *mantras* and ringing his bell the girls throw rice, grain and flower petals towards the image. A short while later the day's events come to a close with much mutual blessing.

The second day

Once again the girls assemble outside the courtyard for initial purification. But whereas on the previous day they simply wore good everyday clothes, they now wear a much grander outfit consisting of red, purple or pink skirt, blouse and shawl (today often replaced by modern garments such as dresses or even slacks) and either gold or silver bangles, anklets and necklace. To complete the intentionally bridal appearance the forehead should have a red *īkā*, and the eyes should be decorated with black soot (*aja* - New.).

After the usual opening sequence of purificatory and worshipping rites the girls are taken to the edge of the courtyard where each in turn uses her left foot to crush twenty-one black dal seeds (*mās* - New.) with a small roller and board. The seeds represent past sinful actions and by so crushing them the girl has thereby morally purified herself. She now steps out of the sacred courtyard to a raised edge of neutral ritual status where she sits in front of a woman of the barber's caste who cuts her toenails, washes her feet and then paints her toes with vermilion paint. The girl steps back into the courtyard where a male agnate gives her some holy water to wash her face and to sprinkle over her head. Thus thoroughly purified she returns to her place. The *thakāli nakim* now goes down

the line of girls carefully rubbing vermilion paste (*bhui sinhaḥ*) into the parting of the hair and touching the head of each girl with a small bronze mirror (*jwala nhaikā* - New.). Both of these rites are, of course, diacritical components of adult marriage ceremonies throughout most of South Asia, and have been so for some thousands of years. Both also figure prominently in 'real' Newar marriage rites, both Hindu and Buddhist.

The paternal aunt then takes from the painted clay bowl that sits on the ground in front of each girl the yellow thread that had been so carefully measured the day before and places it around the neck of her niece. She also gives the girl a strip of sari material known as *ihī prasi* (*ihī sari*) which she places on her lap. Since only married women wear saris such a gift once again proclaims the girls to have attained such a status. Finally, the aunt pins a piece of white paper with a sacred water pot (*kalaśa*) drawn on it in the hair of the girl. Informants were uncertain as to the meaning of this action though some thought that the white colour of the paper in conjunction with a ceremonial water container signified purity and constraint. According to Vergati (1982:278), in Hindu versions of the rite the painting on the piece of paper represents the girls' divine spouse, Viṣṇu Nārāyana.

Thus purified and garlanded the girl is now ready for the main event of the day—the sequence of rites focussing on her relationship to the fruit of the wood-apple tree (*bilva* in Sanskrit, *bel* in Nepali and *byā* in Newar). The clay bowl (*solapā*) is in front of each girl and in it is the *byā*. A priest goes down the line of bowls placing a 6 to 8-inch long red cord in each and then proceeds to rub a little yellow purifying powder on the upturned palms of the girls. The paternal aunt of the leading girl places two leaves, one round and the other pointed, on top of each fruit. A male relative now takes the *byā* and the leaves and places them in the girl's hands while another male relative adds a rupee note and at the same time pours some flower petals and uncooked rice grains over the girl's hands. The first man, who ideally should be the *thakāli*, that is, the seniormost male member of the leading girl's lineage (*phuki*), but is in fact very often the father himself, folds the girl's hands over the fruit and then

ties the red cord around her wrists. Thus bound the girl now sits on this man's knee.

A short while later the girls, after further purification both of themselves and of the route and carefully holding their symbolic spouse in their hands, are led in procession by their fathers three times around the courtyard. Such a circumambulation of the sacred worshipping arena by the marrying couple is, of course, yet another important feature of the orthodox Hindu marriage ceremony. Back in their allotted places they now hold their hands over the clay bowl while the rope is untied and the fruit rolls out first into the father's hands and then into the bowl. This rite, which is curiously called *kanyā dāna*, 'the virgin-girl gift', is said to be modelled on the rite of the same name which is in fact the diacritical rite in the orthodox Hindu marriage ceremony. Yet, instead of the father giving his daughter to the husband by placing her hands in his, he here assists her to be separated from the *byā* (=husband) by untying her wrists so that the fruit rolls out. A few fathers seemed to recognize the seeming anomaly by retying the fruit in their daughters' hands and then releasing it a second time. Others thought the act appropriate because they were of the opinion that the fruit simply represented Śiva as witness, not his son as divine spouse.⁸ Nevertheless, the significance of the inclusion of the *kanyā dāna* rite in *ihī* was apparent to all participants, including most of the 'young brides'. It is this rite that indubitably stamps *ihī* as the girls' 'true' marriage—a rite that in fact is still commonly absent from the ceremonies subsequently performed at the time of their unions with mortal spouses.

⁸ Levy's (1990:665-70) account of this important rite as performed by the predominantly Hindu Newars of Bhadgaon broadly confirms the main sequence of events as outlined in my Buddhist/Kathmandu-based account. The principal difference is that whereas my informants were mostly of the opinion that the girls' divine spouse was represented in the rite both by the statue of Suvarṇa Kumāra and by the *byā* fruit, Levy's informants favoured an interpretation which identified the statue (Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa) as spouse and the *byā* fruit (Śiva) as witness. Though a few of my informants, including one learned Vajrācārya, were of a similar opinion, it must be noted that it directly conflicts with the even more basic equation that possibly all participants, including most especially the young girls themselves, make between the fruit and the spouse. The only certainty is that the power of the rite has much to do with both the ambiguity and multi-valency of its key symbolic elements.

The Hindu version of this important part of *ihī* follows the orthodox *kanyā dāna* format more closely. Precisely at the auspicious moment, which is called out by an astrologer (Jośī), the girl sits on her father's lap and places her right hand over his upturned right hand which is holding barley, *sinhaḥ* powder, sesame seeds and *kuśa* grass. The hands are held over a *pūjā* tray which contains a gold coin as icon of Suvama Kumāra (or Viṣṇu or Nārāyana, or whoever the relevant deity might be thought to be), while the girl's mother pours cow's milk and the priest's wife pours water over her hands and onto the coin. The priest then announces the date and exact time of the marriage between the god and the girl. The father lets the sesame seed mixture drop from his hand onto the tray and then so holds his daughter's hand that he makes her touch the gold coin with her thumb. This act is explicitly equated with that part of the orthodox *kanyā dāna* ceremony in which the father places his daughter's hand on that of the groom.

At the conclusion of *kanyā dāna* each girl is given by her parents a new set of adult clothes consisting of sari and blouse. After this a chaotic scene of much mutual blessing and financial transactions between sponsors, priests and other workers ensues. Later in the evening the senior girl's family holds a lavish feast for the girls during which they are each presented with a ceremonial plate (*thāy bhū*) containing 84 different items of food. They are required to take some of this food home with them as *prasād* to present to their fathers. When doing so they should touch their foreheads to their fathers' feet and then offer rice-distilled spirit (*ela* - New.) by pouring it ceremonially from a height into a small clay bowl. By each of these acts the girls express their new status in their families as 'married' women.

Thus far I have referred to *ihī* as a marriage rite and clearly there are good reasons for so doing. Both the Sanskrit texts⁹ and most informants describe it as such and indeed many insist that it is the only true marriage for a Newar woman. Though the rituals that are performed some years later when couples enter into conjugal relations and establish an affinal connection between two lineages, are almost as complex and elaborate as those of orthodox Hindus,

⁹ According to Pandey (1972:134) the Sanskrit names of the rite are *prathamavivāha* (first marriage) and *śrīphalavivāha* (the blessed-fruit marriage).

they but rarely include the diacritical *kanyā dāna* or 'virgin-girl gift' rite (Bajracharya 1959:418–29, Nepali 1965:198–231, Levy 1990:666 and Gellner 1992:202). It is only amongst some of the more orthodox Hindu Newars, especially those who are increasingly modelling their life-style on that of the Parbatyā Hindus, that *kanyā dāna* is included in the marriage rites.

Other *ihī* features clearly indicative of some kind of initiation into marriage include the use of a yellow neck garland for the male spouse, the parting of the 'bride's' hair with vermilion powder, the presentation of the girls in clothes, jewellery and make-up suitable for brides, the giving of the first sari and the girls' subsequent behaviour towards their fathers. The marriage theme is, of course, most evident in the *kanyā dāna* rite. My research assistant, Rajendra Pradhan, described the *kanyā dāna* scene at a Hindu *ihī* ceremony held in Kathmandu in February 1979 in the following terms:

A hired band plays Hindi movie tunes and the usual marriage music. There is rather a festive atmosphere with the band and the laughter and jokes and the gossiping of the women, the fathers and the visitors. The girls seem a bit shy and embarrassed when they are told that they are going to be married. ... The *thakāli* (seniormost male) jokes with his ten-year old grand-daughter [who is sitting in his lap waiting for *kanyā dāna* to begin] saying 'you are going to be "sent off" now'.

If then *ihī* is a marriage, to whom are the girls married? Though many lay informants, especially the girls themselves, nominated the *byā* fruit itself, most were of the opinion that the fruit was simply a natural representation (*avyakta* - Skt.) of a god. Whilst the more orthodox of Hindu Newars nominated Viṣṇu Nārāyana as the relevant god, many others, including most Buddhists, favoured Śiva's son Suvama Kumāra.¹⁰ Throughout the two days of the Kathmandu Buddhist ceremonies that I witnessed a beautiful gilt image of this god occupied a focal position in the courtyard facing

¹⁰ Swaminathan and Aryal (1972:3) state that the girls 'are given in marriage to Sun God who is represented by a Bel fruit and thereafter they are free to remarry in the event of widowhood or divorce'. I have not found any supporting evidence for this interpretation and in fact it seems likely that the authors have confused the *ihī* rite with the subsequent mock-menstrual seclusion at the conclusion of which the girls do indeed worship the sun god Sūrya.

the three main priests. On a number of occasions he was worshipped both by the priests and by the girls and towards the end of the second day everyone jointly worshipped him while holding a thread that ran from his hand around the courtyard. Though many participants could not name the image the priests were unanimous in stating that he was Suvarna Kumāra. Kumāra is, of course, the eternal bachelor son of Śiva who is often represented as thoroughly disliking women—a seemingly curious ideal husband for the daughters of Tantric Buddhists.

Yet on further reflection he is perhaps not such an odd choice. As a *rite de passage*, *ihī* marks the end of the girl's status as unmarried virgin girl (*kanyā*). Though now formally regarded as a married woman she has as yet neither menstruated nor entered into a conjugal relationship. She is, like the child Brahman bride, in a difficult liminal period, and as is so often the case with those who are thought to defy the parameters of normality, especially prone to become the focus of mystical beliefs concerning her transformative potency. It might therefore be said to be appropriate that she is here married to a supposedly celibate and even misogynist god. Both of them are clearly highly ambiguous in their attitude towards sex. The girls, like the living Kumāris, are required to wear red clothes, to have their hair parted with vermilion powder (or tied with a red bow) and to have both red toes and large red *īkā* marks on their foreheads. As in so many cultures, both Hindu and otherwise, red represents life, sexuality and reproductivity, whereas both white and yellow represent celibacy, purity and control (Beck 1969:553–72). In day-to-day contexts it is only mature and reproductive women, which for the orthodox Hindu means only those married women who are between menarche and the menopause, who wear red clothes. It should also be stressed that the representation of Kumāra as an asexual deity is inadequate. Like his father Śiva he is ambivalent in his attitude for, though in some contexts represented as chaste, in others he is charged with a powerful eroticism and linked in divine coitus with his equally ambiguous female counterpart.¹¹ As previously noted, he is also commonly known as Skanda, literally the 'spurt of semen'. I might add that the link

¹¹ See O'Flaherty (1973). Leach (1962) discusses a similar ambiguity in the attitude of Śiva's other son Gaṇeśa towards sex.

between this god and the *byā* fruit is quite explicit in Hindu iconography, for throughout the subcontinent the *bilva* (*byā*) is popularly associated with Śiva and by extension other members of his family also. Śiva's famous three-pronged staff is called the *bilva danda*, while the leaves of the tree are often laid on his heated phallic *liṅga* to cool it (Liebert 1976:43).

When I asked informants why *ihī* is performed a few simply stated that it is necessary to protect the girls from various dangers, in particular the possibility of attack from malicious spirits. Others stated that the rite ensured that the girls would remain virgins until marriage and that they would then marry men as beautiful as Suvāna Kumāra. But by far the most commonly given reason was to protect the girl from the stigma of widowhood. Because *ihī* links the girl in an eternal marriage with a god the death of her mortal spouse does not in any way detract from her married status. In other words, just as she becomes a married woman prior to the establishment of human conjugal relations, so too does she remain in that state after her mortal partner's death. Thus, the avoidance of widow status not only obviates the possibility of having to mount her deceased spouse's funeral pyre, but it also provides a rationale both for divorce and widow re-marriage. As amongst the matrilineal Nayars, and most probably wherever analogous mock-marriages are performed in India, Newar girls enter into the conjugal phase of their married lives at the post-menstrual stage. The average age for Newar girls at marriage was sixteen in the 1960s and there is good reason to believe that this was not just a modern development. Today, the minimum legal age of marriage for Nepalese women is eighteen.

Levy, when investigating *ihī* amongst his Hindu Newar informants in Bhadgaon, was recounted the following origin tale as an explanation for the rite's importance:

Pārvaṭī was the daughter of Himavān, the deity of the Himalayas. When she was to be married to Śiva, Himavān gave Nepal (that is, the present Kathmandu Valley) to her as her dowry. One day as Pārvaṭī was walking through the Valley she heard an old woman crying. Pārvaṭī asked her why she was crying. 'My husband is dead. A husband is necessary for a woman; without a husband a woman's life is terrible.' Pārvaṭī pitied her and asked Śiva for a boon. 'Can you do something for the women of my natal home so that they will

not become widows?’ Śiva answered, ‘Nārāyaṇa and I will arrange it so that there will no longer be any widows in Nepal.’ Thus the Newars were given the *ihī* ceremony. Nārāyaṇa was the groom, and Śiva the witness. (Levy 1990:666)

Levy added the following interesting, and in my opinion, valid, comment:

The *ihī* ceremony is, as a marriage had to be in Hindu tradition, a premenarche marriage. This means that the second marriage, the one to a mortal, can be delayed as all second marriages can, until after menarche—often long after it. Thus both the necessity of child marriage and the full force of widow disability are ameliorated by the invention of this Newar *saṃskāra*. The *ihī* ceremony is, as we shall see, in some aspects of its form as well as in its legendary intent, somewhat subversive of the Hindu patriarchal and hierarchical principles that are central to the other *saṃskāras*. (1990:666)

Some of the scholarly pandits, both Buddhist and Hindu, are quite explicit in relating *ihī* to the orthodox Hindu version of child marriage. Just as orthodox Hindu girls are given in marriage prior to menarche, so too in Newar society are girls required to have their *ihī* before this event. But having thus drawn the parallel most of such informants then add, in the spirit of the rite’s origin myth, that the Newars introduced *ihī* not just in imitation of Hindu custom, but in order to avoid what they regard as the undesirable features of Hindu marriage—especially the restrictions that are placed on a girl as regards choice of spouse and the prohibition against widow remarriage. One Buddhist pandit stated that *ihī* is a *saṃkalpa*¹², that is, a promise, on the part of the parents, to marry their daughter. Because they have here given their consent, indeed literally ‘given’ their daughter to Suvarṇa Kumāra, she is now free to choose any man she pleases. Furthermore, provided she identifies each of her subsequent spouses with Suvarṇa Kumāra by transferring the *byā* from one to the other she has then acted in conformity with the Hindu requirement of an indissoluble marriage tie.

¹² Turner (1965:579), in his *Dictionary of the Nepali Language*, noted under *saṃkalpa* (*sankalpa*) ‘the Newar ceremony of marrying a girl to a *bel*-fruit in order that she may never become a widow’.

This same Buddhist informant insisted that *ihī* should not be regarded as evidence of spreading Hindu influence but rather as a clever Newar, especially Gubhāju Newar, invention to permit the survival of traditional marriage customs whilst at the same time conforming, on the surface, to Hindu ideals. In support of this interpretation he pointed out, with apparent historical accuracy, that though the high-caste Hindu Newar Brahmans, the Dyāḥ (or Rājopādhyāya) Brahmans, perform *ihī* for their clients, they themselves practised child-marriage until very recently. It was only when child-marriage was made illegal that the Dyāḥ Brahmans began also to perform an abbreviated version of *ihī* for their own daughters. In the earlier period they performed *ihī* for their clients simply because this was established Newar custom and if they had failed to do so they would have lost their clients to their Gubhāju or Ācāḥju competitors.

Thus far I have stressed that *ihī* is, like the *kanyā dāna* ceremony of orthodox Hindus, a *rite de passage* in which pre-menstrual virgin girls become married, though still virginal, women. But *ihī* is also a *rite de passage* in the very different contexts of caste and lineage membership. Whereas *kanyā dāna* marks, for the orthodox Hindu, the transfer of the girl from her father's lineage (and caste, if different), to those of her husband, *ihī*, on the contrary, reaffirms the girl's ties with her father and his kin group and confers on her full membership of his caste. Both Buddhist and Hindu informants specifically compared *ihī* with the important boys' initiation rite (*brata bandha* - Nep. amongst Hindus and *bare chuyegu* - New. amongst Buddhists) in which caste membership is conferred after a brief symbolic flirtation with a celibate and renunciatory lifestyle as either a Buddhist monk (*bhikṣu*) or a Hindu ascetic renouncer (*samnyāsī*). Hindu Newars refer to their version of the rite as *upanayana* (Skt.)—the classic twice-born rite that confers caste membership on all entitled to wear the sacred thread. It is performance of this rite, and its equivalent amongst the Buddhist castes, that serves to differentiate between the lowly 'once-born' and the superior 'twice-born'. The rite confers caste membership in that it is only by participation that a boy ceases to be a Śūdra and becomes a 'twice-born'.

Ihī is said to be the girls' *upanayana*: the girls too are transformed in this rite from a Śūdra-like status to full membership of their father's caste. The most obvious indication of this change of status (and with it, ontological condition also) concerns commensality. Before *ihī* (or before *kaetā pūjā* or *bare chuyegu* for boys) a girl can eat food cooked or touched by any 'pure' caste, but afterwards she has to observe the full rules observed by her father's caste. An equally important change occurs with death. If a girl should die before *ihī* (or a boy before *upanayana*) she would be carried to the cremation ground by hand, whereas after *ihī* she would be entitled to be carried on the *kota*, a ceremonial bier. Similarly, whereas the relatives of a girl who died before *ihī* would be required to observe mourning for only a few days (as for a casteless child), after *ihī* twelve days must be observed (as for an adult caste member). A number of informants also told me that either during, or, as seems more likely, immediately after *ihī*, the girls are initiated into the worship of their father's lineage deity (*digu dyāh*)—again paralleling the treatment of boys at their initiation. It is, in fact, initiation into this important form of lineage worship that most directly confers the right to full death pollution.

The mock first-menstruation rite (*bārāy tayegu* - New.)

Just as orthodox Brahmans insist that their daughters be given in marriage prior to menarche, so too do the Newars insist on the same for *ihī*. But whereas Brahmans, in India as well as in Nepal, perform a first-menstruation rite when the actual physiological event occurs, most Newars, especially those who are Buddhist, prefer if possible to perform a group ceremony for a number of girls prior to puberty.¹³ In other words, just as *ihī* may be described as a mock-marriage,¹⁴ so too is the *bārāy tayegu* a mock-menstruation rite.

¹³ If menarche should begin prior to *bārāy tayegu* then the girl is immediately secluded either alone or preferably with some companions. The sequence of events in this solo version (called *bārāy cwanegu* - New.) is basically the same as in the group rite.

¹⁴ The adjective 'mock' has by now become so established in the literature that I hesitate to suggest some inadequacies. There are, however, a number of problems in its usage, especially in reference to *ihī*. The first problem is that though the word as an adjective is mostly used to imply just imitation and nothing more, as a verb it usually includes an element of jeering or ridicule—

But not all Newars perform group or mock-first menstruation rites. Just as the orthodox Brahmans, the Rājopādhyāya Brahmans, traditionally practised child-marriage rather than *ihī*, so too do they require their young girls to undergo their first-menstruation rite at the actual time of this physiological event. In other words, they conform to the orthodox practice of high-caste Brahmans throughout the subcontinent. As might be expected in a Newar community that is predominantly Hindu, in Bhadgaon the Brahmanical practice is also followed by a considerable number of non-Brahman Hindus who are strongly influenced by Brahmanical ideals—most notably upwardly mobile Śreṣṭha. These individual versions of the rite are referred to as *bārāy cwa(n)gu*. The sequence of ritual actions in the two versions of the rite are basically the same.

But in Patan, a strongly Buddhist Newar community, only a small minority of Brahmans and Śreṣṭhas perform the rite at the actual time of first menstruation. The great majority instead strongly favour the group/mock version. But unlike *ihī*, where, as we saw, every effort is made to bring together not only a very large number of girls, but also girls of as wide a range of 'pure' castes as can be arranged, with *bārāy tayegu* the group of girls is always small, (seldom more than about six to eight, but always an even number), and are recruited not only from the same caste, but usually also from the same lineage (*phuki*).

The girls, generally aged about eight to ten, are secluded in a darkened room in one of their homes for eleven days. Great care is taken to ensure that no ray of sunshine can enter the room for an explicit aim of the rite is to ensure that the girls are seen neither by

and clearly any such notion is wholly inappropriate in this context. But even as 'imitation' there are major problems when applied to a rite which informants consistently describe as a girl's 'true' marriage. However, I have decided to retain the word for the good reason that Newars also like to regard *ihī* as their clever version of a form of marriage (child-marriage) which they find objectionable when applied to human spouses. It may even be that there is some element of ridicule involved.

There are similar problems with the designation of *bārāy- tayegu* as a 'mock-menstruation' rite. Though most girls undergo the rite many years prior to actual menarche, the intent is that by participation the dangers associated with menarche will be nullified. Perhaps it would be better designated as a 'menarche making safe' rite.

men nor by the sun. The first three days are said to be especially dangerous because this is the ritually prescribed period of bleeding throughout the Hindu world. During this period they must not wash and should strictly avoid both salt and all *āme* food. They must also, for the whole period of eleven days, avoid being seen by any males who have passed through their *bare chuyegu* (Buddhist) or *kaetā pūjā* (Hindu) initiation, which is usually performed when the boys, like the secluded girls, are aged about eight to ten. According to Levy this is because

... the sight of the girls is said to be somehow dangerous to them. It was, reportedly, traditionally, said that men would turn to ashes and die if they glimpsed the girls, and it is still said that they would, at the least, bring some sort of misfortune to a man who happened to see them. (Levy 1990:671)

On the fourth day, after a simple initial purification ceremony, the *thakāli nakim* brings a mixture of water, oil and barley flour (*ko cheka* - New.) which the girls then make into a paste and rub on their faces in order to clean and soften the skin. This is said to both further purify the girls and stand as a sign of their newly gained maturity. They also rub some oil in their hair, but leave it hanging down for it is only their future husbands who can tie it into a bun on their wedding night. On this same fourth day many female friends and relatives of the girls come to visit them. The relatives, mostly married female kinswomen from both the father's and the mother's sides, bring pure vegetarian delicacies, especially roast grains, a variety of beans and peas, bread, sweets, milk, curd and boiled rice. The friends, some of whom remain in the darkened room until the end of the seclusion period, make a small cotton effigy (*khyāh* - New.) of a part-deity, part-spirit and hang it on the wall where it remains for the next eight days. He is a rather mysterious dwarfed and pudgy white (some say black) figure with curly hair and red-pouting lips.

The word *khyāh* is a derivative of the Newar word *khiyuh* meaning darkness and according to one informant he is white in colour in order to comfort the girls in the darkness of the room. Each day the girls must, before eating, make an offering to the *khyāh*—an act which if omitted would seriously jeopardize their health. Some

say that he provides the girls with companionship and amusement, others that he actually possesses them. Two young women told me that if he were not satisfied with his offerings he might get off his hook during the night and lie on top of the girls. In a story well known among Patan Buddhists the *khyāh* is said to have originally been male but because he had sexual intercourse with the girls he/she is now female. And in seeming support of such a gender view of the *khyāh* there are those informants who assert that the effigy is really the spirit of a girl who by chance died during confinement. The confinement room is then thought to be haunted by her ghost (Manandhar 1986:175).

On the morning of the twelfth day the barber and his wife come to purify both the girls and the whole house. They scrub the house with a mixture of cow-dung and red soil and then sprinkle all rooms with the purifying water of a nearby river. The barber's wife removes the girls' dirty clothes, washes them and dresses them in red and embroidered saris with gold and red bangles and possibly other jewellery suitable for a bride. She also cuts their nails, paints their toes red and puts a red *ṭikā* on their foreheads. Meanwhile her husband makes a small hole in the door to let in a tiny ray of sunlight. The girls see this, their first glimpse of the sun god Sūrya Nārāyana,¹⁵ and are then taken to the roof where the family *purohit*, together with their mothers, mothers' brothers, fathers' sisters and fathers await them. Their heads are covered with shawls so that they cannot see anyone. Their mothers help them to face towards the sun and then remove the shawls so that they are now 'showing their faces' to Sūrya Nārāyana. The girls, fearing the power of the sun, first look at its reflection in a basin of water before raising their eyes to look directly at it. By this act the god is believed to have removed all of the remaining remnants of the girls' still lingering menarche potency.

The priest now directs the girls to sit in front of an array of *pūjā* equipment, the centre-piece of which is either a *maṇḍala* or an image of Sūrya Nārāyana. The girls worship the god by offering flowers, water, *pañca amṛta*, *sinhaḥ* powder, fruit, seeds, lighted

¹⁵ Leibert (1976:288) describes Sūrya Nārāyana as a 'syncretistic representation of Sūrya and Śiva'. This may help to explain the otherwise surprising identification of the girls with Pārvaṭī, the spouse of Śiva.

wicks and, most importantly of all, a betel nut wrapped in a betel leaf. Each girl now kneels with her left knee on the ground and pours purifying liquids from a small vagina-shaped vessel (*arghā* - Skt.) over Sūrya Nārāyana. By offering the nut and then performing *arghā pūjā* the girl is said to be identifying with Gaurī (Pārvatī) and thus acknowledging Sūrya Nārāyana as her husband. The marital theme is made even clearer a short while later when the girl first puts vermilion on Sūrya Nārāyana and then the *thakāli nakim* marks the girl's forehead and hair-parting with red powder in exactly the same way as in *ihī* and in the subsequent marriage ceremony. Some informants stated that just as Suvarna Kumāra becomes the girls' first husband during *ihī*, so too does Sūrya Nārāyana become her second during *bārāy tayegu*. Late that night a feast is held in which the girls eat *khae sagā* (New.—a ceremonial plate of food consisting of duck egg, fish, buffalo meat, beancake and alcohol) and are thereby freed from the salt and *āme* food tabus.

Much of the symbolism of *bārāy* is clearly related to menstruation and the rite is indeed similar to that performed for high-caste Parbatiyā Hindu girls in Kathmandu valley. But whereas the Parbatiyā (and also, as we have seen, the orthodox Hindu Newars, such as the Rājopādhyāya Brahmans) perform the rite separately for each girl when menarche occurs, most Newars perform a group rite prior to the actual physiological event itself. In the case of the Parbatiyā it is quite evident that the rite is performed to contain the awesome polluting properties of menstrual blood. In addition to the initial eleven-day seclusion a woman is isolated for three days every time she bleeds and she must scrupulously avoid any contact with men, the gods, water or cooking activities.¹⁶ But in the Newar group rites the symbolism is less obvious. Despite the initial eleven-day seclusion and despite the purificatory role of the barber and the priest, the *bārāy tayegu* is normally performed prior to the polluting event itself. The suspicion that the rite may really have little to do with menstruation is further strengthened by the discovery that the Newars show little concern with a woman's subsequent menses. The only formal restriction is that she should have a bath before cooking and avoid the gods, including the

¹⁶ See Bennett (1976a:9–12 and 1976b:191–93) for information on the Parbatiyā Brahman/Chetri first menstruation rite in Kathmandu Valley.

household shrine. She is not secluded and she goes about her domestic tasks very much as usual. Though it seems likely that most men refrain from sexual intercourse there is no formal prohibition and little sense of danger.¹⁷

Why then do the Newars perform the rite? Though I will subsequently argue that *ihī* and *bārāy* are alike in that while they seem to proclaim a concern with purity maintenance, important features of the rites suggest that this is not a matter of much concern, the point that I wish to stress here is that despite the overt connection with menarche *bārāy* can be better understood as the second of a three-stage sequence of rites whose overall effect is to transform a young pre-menstrual virgin into a married non-virgin. Whereas in *ihī* the young girl is symbolically initiated into the status of married pre-menstrual virgin, in *bārāy* she is initiated into a condition of post-menstrual sexuality. All informants were agreed that the three central figures in *bārāy* are the girls, the *khyāḥ* and Sūrya. In the case of the *khyāḥ* there is a strong possibility that he may deflower the girls. The case for ritual defloration by Sūrya is less convincing though it should be remembered that when the girl is taken to the rooftop she is said to be 'shown to him' or 'taken by him'. Vergati (1982:280) further reported that 'some Newar women told me that the human spouse is really the third husband, the second being, in their view, the god Sūrya, to whom they are married on the twelfth day of the puberty celebration.' The first husband is, of course, the god (either Viṣṇu Nārāyana or Suvarna Kumāra) to whom the girls are married during the course of the *ihī* ceremony.

If the Newar confinement rites are in fact modelled on the orthodox Brahmanical pattern then there is further evidence for interpreting the *bārāy* as symbolic defloration. In those Brahman castes where child-marriage is practised, consummation should not take place until immediately after menarche. The young woman is secluded for three days during which she should eat food that is free of jaggery and salt. She then takes a ritual bath and enters a seven or

¹⁷ Informants from some high-ranking Hindu castes stated that menstruating women were strictly prohibited from entering the kitchen. I have, however, little doubt that in this, as in many other contexts, the members of such castes were conforming to Parbatīyā rather than Newar custom.

eight-day period during which consummation must take place. According to most authorities the fourth is the best night for it is then that a son is most likely to be conceived. But some writers recommend a further seven days continence, a period during which the husband may, by gradual overtures, prepare his wife for the momentous event.

The parallel with the Newar sequence is striking. In both cases the pre-menstrual virgin is given to her husband in the *kanyā dāna* ceremony. Again, in both cases the ritual treatment of first menstruation, which may not occur for some years, begins with a strict three-day period and is followed by a more relaxed longer period during which the girl loses her virginity. The only difference is that whereas the Brahman girl is, in most instances, given to and deflowered by her mortal husband, the Newar girl is first given to a celibate god and is then deflowered by either an ugly effigy or by the sun-god Sūrya. And the parallel is taken even further in those orthodox Hindu texts (see Walker 1968, Vol 2:572) which recommend that in order to protect the husband from the dangers of sexual intercourse with a virgin girl defloration is in fact accomplished either by a king, a god or even by an inanimate phallic object, such as a sword.

Yalman and the Nayar mock-marriage

I began this chapter by noting some of the striking similarities between the Newar and Nayar mock-marriage rites. Having now provided a detailed description of the Newar rites I would like to return to the comparative theme. But first, I must provide a brief account of some of the diagnostic features of the Nayar rites (*tāli kettukalyanam*).

The Nayar *tāli*-tying rite had to take place well before puberty and, like *ihī*, it was usually a group rite. The central act of the four-day ritual sequence was, as is common in marriage throughout much of south India, the tying of a gold ornament (*tāli*) around the neck of the 'bride' by the 'groom'. But amongst the Nayar the man who thus became the girl's 'husband' was but rarely her future conjugal partner. Rather, he was simply a member of a linked lineage who became her spouse solely for the purposes of the ritual. This man had no subsequent rights or obligations concerning his ritual 'wife'

and some years later, after the girl's menarche, she entered into quite separate conjugal unions known as *sambandham*. However, interestingly enough, Gough was informed that traditionally in the *tāli*-tying rite, if the girl was nearing puberty, sexual relations might take place during a three-day period of seclusion of the ritually married couple (Gough 1959:25). Once again, there are clear hints here of ritual defloration of brides prior to the commencement of regular conjugal relations.

Yalman, in his discussion of these rites, argued that, like other mock-marriages in India, they are best understood as functional alternatives to the more orthodox Brahmanical custom of pre-pubertal marriage for girls. Both marriage practices are, he contended, best understood as alternative institutionalized responses to the Hindu pre-occupation with the maintenance of caste purity—a pre-occupation which ‘narrows and focuses attention on a profound “danger” situation—the appearance of female sexuality’ (Yalman 1963:39). He argued, with considerable cogency, that in any hierarchically structured society in which purity is an important idiom of status differentiation there is certain to be a major pre-occupation with the maintenance of female purity. This is especially so in India where the purity of the caste is first and foremost a function of the purity of its womenfolk. In developing his argument he concentrated on the similarities between the two marriage complexes—and hence on the underlying similarities between the Nayars and their more orthodox Hindu neighbours.

Yalman's hypothesis is persuasive provided one accepts his contention that the Nayars, and other peoples with analogous marriage systems, are indeed as obsessed with the maintenance of female purity as he would have us believe. I think that there are good grounds for questioning that assertion. Apart from the Nayars and the Newars the main ethnographic examples of mock-marriages come from middle India where young pre-pubertal girls are, or were traditionally, married to arrows. Though the rite occurs across a wide spectrum of the social hierarchy, Dube (1953:25) noted that it is especially common amongst tribal and low-caste peoples and never occurs amongst Brahmans. Indeed, he explicitly associated the custom with a tribal preference for both adult marriage and considerable laxity in sexual morality, at least during adolescence.

Presumably such laxity is but part of a more general tribal or low-caste lack of concern regarding the preservation of female purity. An even more obvious link between mock-marriage and an absence of sexual orthodoxy can be seen in the widespread south Indian custom of marrying young girls to the resident deity of a temple prior to their embarking on a career of temple prostitution (Dumont 1961:30 and 1964:85 and Walker 1968, ii:46–9).¹

In all of these cases there would seem to be good grounds for asserting that the mock-marriages are performed not so much as a straightforward functional response to a concern with purity maintenance, but rather as a means of providing overt symbolic commitment to such ideals whilst in fact permitting considerable laxity or unorthodoxy in everyday social life. In other words, I would not expect mock-marriages to occur in an isolated tribal community, but rather only where, as in middle India for a very long time and in much of the Himalayas over the past four or five centuries, the former tribes have become increasingly encapsulated in larger and more complex caste-structured polities dominated by high-caste Hindus, including Brahmans. It is in such circumstances that one might expect the sort of compromise between conflicting values that seem to be represented in the simultaneous presence of mock pre-pubertal marriages and unorthodox adult sexual morality.

Furthermore, such 'marriage' rites, though mock in the sense of focussing on symbolic rather than 'real' conjugality, are certainly not mock in the sense that they clearly display a very real and genuine concern with what are felt to be problematic properties of female sexuality. But such problematics are not, I would suggest, solely or even primarily, a product of purity concern. From the Hindu perspective, and indeed equally so from the Buddhist, women are valued for both their creative and destructive properties as much as, or in some contexts, even more than, their purity capabilities. Hence, in all mock-marriages much of the symbolic content of the ritual action displays a deep concern with both tapping and controlling all of the varied components of women's *śakti* or power. Young girls as they approach sexual maturity increasingly cease to be relatively powerless pure beings and instead begin to display signs of their emerging sexual and reproductive capabilities. Just how a particular community reacts to such possibilities varies

according to the dominant values that the members subscribe to, most especially those values that directly impinge on the power and status of women in everyday social life.

The Nayars and the Newars

The situation is, of course, much more complex amongst the highly sophisticated and caste-structured Nayars and Newars than that which prevails in the tribal context in middle-India. Nevertheless, I think that striking similarities can be shown to obtain. The first and most important point to make about the Nayars is that though they are part of a state-wide caste system that was famous throughout India for the rigidity with which inter-caste relations were controlled and regulated by reference to an elaborate ideology of purity and pollution, they themselves differed in many important respects from both the dominant non-Nayar Brahmans (the Nambudiri Brahmans) and the untouchable castes. Despite the internal structuring of Nayar sub-groups in conformity with caste principles, and despite an evident concern with purity and pollution in such contexts as birth, menstruation and death, the Nayars were nevertheless famous for their many highly unorthodox social institutions, especially the extreme development of matriliney, matrilocality, the high status of women and their peculiar marriage customs (i.e., mock-marriage combined with serial polyandry in the form of *sambandham* unions). To take but one example of the reaction of puritanical outsiders I quote from a proclamation made by Tipu Sultan, the Muslim king of Mysore, in 1798

... and since it is a practice with you for one woman to associate with ten men, and leave your mother and sisters unconstrained in their obscene practices, and are thence all born in adultery, and are more shameless in your connections than the beasts in the fields: I hereby require you to forsake these sinful practices and live like the rest of mankind. (quoted by Fuller 1976:4-5)

Though a somewhat radical moral evaluation the proclamation nevertheless suggests that Yalman's contention that the Nayars shared their Brahman neighbours concern for the protection of their womenfolks' purity as at best inadequate and at worst quite false. It is also worth stressing here that many commentators have remarked

on the high status of Nayar women—high not only as regards conjugal freedom but also in reference to property inheritance (*ibid.*:6). I might add that Fuller (1976:120) also stresses the lack of sexual orthodoxy in a system predicated on the desirability of regular sexual relations between high-caste males and low-caste females.

Yalman himself suggested that mock-marriages are more likely to be found than infant marriages in those societies where the conjugal relationship is relatively weakly defined. He had little difficulty in demonstrating that this hypothesis is supported by the data from the Malabar coast. At one extreme there are the highly elaborate mock-marriages of the south Nayars in association with a strong matrilineal organization and weakly defined conjugal relations—at the other end there is the Nambudiri Brahman pattern of infant marriage, strong patriliney and indissoluble conjugal relationships. He nevertheless failed to perceive the relevance of such a difference for the possibility of parallel differences in the importance attached to female purity, especially in the sexual context.

I would at this point like to put particular emphasis on the fact that the Nayars are a people who have a strong sense of their historically unique culture—they see themselves as an essentially homogeneous people encapsulated within a larger caste-structured state. In so far as they are internally caste-structured, which they most certainly are, they see this as a consequence of their external relations with pure Brahmans and impure untouchables. Though the early history of the Nayars is unknown I would dare to hazard a guess that, like other matrilineal peoples in south Asia, they were originally a tribal people. At some unknown point in the expansion and development of caste-structured states on the Malabar coast the Nayars, like so many other tribal peoples in India, entered into the system primarily as mercenaries and to a lesser extent as peasant farmers. For a variety of complex historical reasons the militarization of Nayar culture assumed unusual proportions, and as a consequence the pre-existing matrilineal organization became accentuated rather than modified—and it should be noted here that numerous commentators have contended that there is a direct causal connection between the extreme matriliney and the extreme militarism of the Nayars. The matrilineal *taravad* system was

incompatible with the orthodox Hindu emphasis on the sanctity and indissolubility of the marriage bond—yet as the centuries passed the Nayars became more and more an integral part of the Brahman dominated state-wide caste system and hence inevitably found themselves increasingly subscribing to the caste-linked ideology that focuses on the maintenance of female purity. I suggest that the *tali*-tying rite provided, as do all mock-marriages, an overt symbolic expression of such qualified commitment.

Let me return to the Newars. The first point to note is that despite the striking similarities between the *ihī* and the *tali*-tying rites the two social systems differ in important ways. Instead of matriliney the Newars have a conventional patrilineal/virilocal system with both lineages and patrilineal joint families. Furthermore, instead of serial polyandry we find monogamy and well-defined conjugal ties in the context of corporate and enduring family units. At a somewhat different level there is a marked contrast between the Nayar military tradition and the Newar emphasis on agriculture, trade and artisanship.

The Newars are, however, like the Nayars in at least three important respects; though internally structured in conformity with caste principles, outsiders nevertheless tend to regard them both as culturally homogeneous and as constituting a single caste; they are unorthodox in their attitudes towards sex and marriage; and they accord a high status to women.

The historical evidence points to a remote tribal origin for the Newars succeeded by a long period of interaction with orthodox Brahmanism during which the foundations of a complex urban civilization were laid. From a very early period the indigenous Newars were ever-increasingly encapsulated in complex caste-structured states with immigrant Brahmans and ruling dynasties at the top and 'impure' service castes at the bottom. As the political dominance of the Hindu dynasties increased, especially during the period of numerous Hindu incursions from north India precipitated by Muslim conquest, so too did the pressures of conformity to caste-based values increase markedly. As with the Nayars, the prevalence of inter-caste unions is almost certainly a consequence of the pressures for upward mobility in a fluid political context. Just as Sanskritization flows downwards so too do successful men move

upwards by contracting advantageous inter-caste marriages for their children.

Dumont, having noted the common high incidence of both hypergamy and anagamy amongst both the Newars and Nayars, went so far as to assert that their internal sub-divisions do not constitute true castes. He wrote

... in both cases we are confronted with an enormous conglomerate of groups distinguished by their profession, social status (and, among the Newar, even religion). Clearly these conglomerates are not castes, although they may appear as such in certain situations in relation to real outsider castes. (Dumont 1964:98)

Though I think that Dumont is incorrect in stating that these sub-divisions are not castes, the fact that he put forward such a point of view is indicative of the extent to which both systems exhibit what might be termed unorthodox features. But rather than put both communities right outside the caste format I would prefer to regard them as exhibiting common structural and ideological deviations. After all, most peoples in India and Nepal were, if one could push history back far enough, tribal in origin and most still retain marriage customs that depart in some way from Brahmanical ideals. Nor would I regard hypergamy and anagamy as especially significant indices of lack of orthodoxy. Though both certainly occur amongst the Newars, especially where rapidly changing political and economic circumstances have led to upward social mobility, they are not major features of the system. On the contrary, most marriages conform to the ideal of *jāī* endogamy. Furthermore, according to Dumont's own criteria both social systems conform to the caste model in that the various status sub-divisions are explicitly ranked by reference to an ideology of relative purity and impurity with priests at the top and untouchables at the bottom.¹⁸

Whereas Dumont stressed the lack of orthodoxy in the kind of marriage alliances contracted, I would stress rather a more broadly-based departure from orthodox ideals in the evaluation of both women and female sexuality. As we have seen, according to the orthodox Hindu doctrine women are regarded as a major source of

¹⁸ For further discussion of this issue see Quigley 1986.

impurity flowing directly from their ontology—they menstruate, give birth to children and are believed to be subject to unclean desires and passions. Hence, we find a strong emphasis on the maintenance of male control through such restrictive institutions as child-marriage, purdah, a prohibition against both divorce and widow remarriage, and a high evaluation of *sati*. Female sexuality is regarded as a dangerous and polluting force that has value solely in the context of male agnatic continuity. But amongst both the Nayars and Newars this whole complex of values and associated institutions is in large measure replaced by a much more positive set which focuses on the high status accorded to women. In the case of the Nayars this appears to have been a consequence of male absenteeism from home for military reasons. In the case of the Newars, who are neither matrilineal nor markedly militaristic, the high status accorded to women lies rather in their contribution both to key areas of the economy and to the formation of kin groups.

The status of Newar women

Hamilton, writing in 1819, after a brief account of *ihī*, dwelt in some detail on the associated rights and freedoms then exercised by women in their conjugal dealings with men:

Among the higher castes, it is required that girls should be chaste till they have been ... betrothed; but in the lower castes, a girl, without scandal, may previously indulge any Hindu with her favours; and this licentiousness is considered a thing of no consequence. Whenever a woman please, she may leave her husband; and if, during her absence, she cohabit only with men of her own caste, or if a higher one, she may at any time return to her husband's house, and resume the command of his family. The only ceremony or intimation that is necessary, before she goes away, is her placing two betel-nuts on her bed. So long as a woman chooses to live with her husband, he cannot take another wife, until she becomes past child-bearing, but a man may take a second wife, when his first chooses to leave him, or when she grows old; and at all times he may keep as many concubines as he pleases. (Hamilton 1971:42)

Today, after more than 170 years of greatly increased pressures towards conformity to orthodox Hindu sexual morality, many Newar women, especially those of the numerically preponderant caste

category of Jyāpu, still retain most of their traditional rights to elopement, divorce and re-marriage, including the re-marriage of widows. Bina Pradhan (1981) has recently documented the continuity of such rights amongst the Jyāpu of women of Bulu, a small Newar village located some considerable distance from the main urban centres in Kathmandu valley. In the subsequent chapter I discuss her findings in some detail; for the moment suffice to note that they indicate that Hamilton's observation may not have been all that exaggerated.

For the main urban centres, however, the move towards increased orthodoxy has led to a decline in the actual extent to which women exercise these rights, especially those of elopement and divorce. Nepali (1965:247-50) noted that in a sample of 353 ever-married men and 381 ever-married women, only 55 men and 54 women had either divorced, deserted or been deserted by their first spouse. In addition, of the 54 women, only 16 had initiated the separation.

Moreover, it is precisely these same urban Newars who are amongst the most enthusiastic supporters of *ihī*. As previously indicated, my understanding of why this should be so flows from my view of *ihī* as an elaborate ritual response to an ideological opposition between, on the one hand, the old ideas that focus on a high valuation accorded to women's autonomy, and, on the other hand, the increasingly popular Hindu view of women as constituting dangerous sources of impurity, and hence in need of male control. In support of this view it should be noted that whilst the ceremony is most popular in those castes in which such an ideological opposition might be expected to be extreme, most notably in the high-ranking Buddhist castes such as the Gubhāju, Bare and Urāy, but also amongst low-ranking Śreṣṭha and upwardly mobile Jyāpu, and least popular at the two extremes of the Hindu caste hierarchy—i.e. the Brahmans and the untouchables.

The high status of Newar women, at least as compared to that found in more orthodox Hindu communities elsewhere in the Himalayas and north India, is evident not only in the context of marriage and divorce, but in a wide range of other areas of social, religious and economic life. Sons, though perhaps slightly preferred to daughters, especially in the case of the first-born child, are not accorded the exaggerated importance found in most Hindu

communities. There is no evidence of female infanticide, either now or in the past, and the birth of a daughter is not in any way regretted. Girls are, indeed, very much honoured in their natal family and after they have taken their *ihī* they are, as we have seen, granted membership of their father's caste and admitted to the secret worship of his lineage deity. Despite the subsequent unambiguous transfer of allegiance and worship to the husband's lineage, Newar married women nevertheless retain unusually important ties with their parents' close kin. All of the available married daughters of a locally-anchored agnatic kin group (*phuki*) are required on numerous occasions to fulfil important ritual functions. For every feast, ceremony and festival they should be invited and fed with ritually prescribed delicacies. They are also required to fulfil a series of ritual functions at all major *rites de passage*, especially death, affecting members of the father's family.

Because most Newar marriages are contracted between families within easy walking distance the majority of married daughters spend a great deal of time fulfilling such duties in their parents' home. The high status and important duties of married daughters are continued at the next generation level. A child spends a great deal of its time in its mother's brother's home, 'where it is treated with unusual affection by the members of the family and is allowed to enjoy liberty to a great extent' (Nepali 1965:419). The mother's brother figures prominently in most domestic rites and it seems that his importance, like that of other female-linked relatives, is thought of as a function of the power associated with female deities, and by extension, women in general.

The high status of Newar women is given explicit cultural recognition in the popularity of Tantricism, both of the Buddhist and Hindu varieties. Tantric doctrine and practice constitute quite explicit inversions of the ascetic and often even misogynist, values that underpin both Brahmanism and monastic Buddhism. Vajrāyāna Buddhism, like the Hindu Tantra, is directly predicated on a positive evaluation of human sexuality as a source of ritual, meditative and cognitive power. Instead of the Brahmanical rejection of sex as a major source of impurity, the Vajrāyāna devotee celebrates coitus as a cosmic force of great generative power. In accordance with this doctrine the Vajrāyāna priest, the Vajrācārya or 'master of the

thunderbolt', must be a married man. It is only thus that he can ensure the presence of his indispensable ritual partner—a woman who represents the power that is so vital for the success of his ritual objectives.

The same doctrine underpins the requirement that the highest initiation (*dikṣā*-New.) for Newar Buddhists is available only to those who present themselves with a partner of the opposite sex. Such a high cultural evaluation of specifically female powers and potencies, especially as regards female sexuality and reproductivity, has, I would suggest, effectively precluded the possibility of such restrictive institutions as child-marriage, no divorce and widow immolation. But because the Newars are at the same time encapsulated in a politically dominant and caste-structured Hindu world, and hence subject to the contrary negative views of women so distinctive of such a world, mock-marriages may be best understood as an effective solution to the ideological and structural problems faced by these people.

As previously noted, the high status of Newar women is also evident in their prominent participation in economic activities. In the past this was, and to a considerable extent still is today, most evident in the extent of their contribution both to agricultural production and to cloth manufacture. Though this applied across all Newar castes, it was most especially true of that large and in many ways most authentic of Newar caste categories known as the *Jyāpu*. This is, however, a topic that I will discuss in greater detail in the following chapter (pp. 264-5). For the moment suffice to note that the status implications of women's work contribution was by no means restricted to its economic value. Because Newars prefer to organize work, wherever possible, on a group co-operative basis, and because work groups also prefer to conclude a day's labour with a communal feast, the female members of such groups, as the principal producers and distributors of both the food and the rice wine consumed, gain a great deal of prestige.

Conclusion

The range of world views found within the Hindu/Buddhist tradition can, I think, be represented, without too much distortion, as falling between the two poles of world affirmation and world

renunciation. On the one hand, there are those values, philosophies and codes of behaviour predicated on a high evaluation of life and its generative powers, and hence of deep involvement in the affairs of the world. On the other hand, there are those values based on the assumption that the cycle of life and death, the phenomenal world of *samsāra*, constitutes a hindrance to the realization of salvation and hence every effort must be made to achieve detachment and ultimately release from its bonds. It is not simply a matter of Hindu as against tribal, or high-caste as against low-caste, or even orthodox as against unorthodox, but rather that within orthodoxy itself there is a constant oscillation between the two world views.

At the highest level the dialectic is dramatically represented by the relationship between the *dharma* of the king and the *dharma* of the Brahman—between a code of ethics in which status is defined by reference to the politico-economic domain, and a code in which relative human worth is calibrated solely by reference to notions of purity and spirituality. The dialectic cuts even deeper than this for it internally pervades even those castes formally committed to only one set of values. For example, though Brahmans are the foremost exponents of an ideology of renunciation and purity, they nevertheless perpetuate themselves in the worldly contexts of family, lineage and village. Hence, instead of adopting a life-style of celibacy most Brahmans marry, raise children and involve themselves generally in the politico-economic realm. Likewise, most low-caste peasants, in addition to placing high value on fertility, sexuality and productivity, also revere and make offerings to *samnyāsis* and other renouncers who pass through the village. The dual presence of the two world views is, of course, most marked in the middle-ranking castes and least so at the two extremes.

I began this chapter by arguing that amongst those castes most fully committed to the ideology of purity and pollution, emphasis is likely to be placed on rigorous male control of female sexuality and reproductivity. Because castes are perpetuating lineage-based structures there can be no outright rejection of sexuality and reproductivity (as there can be in celibate renunciatory institutions, such as monasteries or nunneries)—on the contrary, high value is accorded to those women who maintain the lineage by producing male children. The solution to the problem of maintaining such

control mostly lies in the development of three institutions—the betrothal of girls prior to first menstruation, the control of sexually active women by their husbands, and the prohibition against widow re-marriage. The more any given community is caste-structured and the more any given caste subscribes to the purity ideal, the greater the probability that such restrictive institutions control the sexual lives of women, especially those who are post-menarche and pre-menopause. Contrariwise, where commitment to this Brahmanical ideal is least, as amongst non-Hindus in a Hindu-dominated state, especially those with a tribal background, many low-ranking castes and, though less commonly, unorthodox or reformist Hindu sects, one is more likely to find adult marriage, socially-approved divorce and the re-marriage of widows. Though I cannot develop the argument here I would suggest that in such communities a strong emphasis on ‘correct’ marriage often replaces the Brahmanical emphasis on early marriage. By ‘correct’ I mean specifically marriages that are in conformity with culturally stipulated ‘rules’ concerning the selection of marriage partners, such as rules of exogamy, elaborate incest prohibitions, cross-cousin marriage rules, caste endogamy, etc.

When viewed in the light of these considerations the seemingly peculiar marriage institutions of the Nayar, the Newar and some middle-Indian communities begin to make some sense. The *tāli*-tying and the *ihī* rites are seen by the people themselves as equivalent to the pre-pubertal virgin-giving rites of the Brahmans. But instead of the girls subsequently entering into indissoluble conjugal relationships with their initial spouses, they establish as adults quite separate and easily dissolved secondary marriages. Put bluntly—the mock-marriages may be said to constitute a formal show of commitment to orthodoxy in Brahman-dominated communities within which key values are still strongly unorthodox—especially as regards the status of women, their sexuality and their reproductivity.

I would, however, be most reluctant to conclude on this seemingly ‘rational’ note. Despite Mary Douglas (1966), rites seldom exist solely, or even primarily, to provide solutions to problems of a cognitive or intellectual kind. Many rites, and this applies perhaps most especially to *rites de passage*, have as their

primary *raison d'être* a strong belief on the part of practitioners that performance generates a magical capacity to defuse dangers, to remove obstacles that stand in the way of desired goals. As I have argued elsewhere (Allen 1976:315 and this volume, Chapter 7:210-11), I agree with both Yalman (1963) and Gough (1955) in their depiction of the Nayar *tāli*-tying rite as an institutionalized response to a profoundly felt danger that focuses on female sexuality. But I doubt if the danger lies, as Yalman contended, in the fear of pollution generated by the pubescent girl's approaching sexual maturity. Nor am I over-persuaded by Gough's ingenious hypothesis to the effect that the danger arises through the identification of a virgin girl with the incestuously desired and castrating mother.

As I see it, the danger is simply that of uncontrolled sexuality in a caste-structured community dominated by a powerful, and in some respects, alien, minority. In Kerala, the combination of matrilineally-structured *taravads*, hypergamy and the *sambhandam* institution together ensured that the men at the top of the caste hierarchy, above all the non-Nayar Nambudiri Brahmans, had easy and exploitative access to the sexual services of Nayar women. Similarly, in Nepal, men of the twice-born conquering Gorkha castes were often able to establish coercive and exploitative sexual relations with Newar women. This was an especially noted feature of the one-hundred year Rana rule from 1846 to 1951. For example, Maharaja Jang Bahadur Rana, who reigned from 1846 to 1856, in addition to his twenty-two wives who were listed and honoured with the titles of Maharani or Rani, possessed numerous concubines and more than two hundred other women in his harem. Many in the last two categories were Newar women (Rana 1995:51).

The fear of either pollution or of castration by a powerful mother figure may, of course, add yet another dimension to the concern of both Nayar and Newar men to control female sexuality. They do not, however, adequately explain why such control is sometimes exercised through the child-marriage set of institutions, and sometimes through the mock-marriage set. It is my contention that the high status accorded to the women of these communities, in conjunction with their relative freedom from constraint as adults, may well have exacerbated the anxieties of their menfolk concerning their sexual behaviour, especially in relation to the dominant men of

an alien minority. It is only as a result of a very long history of gradual incorporation within developing caste-structured states that the Nayars and Newars have evolved such fascinating solutions to the conflicting sets of ideals regarding women and their sexual and reproductive functions that I have here delineated.

The Newar solution was to develop an elaborate set of institutions focussing, in the case of the mock-marriage and mock-menstruation ceremonies, on the containment of the potentially dangerous powers believed to be inherent in pre-pubescent female sexuality, and, in the case of the Kumārī cults, on gaining access to these same powers for political and other worldly purposes.

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