Macrocosp, mesocosm, and microcosm: The persistent nature of ‘Hindu’ beliefs and symbolic forms

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INTRODUCTION: MESOCOSM

With his recent book, Mesocosm: Hinduism and the organization of a traditional Newar city in Nepal, Robert Levy has greatly indebted students and scholars of South Asia. The work deals with the urban universe and its components of Hindus in the Newar town of Bhaktapur in Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley during the mid-seventies. It presents, in contrast to primarily philological and historical analyses, a structured account of the totality of a local form of Hinduism and, in my opinion, for the first time, a clear view of the intricate nature of the elements and their interrelations of a ‘medieval-type’ Hindu community.

Mesocosm successfully combines a well-informed textual and historical background, with anthropological observation and, as his earlier work—Tahitians: Mind and experience in the Society Islands (1973)—led us to expect, insightful analysis. It is often overlooked that the Hindu texts, whether in Sanskrit, Middle or New Indo-Äryan, or Dravidian, usually represent the voice of the Brähman (the Buddhist, the Jaina, and so forth) establishment. Even originally counter-movements (Tantra, for example) made their way into the received texts only after a period of ‘Brähmanization’—entailing purification and adjustment to the norms of Hinduism.

This book, however, presents Hinduism as it operates on the ground, from private beliefs to the city-wide Tantric religion, from private rituals to the public festivals of a whole realm, from individual sacred space in private houses to the sacred geography of the town of Bhaktapur and surrounding areas. It thus has intrinsic value not only for understanding local Newar Hinduism but also for the

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wider study and understanding of Hinduism in general.

ETERNAL HINDUISM?

There are several reasons, well known to specialists in Nepalese studies, for the choice of Bhaktapur and, consequently, for the value this study has in the understanding of traditional Hinduism. They include the ‘museum’ character of Bhaktapur, a very conservative town largely untempered by medieval Muslim and more recent British influences; a long history of some 2,000 years of Hindu life of the Newars, a people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family; and the Newar stress on rituals and festivals as expression of their culture which has preserved a lot of older Hindu traits. We can, thus, for heuristic purposes, at least, take Bhaktapur Hinduism as a sample representation of ‘medieval’ Hinduism in a traditional monarchy and in an urban context (and not, significantly, in the usually studied village context where most anthropological accounts are based).

Another reason why this analysis is so important is that Mesocosm is, as I have said, a structured analysis. The usual, run-of-the-mill books on Hinduism are, as ethnologists would say, more or less ‘thick’ descriptions of the religion, with its festivals, customs, rites, beliefs. But such books often remain descriptive, sometimes to the extent of mere enumeration of features. They repeat, often ahistorically, the usual litany of the supposedly main concepts of Hinduism, such as the four āśramas and the four puruṣārthas.

Occasionally one can come across a good analysis of one or another aspect of Hindu life (marriage, death rituals, purity and pollution, the ‘caste’ system), but we normally miss in such books an incisive, in-depth analysis of the larger, integrating context of Hinduism and its worldview that goes beyond the common puruṣārtha and varṇāśrama concepts. If we limit our viewpoint to the formal aspects of Hindu religion (worship, festivals, pūjā), then, again, there virtually is no single book which clearly delineates the structure, the variety, and the meaning of these rituals. I will concentrate on rituals and festivals for the purpose of this paper.

I am not of the opinion of those writers who maintain an eternal, essentially unchanging nature of Hinduism from Vedic times. Vedic religion cannot be compared directly with the Hinduism of the Great Epics, the various historical levels visible in the Purāṇas and in Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Śāktism, and Tantrism—or the more informal local versions of Hinduism in towns and villages, from Srinagar and Kathmandu to Cochin and Jaffna and from Dwarka to Manipur. I
would rather like to point out and stress that while many of the structures and forms of South Asian religion that Levy portrays at Bhaktapur can be seen to be present in the Vedic period, he is emphatic that historical archaeology was not the aim of his book.  

I will make use of Levy's observations of modern Newar Hinduism (and add some of my own) in attempting to suggest continuities and analogs of some structures with those of the Vedic period. Some of these persistences have been well described by Hermann Oldenberg (1919) and Stanislaw Schayer (1922–23): the procedure found in the Brāhmaṇa texts of analyzing the universe on three levels and connecting these by a series of 'identifications' (homologies), for example, and the use of 'creative etymologies.' Brāhmaṇa thought is based on a multifaceted picture of the world, with a three-level division into the macrocosm of gods, the microcosm of humans, and the mediating realm of ritual, which is supervised and manipulated by self-appointed priests, the Brāhmans, in the interest of their clients (and, of course, their own interest). This intermediate realm of ritual has now conveniently been termed 'mesocosm' by Levy for the Hinduism of Bhaktapur.

Indeed, the three-level pattern of the Veda holds for modern Hindu Bhaktapur as well. As we will see, some of the dramatis personae on the three levels may have changed over time, but the model is still in place.

Levy's analysis allows us to view Hinduism, just like any other religion, on its own terms, as a rather well-organized system of beliefs, rites, and customs. Western scholars sometimes do not see it this way. They are often dazzled by the endless array of gods, images, motifs, stories, mythical cycles, and so on, and by the infinite number of smaller and larger rituals and festivals. The problem is compounded when these elements are set free from their selection and interrelations in a particular community and are set adrift in some unlocalized historical space. Scholars get lost in catalogs of the multitude of gods, symbols, and customs of Hinduism. Hindu (or Vedic) mythology is not just a jungle of tales that seems to sprout ever new shoots and branches like a jungle creeper or banyan tree. The tales are variations on a number of well-established themes and structures. It is just their effulgence and their multitude that confound.

Further, we must also distinguish between an 'academic' approach based on the systems of (some favored) Hindu philosophers—all too often this is Śaṅkara—and an analysis based on the thought and religion of the bulk of the (non-philosophical) population. As, for example, I have frequently learned 'on ground level' in villages and towns, it is primarily neither the concept of karma nor the cycle of endless reincarnations (as Levy, too, mentions; 1990: 215, 442, cf. 223 but contrast 318, 361, 520) but some much older and persistent features that are more prominent in the thought and lives of most Hindus.
MODERN BHAKTAPUR AND THE TEXTUAL TRADITION

Levy's description and analysis of Bhaktapur society and religion allow us to compare what has happened during the long period extending between the pre-Hindu religion of the Vedas and the Hinduism of modern Nepal. One may, of course, question why such a comparison should be made at all. A thorough comparison of, say, early Buddhism in Bihar and its modern forms in Sri Lanka or Japan would result in a large number of incompatibilities, even though all these forms are based on, ultimately, the same set of teachings. The same can, certainly, be said of Vedic religion and any local form of modern Hinduism. It can even be denied, and usually is by scholars of Veda and South Asia, that this is the 'same religion' since most of its deities, beliefs, and rituals have changed considerably.

When working in Nepal during the seventies (1972–77 and occasionally later on), I noticed that many elements—as well as structures—of rituals, customs, and beliefs have continued from the Vedic period into modern Hinduism; nevertheless, I was also aware of the fact that such correspondences are not recognized very easily. What is necessary is a Vedic specialist who takes a close look at the practices of modern Hinduism. This, of course, is usually not done, as the myths and 'theology' of Hinduism seem to be that of the Epics and the Purāṇas, and these are regarded as something intrinsically different from the preceding Vedic period.

We may, however, easily find individual examples where Vedic concepts and beliefs have been perpetuated into modern times. One such group is clustered around death and its rituals. The Vedic texts, for example, refer to 'the departed' (preta) flying around as birds or visiting their descendants in the form of birds (BDhS 2.14.9–10; JB 2.53; Kaṭhā 2.185–86; KB 7.4; KS 34.8; VādhaB 4.37). This thought is still found in various parts of modern South Asia and fits poorly into the idea of a departed soul on its way to the other world or in the process of reincarnating itself. First, there is the Kāka Bali, 'Crow offering,' in many rituals (Witzel 1986, 1992). Crow s indeed represent ancestors in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and other places—though not everywhere in India. It is noteworthy that on a certain day, once a year, all crows are said to assemble in Benares, as if to take part in an annual śrāddha feeding. In Bhaktapur this belief persists in the annual Kwa Pūjā, 'Crow Pūjā,' just before the Newar New Year in October, which Levy characterizes as 'Placation of Yama, the god of death' (656).

Another persistent idea is of a departed person going to heaven (or to the pleasant world of the ancestors in Yama's realm; RV 10.135.1; VādhaB 3.91). While this is prominent in Vedic religion from Rgvedic times, some doubt about
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it should have been expressed once the late Vedic ‘doctrine’ of reincarnation emerged. This juncture (see Witzel n.d.a) of an earlier common belief in rebirth and the new one in the retributive force of karma would turn ‘heaven’ into an unnecessary if not an impossible notion: rebirth should take place upon death. Indeed, medieval Jainas (and non-Nepalese Buddhists) ridiculed the Brāhmaṇs for performing ‘useless’ śrāddha rituals since their ancestors must have already been reincarnated. Rebirth, however, is usually not stressed in modern South Asia; rather, a long sojourn in (Viṣṇu’s) Heaven is supposed to occur. The stay in Yama’s, by now, dreadful world or the subsequent rebirth in this world are played down (442), and this is indeed what I often heard express in Nepal and India: people do not talk about reincarnation, but everyone wants ‘to go to heaven.’ The expression is also used in the common Sanskritic term for a departed person: divaṃgata, ‘gone to heaven.’ It can be read, for instance, on the printed flyers commonly found on the walls of houses announcing someone’s death. Even the Newar Buddhists suppose that a departed person would go to heaven (for example, Amitābha’s western paradise) before the various constituent parts of his or her personality would reassemble in various new life forms. Both Buddhists (even though their interpretation may vary) and Hindus in Nepal, therefore, perform śrāddha ceremonies to feed their departed ancestors. In other words, the Vedic idea of a stay in heaven has been integrated into the post-Vedic and medieval view of constant reincarnation, and it nowadays forms but one step in this process. It is, however, such an important step that it still takes precedence over all post-Vedic philosophy and perpetuates the age-old human wish to stay in a blissful world in the afterlife.

While such concepts have persisted, the great gods and myths of the Vedic period, on the other hand, have all but disappeared. Instead, an innumerable number of stories with countless variants and transformations of the old myths are told: why things are the way they are, or how the Hindu gods were involved in the establishment of the present world. Such tales are usually couched in terms of the great Hindu Trinity, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, of their wives, and of their various associates and adversaries. But to add to the complexity and confusion, any local form of a deity and the various sages, epic heroes (see Hildebeitel 1988), and even semi-historical persons are linked to other, often local, variations of myths so that the final result is the well-known bewildering array. Not surprisingly, we still lack a reasoned and insightful analysis of the total domain of myths and gods as Levy has done for the Bhaktapur corpus.

Such Epic and Purāṇic ‘explanations’ as we do have are quite obvious ad hoc explanations in terms of a relation between the great gods and their associates.¹⁰ Like a Lévi-Straussian analysis, they convey little beyond the fact that such and such a dichotomy (between eroticism and asceticism, for example) and such and
such a ‘solution’ (the character of Śiva) of the conflict exist and that this conflict is somehow important for medieval Hinduism.

A Vedic analog, for example, is the dichotomy between a Vṛātya and a Brahmacārīn, on the one hand, and a prostitute (puṁścalī), on the other. It is represented in the Mahāvarta New Year ritual (e.g., ĀpŚŚ 21.17ff; ŚŚŚ 17.18ff) by, respectively, intercourse between a Māgadha and a prostitute and explicit verbal exchange between a Brahmacārīn and a prostitute. The same dichotomy is visible in the quasi-marital relationship of certain humans with semi-divine Apsarasas, for example, that of Purūravas, one of the first humans, with the Apsaras Urvaśī. Apsarasas, otherwise, live in ‘open’ relationships with semi-divine Gandharvas, relationships that are the divine counterpart of the open relations between human Vṛāyas and prostitutes (and other unmarried women living with this sodality of unmarried young men). This dichotomy also exists between the divine twins, Yama and Yamī, on the one hand, and their brother, Manu, and his wife, Manāvī, on the other. Yama and Yamī were about to commit incest, and they engaged in a heated dialogue about its appropriateness. (According to some traditions, they actually carried it out.) Their brother, Manu, however, established a marital relationship with the Hindu Eve, Manāvī, whom he created (from clarified butter, ghṛt) because of the primordial absence of human females. Resolution is achieved by a substitution of the open relationships by ‘proper’ marital ones which produce the human race and are the model for future human generations. However, the conflict is reenacted each new year in the graphic verbal exchange (similar to the one of Yama and Yamī) and in the intercourse involving a puṁścalī.

Of course, this particular dichotomy has remained important, for it seems to have generated in Nepal a large collection of tales in the Svasthānī Vrata (425), the Nepāla Māhātmya, and, on a larger scale, parts of the Himavat Khaṇḍa. The opposition and its resolution seem to motivate the shift between Purūravas and Urvaśī in an abrupt change from sexual indulgence11 to abstinence12 and to manifest in the relation between Devī and the Malla kings in the Kumārī legend and ritual (Allen 1975; cf. below). In the Vedic text Śatapatha Brāhmana (11.5.1; see also BŚŚ 18.44) this union is allowed to resume once a year,13 just as the Nepalese king will meet the Goddess in her incarnation as Kumārī once a year during Indra Jātrā—if only to receive a tilaka mark from her. The dichotomy is visible in modern Bhaktapur and in many of its rituals and festivals (see below).

We can, thus, usually turn for clarification to earlier sources which quite often state the problem in different but clear terms. Indeed, it has been my repeated impression, and now is my considered opinion, that the way things are formulated in the Epics and the Purāṇas are a ‘secondary elaboration’ of a Vedic (and, often, still earlier) set of concepts. This is, of course, not to deny that innova-
tions, developments, and transformations have taken place between the two periods. However, there are many overlooked constants that have been retained from the Vedic through the Epic to the modern period.

To give just one, and quite obvious, example. The importance of male children in the Mahābhārata (1.19) shows links with Vedic as well as modern concepts. In the Epic, the childless ascetic Jaratkāru meets his ancestors hanging on a string that is gnawed at by rodents. They are in danger of falling into a deep abyss. They explain that this is so because they have no descendants beyond Jaratkāru who could take care of them in the next world. Hence, he quickly marries a woman—also called Jaratkāru—and procreates. This is a retelling of Vedic concepts which include a string of progeny (TU 1.11) that extends between the various generations (cf. AV 3.1.60, 6.122.1–2; PS 16.1 [AV 8.1]; RV 1.142.10; SB 10.5.2.13 achedy asya) and must be kept intact (AB 7.13; TU 1.11). If not, the deep darkness of Nirṛti threatens, an abyss which has no light, no food, no children (RV 7.104).

Yet, even in heaven or in Yama’s realm, the departed have to be fed by śrāddha rituals. In fact, the tale emphasizes one of the well-known three ‘debts’ (Manu 6.35; TS 6.3.5.10), that is, to maintain the ancestors—a very important feature in Hindu society to this very day. Only this way can one ‘support the lineage’ (116) which requires having sons. The ritual worship and feeding of the ancestors also continue, and take a typical Newar expression, in the yearly worship, usually in the spring, of the stone representing the lineage god, Digu Dyaḥ (260), and in the Newar form of the śrāddha half-month (pitṛpakṣa) in early fall (655 [66]).

In other words, as all of this may suggest, to read Epic and Purānic stories in isolation from their historical roots is like interpreting medieval Christian mystery plays, for example, or legends of the innumerable saints without taking recourse to the source (mūla) texts, the Judaeo-Christian Bible. In medieval stories, just as in the Epic-Purānic texts, the same topic is taken up and modified again and again. Further, it is important to note that medieval tales of saints often represent pre-Christian thought, myths, and deities in a Christian garb, and the same relationship can be observed in Hinduism. Its various regional and local forms have incorporated local religious beliefs and reinterpreted them, in interpretatio Romana fashion, as ‘Hindu.’ Examples abound in Nepal: Nāsa Dyaḥ (254–55), for instance, and Digu Dyaḥ (260–61).

The preceding lines are, of course, not meant to claim that all Vedic themes and rites make a transformed appearance in Hindu texts and, conversely, that all of Hinduism has Vedic roots, as some maintain. Female deities, for instance, are more important in Hinduism than in the Vedic texts where they play a more hidden but a crucial role. What is easier to discern are the sources for Hindu
beliefs in the Vedic texts, if one can actually detect and interpret them; then, the line of development up to modern Newar Hinduism is easily visible and more or less straightforward. What helps in this endeavor is the well-known conservatism of Nepalese, or more precisely Newar, Hinduism. Sheltered in a valley beyond the often steep, 9,000 feet high Mahabharat range, the Kathmandu Valley has seen only a brief abortive invasion by a Muslim army in the fourteenth century and none by the British. Medieval influences from India—of the Mughal court or, later, the British—were only indirect and received by ‘osmosis.’ Modern invasions—tourists, Hindi films, worldwide TV—are a more serious threat. It is only recently, however, that severe changes have set in. Levy worked in Bhaktapur in the early seventies, at a time when traditional Hindu forms in Bhaktapur were still in large part intact. Levy’s study could no longer be done in the same way today, which is, incidentally, another one of its lasting merits.

The persuasive analysis and comprehensive view of Hinduism as concretized in Bhaktapur are the great accomplishments of Levy’s synthesis and stand apart from their value for the understanding of medieval (north Indian) Hinduism and pre-modern Newar urban culture. Mesocosm deals with Bhaktapur’s urban and household social and cultural organization (but comparatively little with the individual) and the town’s Vedic, Purānic, and Tantric pantheon (and, in passing, the universal, underlying force of Dharma). The main sections of the book, though, describe, discuss, analyze, and interpret the mediating realm of the urban mesocosm and its ritual technicians and their helpers, the concept of ritual purity, and especially the all-important ‘dance of symbols’ expressed in rituals and festivals.

For this, the name of the book and indeed its central concept, mesocosm, is well chosen. When we compare Vedic concepts, we notice that there is a conceptual gap between the Vedic descriptions of the macrocosm (adhidevata) and the microcosm (adhipuruṣa) discussions in the Upaniṣads: the middle realm linking the world of the gods and the humans is simply called ‘ritualistic discussion’ (adhiyatma). Accordingly, in Western languages, we speak of the macrocosm–ritual–microcosm connections (bandhu, nidāna). Levy’s term fills the ‘ritual’ gap and stresses its mediatory function. It is also more inclusive than that of the solemn yajña level. ‘Mesocosm’ would include the various offerings to threatening deities such as the ominous Rudra Paśupati, the various Gandharvas and demons, and the festivals of the Vedic period which are less prominent in the texts than they are in the Epics and the Purāṇas. The term ‘mesocosm’ stresses a link between humans and gods, established and maintained by ritual (Vedic yajña, post-Vedic yāga), pūjā, food offerings (bali), and festivals (utsaśa), whose terminology, incidentally, goes back to the numerous Vedic Sava rituals, special Soma sacrifices (Gonda 1965).
I can deal, for want of space, only with four aspects of this mesocosmic dance of symbols. They are a comparison of the Vedic and modern form of (i) the role of mesocosm between the world of the gods and the humans, (ii) the cycle of exchanges between the gods/humans/‘other beings’ that keeps the relations among these realms intact, (iii) the parameters of space and time in which the exchanges between these realms take place, and (iv) the complex ‘dance of symbols’ that expresses these realms and their relationships, exemplified by Bhaktapur’s Indra Jāṭrā festival, which I will compare to the Vedic Indradhvaja ritual.

RITUAL EXCHANGES

The relationship between the macrocosmic realm of the gods and the microcosmic realm of the humans, their society, and their environment is established, maintained, and mediated by the mesocosmic expanse of the rituals and the festivals and by the ‘technicians’ involved in these proceedings, the Brāhmanās and other priests.

Food, the universal medium of exchange

The mesocosmic function of ritual is, first and most importantly, a cosmic exchange of food: humans offer food substances (nowadays also fruits and flowers) to the gods, these partake of it and then give the remnants (ucchiṣṭa) back to the humans in the form of food leftovers; this is now called prasāda, ‘grace.’ Notably such leftovers are not ‘untouchable,’ spoiled food (Newari cipa, Nepali jutho from Sanskrit jusṭa, ‘[already] “enjoyed” [as food]’) as these have been tasted by a socially marked superior (385; see below).

These ‘superiors’ include the gods, the ancestors, and the ṛṣīs, the primordial seers. The gods have, as deva, procreated via the first mortal, Manu, humans whom they would like to eat (BĀU 1.4.10)—if the humans had not invented the ritual substitutions of the five domestic animals. Manu and the other semi-divine pitr̥s have procreated the individual clan or lineage group (gotra, Newari thar, phuňi), and they must be fed by them so that they would not go hungry in the next world. Other early humans, the semi-divine ṛṣīs, created Vedic poetry, the hymns necessary for ritual as food for thought (man-tra) and for praising the gods. Humans not only have to learn and recite this poetry in order to feed the ṛṣīs with metaphorical ‘food for thought’ but also have to gain new insights (medhā) and wisdom. All these types of food have to be constantly recycled in ritual so as to keep the universe in motion and functioning well according to the
rules of the universal 'law' of Ṛta, which underlies and regulates all actions of
gods, nature, and humans (just as Dharma does for post-Vedic Hinduism).

The return gifts of the gods for having been fed can take 'invisible,' less direct
forms. A prominent one is rain which enables life on earth. Another gift is in
the form of male children who are described in the Upaniṣāds as ancestors
returning to earth via rain/semen. The universal 'currency,' however, is food. It
can be regarded as a code substance (Marriot 1976). This had been detected and
described for the post-Rgvedic society by Wilhelm Rau (1957). According to Rau, the Brāhmaṇa texts describe the Vedic society as
one of eaters and eaten ones: the Kṣatriyas (usually in alliance with the Brāhmaṇs; JB 1.287) are the eaters (attr), the Vaiṣyas (and the Śūdras) the eaten ones
(anna, 'food'). This hierarchical relation of eater and eaten is the reverse of the
dominant Hindu one. The well-known Hindu jajmāna system of the anthropolo-
gists incorporates both relationships: services and food are recycled between
a patron (jajmāna) and his ‘clients’—both higher (Brāhmaṇs, for instance) and
lower (tailors) than himself. In relation to the higher-than-him ‘employee’ the
jajmāna represents the ‘eater’ of the Vedic period. He ‘eats’ the products of his
higher-status ‘clients,’ but he also gives back something (a sort of reverse pra-
sāda, as it were), payment in the form of food.

The poor can eat the rich and the lower castes the food of the upper ones
without fear of pollution. Upper-status partners are not polluted when ‘eaten’ by
people lower than themselves. This case of the upper group ‘eating’ the lower is
a counter-idea to the usual direction—in which the lower group incorporates the
substance of the higher, and where ‘pollution rules’ use a complex of powerful
metaphors (375–97) to construct a hierarchical order.

The Vedic idea of consumption by the gods, and its extension to consumption
by higher-status persons, can still be glimpsed in the three realms of gods/humans, husband/wife, and king/populace. Interestingly, in all the three cases
the superior person is sometimes called deva, ‘god.’ The gods (deva) partake of
human (cooked) food offerings and return the remnants (ucchiṣṭa/prasāda). The
husband (deva) eats the food prepared by his wife and gives back the leftovers as
her food which she can eat only then; this is nothing new, passages of this
import are found in the post-Rgvedic texts (KS 11.6; MS 1.6.12; ŚB 3.1.3.3–4;
TS 6.5.6; further KathB 2.143; ŚB 1.9.2.12, 10.5.2.9). It is not surprising that the
king (addressed as su-deva in the Rg Veda [10.95.14]) is also called deva today,
and his prajā (literally ‘progeny,’ as in the Nepalese national anthem) offers
‘food’ to him as taxes, called bali, ‘food offering,’ in the Veda. But from this
also flows the duty of the king to give back something to the populace: dāna,
‘gifts.’ Sometimes, for instance in the famous gift-giving ceremony of Emperor
Harṣa (seventh century CE), gifts were given to Brāhmaṇs, Buddhist monks,
beggars until the royal coffers were empty and a new cycle of acquisition had to begin. This potlatch-like distribution, unfortunately, is no longer maintained.

In all these cases, food or its equivalences are recycled among the constituent parts of the Vedic and Hindu universe. In the Vedic period, however, food offered to the gods was cooked by the fire-god Agni, and only cooked food was agreeable (juṣṭa) to the gods.

**Ritual structures**

Ritual itself has several important features. What happens, then, in the fire rituals? The food brought and prepared by the sponsor of the ritual is cooked by a priest, who in the Vedas is sometimes regarded as female in this relation towards the gods. In the long Lakṣahoma of 1976 at Bhaktapur, people teased one of the Brāhmans who had to cook, in full view of the public, a rice bali for the gods: he was doing a woman’s job.

By cooking, food is transformed from its natural into a ‘civilized,’ domesticated state (Lévi-Strauss 1995). In Vedic ritual, however, something else happens as well: the gods, who are present on the offering ground, may directly eat from the cooked food, but often enough they can only partake of it at a distance or in heaven. In such cases, they may consume the smell of the cooked food, for as some Vedic texts say, smelling is eating and not eating at the same time (Kaṭhā 2.143). In every ritual using fire (and Vedic rituals always do) the smell of the offering rises to the gods, and they can consume its *medha*. As the Brāhmaṇa texts (Vādān 4.19a, 4.108) explain, every offering is ‘split’ in the process into its *asu* (‘life force’) and its *medha* (‘juice, essence’). Not only the ‘essence’ but also the ‘life force’ of the victim rises to heaven. It is promised a new life there ‘in the fold of the gods’ (RV 1.161; Schmidt 1973). This sacrificial theory has persisted to this very day (ChU 8.15; 327).

The fire ritual with its transformational force of fire thus *transsubstantiates* the offering on two levels: on a physical level, it changes raw food into cooked food, on another, invisible level, it prepares raw food for the gods by separating the *asu* and *medha* of the plant or animal offered. The *medha* rises to the gods, just as the flames of the ritual fire link this world with that of the gods, by a sometimes visible, sometimes invisible string (*tantu*), which has been described from Rgvedic times.

However, what the gods really want—but usually do not get in the Vedic period—is human flesh and blood (Vādān 4.108). Instead, they receive substitutes: horse, cow, goat, or sheep, and, in later times, rice or barley (Vādān 4.19a) or fruits and flowers (as in modern pūjā). While human and, later, animal sacrifices are avoided, modern Tantric rituals express the same desire of the
protecting dangerous deities (323ff) for blood and flesh: what has been subdued by centuries of Vedic, Buddhist, and Jaina influences survived ‘under the surface’ and reemerged with Tantric rituals.

*Guest worship and pūjā*

Another important aspect of the form of ritual is that it originally (in the Rg Veda) had the form of guest worship. This feature has been well known ever since Paul Thieme’s (1971) study. Such relationships of a host with a guest are governed by a set of rules based on mutual acceptance and trust; ‘trust, belief’ is called śṛāddha in Sanskrit. It is not surprising, then, that this term is central in the relation between humans and between humans and either gods or ancestors. Vedic rituals work only if this relationship of trust exists (KāthU 1.2; RV 10.151). In the post-Ṛgvedic period the meaning is further narrowed to ‘trust in the efficacy of the ritual’ (Köhler 1972). The main ritual of ancestor worship, śṛāddha, is but a derivative of the term: ‘that which is related to trust,’ for without the trust of the ancestors in their descendants’ faithfulness in carrying out these rites they would go hungry in the next world, just as the gods would without Vedic sacrifice. Among humans, the term for guest friendship, aryaman, is derived, rather artificially, from ary-, ‘hospitable,’ (and ari, ‘stranger’), the etymology of the self-designation of Iranians and Vedic Hindus, the Āryas. The concept of hospitality, thus, was crucial for the self-image of Vedic Hindus, and they wanted to treat their gods in the same fashion.

In short, the Vedic gods are ceremoniously invited (āvahana) to the offering ground (vedi), seated on the grass strewn around the fires (barhiṣ), feasted with a meal (haviṣ) of food and drink, which is accompanied by poems, some of which are sung (stotra), lauding them and their great deeds (mantra, śastra). The gods are then sent off—until next time. The parting gift, however, is given to the priest (as dakṣinā), not to the departing guests.

This might sound like a description of a modern pūjā; the basic structure, in fact, is the same, and it is even sometimes recognized as a structure of guest friendship by modern Hindus (Östör 1982). Though a pūjā can comprise 16 or 36, in Bhaktapur even 60 (639), sets of actions, its most basic structure still is: first, āvahana (‘driving here,’ or even ākārṣaṇa, ‘drawing close,’ in Tantra); second, worship with food (stotra/stuti), and the giving of a gift; and third, visarjana, the ‘sending away’ ceremony. The return gift of the gods, the ucchiṣṭa/prasāda, is applied by the performer of the pūjā, be it a private person or a priest, in the form of a tilaka on the forehead of the worshipper. In accordance with one possible etymology of the word pūjā (Mayrhofer 1953–80), the unstudied history of this act seems to go back to a smearing of the blood of the
victim (Witzel n.d.a.). Interestingly, the very word is not, as has often been supposed, a post-Vedic loan or innovation; it is attested in the \textit{Rg Veda} (Witzel 1980b), though in an unclear context.

The guest or the god is supposed to return the favor by a counter-invitation (to heaven) or by a more substantial return gift (rain, for example, or children). Even then, the cycle of giving and taking is kept in progress, as the exact amount of gift and counter-gift is difficult to measure and evaluate. Humans give, the gods give back, to a degree, and the humans have to give again. The Stone Age mentality (Sahlins 1972) of \textit{dō ut dēs} (‘I give, so that you give’) applies to the \textit{Veda} (\textit{dehi me, dadāmi te}, ‘give me, I give you’; TS 1.8.4.1, VS 3.50) and modern \textit{pujā} as well.

Finally, both Rgvedic ritual and modern \textit{pujā} work within the framework of microcosm and macrocosm. This universe, however, is limited. Though it comprises the gods (Vedic: Deva, Āditya; Epic: Sura) and the antigods (Vedic: Asura; Epic: Daitya), this universe does not comprise nonbeings (\textit{asat}) which is described as \textit{nirṛti}, ‘state without order, \textit{ṛti}/\textit{ṛta}.’ In contrast, the Vedic (and Hindu) universe are governed by a certain underlying order. This is the Vedic \textit{ṛta}, the \textit{active} force of truth (as opposed to the active force of untruth, \textit{druḥ}, ‘deceit’). All gods and their actions as well as all humans and their actions are governed by this force, and only because of \textit{ṛta} the \textit{Rg Veda} says, the rivers flow, the sun moves in its paths, and so on. In the post-Vedic period this is replaced by \textit{dharma} which has quite similar functions. Our universe is one governed by \textit{dharma}, even if the ‘amount’ of \textit{dharma} has been decreasing in the present Kali age, and kings and gods constantly have to work at slowing down the rate of decrease. The same holds for the various classes of citizens of Bhaktapur (395f). Even then, nothing exists outside this oikumenical and civic cosmos. In the Vedic period the amorphous \textit{outside} was called \textit{nirṛti}. It was a realm of absolute destruction, of perpetual darkness, without food and drink, without children—in short, without all that made life livable for a Vedic Hindu. This negative concept, however, is not a ‘hell’ since it was reserved not for those who had committed \textit{morally} bad actions (killing of humans, for instance) but for those who went against everything that supported the Vedic \textit{oikumene}: killing of Brāhmaṇs (the transmitters of poetry), cows (the symbol of poetry themselves [Witzel 1991]), (male) embryos (who perpetuate the family line). However, in post-Vedic Hinduism, with the development of the morally determined force of \textit{karma} and rebirth regulated by it, the role of \textit{nirṛti} has been taken over by the various types of hell to which one is consigned according to the fruit of one’s deeds in this world. Nirṛti, therefore, has become an intracosmic ‘deity’ of the inauspicious southwestern direction and now is the daughter of Adharma (‘non-Dharma’) and the mother of Naraka (‘hell’).
A certain amount of historical transformation, thus, is seen in the most basic concepts as well as in the content of these concepts that have withstood the three millennia since our earliest texts.  

**Historical transformations**

The solemn Rgvedic guest worship of the gods carried out by a priestly class is perpetuated in pūjā by the same priests (638f) as well as by private people of all classes (often women) at home and at various temples (636f). The period between the Rg Veda and the Epic texts saw, first, the development of the Vedic Śrauta ritual with its obfuscation of killing and the shift of the 'guilt' inherent in killing to special assistant priests (like the Śamitars, the 'pacifiers'), expressed through the myth of the priests and the healers of the gods, the Aśvins, who substitute a horse head for the head of a human (Witzel 1987b, cf. 1987c). It is notable that, in the same vein, the modern Bhaktapur Rājopādhyāya Brāhmaṇs, who occasionally carry out some nonviolent Vedic rituals, such as the daily Agnihotra and the fortnightly Dārsapauṇamāsa, still make frequent use of lower-class 'assistant priests,' the Ācājus (Karmācāryas), when it comes to blood sacrifice (329), though not always in Tantric rituals (329).

After the hiding of violence in Vedic rituals and the complete shunning of such rites by the anti-ritual stance of Jainas and early Buddhists (DN 4.22ff; 5), the older traditions have reasserted themselves in the originally antinomian Tantra on two levels. On the one hand, the late Vedic tendency to interiorize the ritual actions, so much so that even breathing is regarded as offering into the (internal) fires, is very dominant in Tantra: all ritual activity is seen as an inner process (antaryāga), for example, the joining of the idā and pingalā veins into the uttāravahinī vein at the navel is used to imagine a ritual bath of the adept at this sacred confluence, like the prominent one of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā. On the other hand, the same rituals are also carried out outside the body, in a ritual enclosure, at a temple, or in an open natural surrounding (including, in Nepal, all of the Kathmandu Valley) (Witzel 1992).

While the aim of such Tantric rituals is 'self-realization,' they are supposed to produce supernatural powers (siddhi). Some adepts may perform Tantric rituals simply to achieve such supernatural faculties, just as Vedic (and post-Vedic) rituals could be performed to produce certain meticulously specified effects. They may include, as the Maṇjuśrīmūlakapla, a Buddhist Tantric text, specifies, the gaining of a dināra, 'gold piece,' of three dināras—or of the king’s daughter.

Apart from the initial interiorization and the subsequent expansion into public ritual, Tantra has also given rise to often violent rituals. They involve the dangerous deities who in Bhaktapur protect the city from the dangerous outside (for
example, the Mātrkās; 154f, 166ff, 229ff). Their equally dangerous pūjās usually involve animal sacrifice (323ff) and, it seems, occasionally even human sacrifice (331): exactly what the Vedic gods originally wanted. Now their Tantric reincarnations can gorge themselves on the blood and flesh of still living victims.

In a similar way, the simple form of guest worship, pūjā, has reasserted itself, even among the Buddhists. Nevertheless, in all these cases, both Buddhists and Hindu rituals have undergone considerable 'Brāhmanization' and have become, in the process, as complicated as the Vedic Śrauta ritual, especially in the long drawn-out Purānic/Tantric fire rituals (Witzel 1984, 1992). While this may apply to the outward form, the meaning of these Tantric rituals usually is entirely spiritual: unification with the god worshipped, or immersion in śīnyatā in the Buddhist version. The distinction between an inner experience (antaryāga) and an outward ritual (bahirityāga) applies in both cases.

In short, what we can now observe in Bhaktapur are various levels of complication of the old rituals of guest friendship. First, there are the domestic pūjās, often executed by the women of the household (636–38). They are fairly simple affairs which slightly embellish the old, main structure of invitation, worship, and sending-off. Then there are the more complex Brähmanized forms of domestic pūjās (638ff) which must be carried out by a priest. They can be very elaborate, up to 60 stages, and require up to 200 ritual items for their performance (639). Historically speaking, this is a sort of re-Śrautification of a simple pūjā performed by a householder or his wife, just as a simple offering into the domestic fire was enormously enlarged in scope in the Vedic Śrauta ritual and, subsequently, even in the Vedic domestic (grhya) ritual. The same cycle of Brähmanization can be observed in the development of an originally private Tantric pūjā into the enormous public rites held for the Malla kings or the modern citizens of Bhaktapur.

Apart from the domestic pūjās, there are the well-known pūjās carried out by the priests at various temples. Like the domestic forms, they can be rather simple affairs or very elaborate ones; their Tantric versions are usually held in secret, in the upper-floor Agaṃ ('secret') worship rooms which are not open to the public. Many pūjās involving animal sacrifices are mostly carried out by the non-Brähman Karmācārya priests (329). In all such rites, except for some Tantric rituals in Agaṃ, the Newari-speaking (Rājopādhyāya) Brāhmans try to keep away in order to preserve their ritual purity (329), even though they have adapted their traditional rituals to local conditions and participate at certain levels in local rituals and festivals. It is notable, at any rate, that, among the Newars, women and the lower classes of the population are more involved even in solemn rituals (Witzel 1992) than elsewhere in South Asia (cf. 120–25). (A comparison with the historically somewhat similar but neglected situation in
Bali may be instructive.)

The scope of the pūjās ranges from daily guest worship of the household gods or a particular god to seasonal and yearly rituals which reflect the same concerns that were visible in the Vedic period: to keep the cycle of the year and the seasons, the phases of the moon, and the course of the sun intact; and to ensure rain, an increase of progeny, cattle, agricultural products, and personal health, and, finally, a way to heaven. In Bhaktapur the cyclical aspect, though present in some pūjās (the Navānna Īṣṭī, for example, at the Aṃga in Patan), is prominently expressed by festivals involving parts or all of the city. The rituals of Bhaktapur are part of the civic space of the town, encompassed by its processional path and its outer circle of protective Mātrikās (154f). They take their special form in the ‘dance of symbols’ (401ff) and in the multitude of festivals (there are some 80 festivals a year; 643ff).

Festivals

Indeed, we know little about festivals in the Vedic period. What we can discern are elements of festivals that have been inserted into—and thus domesticated by—the Śrauta ritual of the post-Rgvedic period. They include the ‘hunting expedition’ during the Soma ritual, the violent exchange between the buyer and the seller of Soma, and the enigmatic Kurūṇāṃ Kaunta and Kuntāpa rituals. The most obvious example perhaps is the Mahāvṛata Day, just before the Vedic New Year. This includes chariot races and bow-shooting by men, a great din of music, singing, and dancing by women, and ritualized word fights and copulation (see below). A lot of what we would call festivals reemerged in the Epic and Purānic texts. They often provide catalogues like the one by Levy given for Bhaktapur. Later, these rituals were supplemented by rituals involving various Tantric deities, some as recently as 250 years ago, for example, by the Malla kings of Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, or Patan.

The Vedic carnival of Mahāvṛata, thus, is replaced by those during the Purānic Holī festival or the medieval Nepalese Gai Jātrā, Bisket Jātrā, and Indra Jātrā festivals (see below). Some Tantric semi-public rituals such as the Cakra Pūjā have been supplanted by private Rājopādhyāyas, or more innocuous public rituals such as the Kaṇphaṭa Cakra Pūjā along the rims of the Valley.

MEDIATORS, SPACE, AND TIME

I can mention only briefly the changing role of priests as mediators between the
microcosm and the macrocosm and the role of space and time.

Mediators

In the early Vedic period the functions of priests and poets who composed hymns to be used in ritual are not always clearly distinguishable. Certain priests are, however, described as purohita, literally ‘placed in front’ of the offering ground or the sponsor of the ritual, the yajamāna. Both Agni, who is addressed as such, and the ‘house priest’ protect the sponsor from the forces of darkness and evil, and both establish a link to the gods. In a text such as the (unfortunately not well-dateable) ‘appendix’ (pariśīṣṭa) to the Atharva Veda, the role of the purohita is clearly specified as being the priest of the king. The protective role of the house priest continues to this day; the purohita still is a hereditary figure and remains attached to a certain family. He continues to take care of the annual rituals of the family and the individual rites of passage. He is more specialized, thus, than the other Brāhmaṇs who may pursue various sorts of professions. At the same time he always has been in a slightly lower social position than his fellow Brāhmaṇs as he must take up work not only with the Brāhmaṇs but also with the members of the other two Ārya classes, the Kṣatriyas and the Vaiṣyās, who often treat him as an employee. His theoretical dominance as a member of the first class, thus, has always been compromised by his dependence on the two lower classes. The Brāhmaṇs tried to camouflage this during the Vedic period by stressing not only the close co-operation between the two highest classes (brahma-kṣatra; JB 1.287; Rau 1954: 36) in exploiting and dominating the Vaiṣyās and the Śūdras but also their superiority by declaring Soma their own king in the public installation ceremony of the king. Social reality has always been as varied as it is today.

The role of, approximately, one hundred Newari-speaking Brāhmaṇ families in the communities of the Kathmandu Valley has been similar. Theoretically they have always stood at the top of the social pyramid (Witzel 1980a),24 have acted as powerful spiritual advisors to the kings (such as the famous Tantric Viśvanātha of seventeenth-century Patan), and have always been the main priests of the royal tutelary Tantric deities (such as Taleju). At the same time, though, they have shared the fate of all ‘employed priests’—of being regarded as mere servants. In the case of the Newari-speaking Rājopādhyāyas, however, this threat to status has been mitigated by their restricted numbers: the several hundred thousand Hindu Newars have always depended on the services of a few hundred Rājopādhyāya Brāhmaṇs for their domestic rituals, and this fact has put them in a stronger competitive and economic position than that of their (Nepali-speaking) Kumai, Maithila, and Purbe brethren.
Time

Time, in the Vedic period, is closely linked to the year and its changing seasons, the course of the sun, and the waxing and waning of the moon. The most important Vedic rituals are, thus, tied to the liminal points in the course of the year. The dangerous ‘joints’ (parvan) of dawn and dusk (Agnihotra ritual), of new and full moon (Dārsapaurṇamāsa), of three seasons (winter, summer, and fall), and of new year (Mahāvrata, Śunāṣṭīṛya, Soma ritual) are marked by the great, solemn transitional rituals of the Śrauta system; they function, as it were, as rites of passage of the year. They are intended to keep the sun moving beyond the liminal points in the morning and the evening, the seasons, or the dangerous winter solstice. The importance of the yearly cycle in nature is stressed by the ‘theological’ identification of the year with the ritual, the universal creator-god Prajāpati, and the sponsor of the ritual. The year is not only a complete cycle but also a symbol of the whole (sarvam), the universe which encompasses time and space. Only occasionally do we also hear of larger units of five years (based on astronomical features such as the full moon on the New Year Day) and perhaps even of still larger units, ‘eras’ (yuga).

In post-Vedic Hinduism this system is maintained but built into a grand scheme of repetitive, reverting cycles of thousands of years (Kirfel 1967). Against the background of these eons found in the texts we often lose sight of the smaller annual cycle, which is more important for the citizens of Bhaktapur, and of linear time (inside a particular Yuga), which is so important for the Newars (and other Hindus) that they kept detailed diaries (ṭhyāsaphu) about the occurrences during the reigns of various kings and of personal data (births, for instance, or deaths in the family). These ‘chronicles’ are a neglected feature in Hindu historiography (Witzel 1990). Yet, apart from such general observations, the main features of observed and marked time remain that of the year which is permeated by seasonal, monthly, and fortnightly festivals of a very complex nature (see below) and that of incidental festivals devoted to a particular deity, for instance, the birthday of Kṛṣṇa. The main features of the year, on the other hand, are still marked by major festivals such as the New Year and by the beginning and end of the monsoon season.

Space

The sacred, extraterrestrial Vedic ritual was clearly set off from its nonsacred surroundings by demarcating lines such as the Vedi and (in more complicated rituals) the Mahāvedi. The area marked by the three fires actually represented the universe, and the priests traversing this ground as ‘gods on earth’ are clearly
described as ascending to heaven (the square āhavanīya fire) and returning from it to earth (the round gārpapatya fire). The post-Vedic temple, as the perpetual house of a particular god (devagrha, Newari dyāḥchein; cf. Kramrisch 1976), is equally well marked off against its surroundings by its walls; especially well known is the south Indian system with its concentric walls surrounding the temple itself.

The sacred space involving the mesocosmic function of festivals, however, is more complex. The various festivals involve parts of Bhaktapur (local Gaṇeśa, for example, or Luku Dyaḥ), the whole town (Bisket Jātrā), or the whole kingdom (Navadurgā) and all its citizens. During festivals parts or all of Bhaktapur become for a limited period of time sacred space and sacred time. A Vetāla on the main street is stepped on every day but becomes a god on certain festival days. Certain low-caste persons are incarnations of the goddess for days or parts of the year. Still, the city as such is separated from the dangerous outside (and from its outcasts), just as the Vedic offering ground, by a clear demarcating line. In a Hindu city this is usually the circumambulation path (although this is problematic for Bhaktapur; see 163, 199) around the city proper (pradakṣiṇāpatha) and the circle of Mārkās further outside (154f). (Some additional features involve the whole of the Valley or all of the subcontinent, jambudvīpa [Gutschow 1982].)

In that sense, the Vedic distinction between grāma, ‘settlement,’ and aranya, ‘wilderness,’ is maintained. Aranța (not ‘forest’) is the area ‘from where one can no longer see the roofs of the settlement’ (TA 2.11). It is dangerous and full of threats. Human ‘others’ (for example, the Nišāda aboriginals called Dasyus; JB 2.183–84) and the demons (the Aranyāṇi Goddess; RV 10.146) dwell there; one goes home at nightfall so as not to spend the night in this dark and dangerous area—just as a Newar town shuts its gates at night against similar dangers from the outside and others (156ff). The distinction between a town surrounded by a processional path, ‘pradakṣiṇāpatha,’ (contrast 163, 199) (and, at times, also by a wall) and the surrounding countryside is maintained in legends referring to the areas in front of its gates as haunted at night by spirits of all sorts.

Life and its accompanying rituals and festivals still revolve around the two axes of space and time, and they are interlinked and interwoven with a multitude of rituals and festivals, the dance of symbols that is the major feature of Levy’s book. The main functions of the festivals of Bhaktapur are similar to that of the Vedic rituals. They seek to establish a link between humans and gods and to use this to keep the civic cosmos intact—for the time being or for another year. I will briefly discuss one example of the latter sort, the various forms of Indra Jātrā, as it lends itself to a historical and structural analysis since it has roots in
the Vedic texts (and perhaps even beyond).

**THE DANCE OF SYMBOLS IN INDRA JĀṬRĀ**

*Indra Jāṭrā and Bisket Jāṭrā*

The Indra/Bisket festival has a long history, going back all the way to the raising of Indra’s pole in the Vedic Indradhvaja ritual. The discussion is further complicated when taking the Kathmandu and Bhaktapur variants of the Indra festival into account. As Levy remarks, ‘some of the elements in Kathmandu’s focal Indra Jāṭrā are moved in Bhaktapur to other times of the year and... amalgamated into Bhaktapur’s own major and focal festivals’ (457; emphasis in original). Indeed much of what is centered around Kathmandu’s Indra Jāṭrā in September (Bhādrapada, autumn equinox) is arranged around Bhaktapur’s Bisket (Biskāh) Jāṭrā in March (Caitra, vernal equinox). I cannot go here into the difficult question of the history of the New Year festival in India which is sometimes at the winter solstice, sometimes at the eighth day after the winter solstice (ekāṣṭakā), sometimes at the vernal equinox, sometimes at the autumn equinox, sometimes in the case of Bhaktapur’s New Year date, in the month of Kārttika (late October), or sometimes, as in old Kashmir, during the full moon of Kārttika. It may be pointed out, however, that these shifts have some connection with the reordering of time according to a different subsistence calendar (pastoral, non-monsoonal in the Veda, agricultural, monsoonal in later times; see Kuiper 1979). Levy (492) highlights, among other items, the solar aspect of the Bisket festival at the vernal equinox, the east-west alignment of the Bhairava and Bhadraṅgī chariots, and the east-west axis of the raising and lowering of the pole.

The various elements that link the Vedic and Bhaktapur festivals include the following.

*Indradhvaja*

The Vedic Indra festival, Indradhvaja, was characterized by the raising of a pole symbolizing Indra, the demiurge, who, as soon as he was born, raised heaven with his outstretched arms. A remnant of this may be seen in the strange form of the Indra (Yasim) Pole in Bisket Jāṭrā, with its cross bar (476ff), which has received a new interpretation in Bhaktapur. Indra, the Hindu Atlas, is also a symbol of royalty, fromṚgvedic times. The king in the Vedic inauguration ceremony (*abhiṣeka*) has to stand up, firmly, just like Indra (RV 10.173). The raising
and lowering of the pole is the climax of Bisket Jātrā and takes the co-operation of many people (482); it marks the liminal point at the end of the old year and the beginning of the new.

Indradhvaja was popular in Vedic (Kauś 140.3, 7.9; PGS 2.15), Epic (Mbh 5.58.15, 6.114.84; Rām 2.71.9), and medieval times (BrhS 42.61; NP 726f). Nowadays it is, apart from Nepal, preserved only in Kashmir as a minor pūjā at home (under the name Indra Bah from Indradvādaśī, the twelfth day of Bhādrapada ūkla; cf. Einoo 1994: 138, 196). In Bhaktapur, the pole, the Yasim deity (467ff; 649 [22]) is raised on the Yasim Field near the Hanumante River, a 'vaguely defined boundary area' (476) which befits its liminal function at the end of a year; note that the field is near the houses of the outcast Pođe (84) who live just outside the town boundaries, east of the Yasim Field.

**Bisket Jātrā and the Veda**

In Bhaktapur, the raising of the pole and the accompanying competitions closely follow the age-old pattern of Indo-European (and other) New Year festivals. The Vedic New Year was characterized by a series of carnival events and sportive competitions. The latter included chariot races imitating and aiding the sun in its turning around the difficult solstice point and bow shooting at a white skin (representing the sun) on a scaffold which was meant to nudge the sun on its path. The former included a verbal 'contest' between a sexually abstinent Vedic student and a prostitute, restricted to shouting abuse at each other, while, just as in ancient Babylonic New Year rites (cf. the Enuma Eliš myth), actual intercourse followed in a hut on the edge of the offering ground, carried out by a prostitute and a 'foreigner,' a Māgadha man.

The sexual element is represented in Bhaktapur by Bhairava (always a liminal if not a transgressional deity) and his frightening consort Bhadrakāli. It is seen in the two banners hanging from the Yasim Pole whose fluttering in the wind is said to represent intercourse of their ultimate prototypes, Śiva and Śakti, while that of the ropes tied to the top of the pole represent intercourse between Bhairava and Bhadrakāli (478). This interpretation is repeated at the lowering of the pole (485). It is also significant to note that the male/female moieties of the universe, represented by Bhairava and Bhadrakāli, are placed west (looking east) and east (looking west) of the Cyāsi Marṇdāp, facing each other. Notably, these two deities are always kept near each other during the festival, but they are not united on a single chariot or building (482). They do, however, make dramatic contact on the fifth day, after the beginning of the new year: on the Gāhīhti Square the Bhairava and Bhadrakāli chariots crash into each other three times, which is thought of as representing intercourse (486). Perhaps it is not fortuitous
that these two representatives of the world of the gods are also depicted, at this moment, as having quarreled. This may reflect the often misunderstood relationship in Vedic times between Indra and his wife Indrāṇī, at this liminal point in time, when she had been angered by the aggression of Indra’s oversexed friend, the ‘bull-monkey’ Vṛṣākapi (RV 10.86; with the—ironic—refrain ‘Higher than all is Indra’). Bhadra-kālī (like Indrāṇī) is appeased by her male partner after the quarrel—and significantly the final stanza of the Ṛgvedic hymn speaks of abundance of children, just as some in Bhaktapur hope to get male children by the magic of picking up leaves from the pole when it is lowered. Just as in the Ṛgvedic hymn all (Vṛṣākapi included) return home peacefully, so does Bhadra-kālī now visit her husband’s home at the Taumāḍhi Square (488; see also Witzel 1997b). It is interesting to note that on the same day, the Saṃkrānti Day, when the lowering of the pole marks the beginning of a new solar year not only the pole (representing Indra in Vedic interpretation) but also Indra himself and his otherwise (in Bhaktapur) rather insignificant wife Indrāṇī (‘Mrs. Indra’) are the focus of some rituals (484). In Bhaktapur’s pantheon, Indrāṇī is at other times of the year just one of the Aṣṭamāṭkā Goddesses (situated in the north-west of the town).

While the Bhaktapur festival involves a number of dangerous deities, the Vedic ritual does so only in its mythic form: it is based on the yearly struggle between the Devas and their perpetual rivals, the Asuras. At the same time, it also involves a struggle, repeated since cosmogonic times, between Indra and Varūṇa. This has usually been taken as a purely cosmogonical trait, but it may very well have been repeated on the level of the gods in the sexually very explicit, often comical, four-sided quarrel between Indra and his wife Indrāṇī and between the Vṛṣākapi and his wife Vṛṣākapāyī (RV 10.86). The conflict, started with an assault by Vṛṣākapi on Indrāṇī, is solved in the end (see below). Vṛṣākapi shares some of the comic, trickster-like characteristics of Vidūṣaka of a Sanskrit drama which indeed has cosmogonic origins (see Kuiper 1979). In the Vedic ritual the deities are impersonated by human representatives: the Devas by the Brāhmaṇs (‘gods on earth,’ the offering ground) or partially by a Vedic student (the Brahmacārin) or a king; and the Asuras by their equivalent in human society, the Śūdras and other outsiders, such as a prostitute or a foreign Māgadha man. Still, to echo Levy, again, ‘the “deities” at issue here, far below the surface and beyond anthropomorphic gods, are order and chaos’ (496).

In Bhaktapur, the myths and tales attached to the New Year pole repeat the old motifs of not only the semi-divine Nāginī and her human royal husband (478–49) but also the cut-off head of a deity, equally well known from Vedic times (479–80). While this latter motif is commonplace in its stark form of the ‘lost head of the sacrifice’ which, even according to the Ṛg Veda, originally could
have meant only a real human head (Heesterman 1985; Witzel 1987b), there is also a sanitized version where the head of Dadhyañc is cut off by the Aśvin Gods, divine representatives of the main ‘working’ priests of Vedic ritual, the Adhvaryus, who substitute the head of a horse.\(^{31}\) This is the charter myth of the Vedic Śrauta ritual (Witzel 1987b), typical for its obfuscation of ritual violence and its further transfer to scapegoat-like parapriests (the Śamitars, parallel to the Bhaktapur’s Ācājus).

All these features can be rediscovered in the rituals surrounding Bhairava. There is the legend, for instance, of Bhairava having sunk into the ground and being beheaded by his wife at the Gāhīti Square (486), the exact location where the Bhairava and Bhadrakāli chariots now crash into each other on the fifth day of the festival, representing intercourse of the so far carefully separated deities. This is preceded by a series of competitions: In Bhaktapur the upper and lower town compete in dragging the Bhairava chariot to their part of the town after it had been placed on the dividing line between the two ritual city-halves at the Taḥmārhi Square (468). Note that the Malla king, now represented by his Rājopādhyāya Brāhmaṇ priest carrying the royal sword, sits on the chariot (469). In Vedic times, the king himself rode in the chariot. The two moieties of society are well represented in the Vedic ritual as well, though here it is a Brāhmaṇ, as the representative of the three higher classes, and a Śūdra, who—only at this moment—has the liberty to accuse the Brāhmaṇ of having robbed the lower class of its wealth. In Bhaktapur, in contrast, society is divided, at this moment, not according to its stratification but according to its spatial extension.

The ensuing tug-of-war often results in bloody heads (472f), and a mood of anxiety is present. Just as the ‘struggle with the chariot is the major manifestation in Bhaktapur’s annual calendar of...conflict’ (473), so is the Brāhmaṇ-Śūdra confrontation the major, indeed the only, open conflict allowed in the course of the Vedic year. In both cases the liminality of the closing days of the year with the dissolution of time and society are emphasized. This is expressed in Bhaktapur at the time of taking down the pole (beginning of the new year) when prasāda is given directly by assistant priests to the untouchable Pođe surrounding the Bhairava chariot (486). It is also at this moment that the farmers (as representatives of ‘proper’ society) struggle with the Pođe in which direction the Bhairava chariot is to be drawn. Just as the Vedic Brāhmaṇ always overcomes the Śūdra in pulling at a round skin representing the sun, so do the Jyāpu farmers always succeed in pulling the chariot away from the Pođe into the city proper (486).

While these actions are carefully orchestrated in Bhaktapur to include all sections of the sacred geography of town space and its deities, this could not be done in the more amorphous geographical structure of the Vedic half-nomadic
settlement. Still, the Vedic offering ground has its own carefully laid out plan, representing the macrocosmic structure (sun, moon, earth): many of the actions, including the carefully orchestrated verbal fight and tug-of-war between a Vedic student and a prostitute, occur at the door to a hut in the middle of the offering ground and thus in sacred space. However, the tug-of-war between a Brähman and a Śūdra takes place on the boundary line, half inside and half outside the offering ground; and the actual intercourse between a prostitute and a Māgadha man happens, as we might expect, in a hut straddling the borderline of the offering ground. Obviously, the various regions of the universe and its two groups of deities as well as all sections of society are involved in the Mahāvrata New Year ritual, just as they are in Bisket Jātrā.

Levy, while clearly stressing the points of conflict arising at this time of the year, also underlines the restrained manner in which these conflicts are depicted and enacted (494). The same may be said about the Vedic New Year. Though people push, tear, and shout at each other, these are well-orchestrated actions with ‘set lines’—and the existing order always wins. In the Vedic New Year, Mahāvrata, the various actors often sing, play music, recite, and act at the same time on the same offering ground. Such multimedia actions indeed ‘are dynamic, and can express relations, conflicts, dilemmas, resolutions and their failures; in short, they have the quality of narrative and drama’ and ‘combine to say something...to capture and hold the attention of the narrative’s audience’ (494). These actors, in Bhaktapur’s case, are assembled on Bhairava’s chariot or surround the chariot to pull it (495), while, in Vedic times, they (even the prostitute and the foreign Māgadha man) assembled on the sacrificial ground or immediately next to it for the chariot race, where they acted more or less simultaneously. While the two halves of the city are stressed in Bhaktapur, it is the two dichotomous macrosegments of society, the Āryas and the Śūdras, which act in the Veda.

These conflicts are, thus, only temporarily resolved. The Devas and the Asuras are constantly (or, rather, periodically) in conflict. The Asuras (or the Śūdras) are chased away and overcome, for the time being. The problem will arise again. ‘It will all need to be repeated yet again in each revolving year’ (499).

The underlying myth—and in South Asia, at least, myth and ritual always proceed together very closely—speaks in quasi-cosmological terms about the founding of Bhaktapur and also for the origins of Vedic society and oikumene. The difference here is between a general location (in Punjab, Kurukshetra, or anywhere in north India) in the case of the Veda and a specific geographical location in the case of Bhaktapur. This difference cannot be bridged. Vedic myth and ritual are ‘transportable,’ but Bhaktapur’s are not; they are too specifically local. Even the surrounding towns (Kathmandu, Patan, Thimi, and so forth) have
their own versions of this festival and its legends.

Levy in his interpretation of the festival (494) stresses its complexity which is well structured and requires the participation of all segments of the town’s population. Both Bhaktapur and the Vedic New Year share this complexity and focus. Indeed, it is, uncharacteristically, the Mahāvrata Day which is (next to the royal inauguration, Rājasūya, modern Rājyābhiṣeka; Witzel 1987a) marked by the participation of large segments of the population, while other Vedic rituals are more geared to individuals, households, or clans. To quote, conversely, Levy, Bisket is ‘about the city in itself, and not about one element of life in the city’ (494; emphasis in original).

Nevertheless, the king who plays a focal role in the chariot race at New Year is still present in the form of his sword (468) carried by a Kathmandu official. Though he is in Levy’s interpretation rather passive at this liminal time (493), his mythical counterpart, Indra, indeed acted in cosmogonic time but was fairly inactive, and apparently too weak, until structured ‘time,’ the New Year, began.

There is a dissimilarity between Vedic and modern Bhaktapur rituals, though. Levy calls it the rhetoric of the ritual actions involved (499). In the case of Bhaktapur, he stresses that danger exists when ‘marked symbolism’ collapses into real danger, for all actors in the drama are real-life persons: the king, the high-caste Brāhmans, the ‘true’ Bhairava (versus his copy image), and so on. They can all be endangered when the festival goes awry and the forces of disorder take over. Hardly so in the well-ordered world of Vedic ritual. Though I am not of the opinion that the old conflicts have been collapsed here into a sequence played out by one actor (Heesterman 1985), it is clear that the chance for a real conflict is very limited: In Mahāvrata, the Śūdra may pull too hard at the skin representing the sun and draw it outside the offering ground—but so what? Or he may not speak his prescribed (incidentally quite revealing) lines of complaint and launch into a tirade, but one man’s voice does not really count in the din of the performance! In all of this there is little physical danger to the gods, the king, the Brāhmans.

Nevertheless, the central message of these rituals is clear and similar in both cases: ‘admire and celebrate the civic order’ (499–500). We may add, especially for the Vedic case: ‘and the cosmic order.’ (This actually also holds for Bhaktapur when Bisket Jātrā is viewed as a solar New Year.) ‘That order may momentarily...sway and lurch, but when...[the populace] works together...and accepts the traditional directives of mesocosmic order, it will all hold together’ (500). ‘The main danger to civic order...is civic strife’ (500), which we may enlarge, in the Vedic case, to include the replica of human society and the civitas of the gods: the gods and the Asuras—not quite gods but not yet the obnoxious demons of later myth—have to find their balance, just as nature has to: the sun swings on
its pendulum between a southeastern rise (at winter solstice) and a northeastern rise (at summer solstice). For good reasons, this is symbolized by a Brāhmaṇ swinging on a giant swing in Bangkok (Wales 1931) or on a rather small one in the Mahāvrata ritual of the Vedic period.

In the preceding passages I have intentionally let Levy speak not only for Bhaktapur but also for the Vedic period, though he never intended it or may not have thought this possible. His analysis is so penetrating that it holds true, in a great number of cases, in comparable fashion even for the Vedic period in which the major rituals were structured, as I have repeatedly endeavored to show. In short, if my analysis is correct, this procedure is important not only because it reveals the resilience of the underlying structure of ‘Hinduism’ with its ever-changing appearances of myths and rituals but, conversely, also because it bears witness to the insights of Levy’s analysis of modern Bhaktapur’s rituals and festivals.

**Kathmandu and Bhaktapur**

Turning now to a few items in other cities’ enactment of Indra Jāṭrā in Nepal, we may note, to begin with, that even in Bhaktapur Bisket Jāṭrā has its faint echo in September with a number of small rites, some of which are integrated into the Kathmandu Indra Jāṭrā of September: Yama Dyaḥ Thānigu [59], Indrāṇī Jāṭrā [61], Yau Dyaḥ Punhi [62], and Pulu Kisi Haigu [65] (456ff). Note that the Indrāṇī festival is repeated even in Bhaktapur, though the September one is only of moderate importance (655). The two Indra Jāṭrās are mirror images of each other, including the fact that the Kathmandu and Bhaktapur poles are made of the ‘same kind of tree, gathered in the same place by members of Bhaktapur’s branch of the same thar’ (457). This coincidence is simply due to the fact that the Kathmandu ritual is of the vernal equinox/solar New Year, while the Bhaktapur ritual is of the fall equinox (thus preceding by two months the beginning of the Bhaktapur lunar New Year).

**Indra as rain god**

In Kathmandu, the autumnal Indra Jāṭrā is more prominent than that of the vernal equinox at the time of the solar New Year in March, the ‘small Dasai.’ A connection with the Vedic ritual is seen in the centrality of Indra, who is represented not only by the pole but, in myth and ritual, also by a small figure. Vedic Indra is, among other things, a god concerned with rain. According to a medieval myth, Indra was raining too much and was caught and imprisoned in a cage by the great Tantric Matsyendranātha. (In post-Vedic myths Indra has only
The elephant in Bhaktapur symbolism

One of the major rituals taking place in Bhaktapur during the eight days of the Kathmandu Indra Jātrā is Pulu Kisi Haigu. This is the often drunken procession of a model of an elephant, Indra’s vehicle, through town. The elephant is covered with the straw funeral mats (pulu) of the dead of the past year. Levy downplays the connection between the elephant and Indra and regards the festival as mainly connected with Yama, the lord of the dead, and their judge in the netherworld. Indeed, the Pulu Kisi Haigu Day is preceded by the Śmaśāna Bhañiladyah Jātrā Day [64], where a funeral mat representing Bhairava of the cremation grounds is carried around the town limits. This, in turn, is preceded, three days before, by Yau Dyaḥ Punhi, when lamps are set out to show the dead the way to heaven, and, another four days earlier, by Yamaḥ Dyaḥ Thāṅigu, when poles are erected in each ward representing Yama to protect people from death. Further, the elephant festival is immediately followed, five (or eleven) days later, by Dhalaṁ Salāṁ [66], in which all who have been dead more than two years (and have thus become members of the amorphous pitṛ group of ancestors) are worshipped and fed in a śrāddha ceremony by a river side; this is attended by large groups of mourners led by a Brāhmaṇ in their rituals. The whole half month after Yau Dyaḥ Punhi (corresponding to Newari Yaṁlāgā) is usually called pitṛpaka, that is, the half month of the ancestors.

The question rises: why, then, is an elephant used in the first place? I think because of its close relation to Yama and Indra in the Vedic texts: after all it is their father, Vivasvant or Mārtāṇḍa, a sun god, who had been born, or rather aborted, in the form of an undifferentiated ball or egg. (Mārtāṇḍa means ‘coming from a dead egg.’) The elephant, according to the Kātha Samhitā (11.6) and the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (3.1.3–4), is the remnant of the cuts made into this amorphous mass by the gods to give Mārtāṇḍa shape. The elephant, thus, is a
sort of ersedz father of the twins Indra and Yama, or perhaps their uncle. (Of course, in later Hinduism, the elephant, Airavant, was made the vehicle of Indra.34) The appearance of the Bhaktapur elephant covered with funeral mats is, therefore, no longer surprising. In fact, these mats may represent a second skin for the poor beast cut from the raw flesh of Mārtāṇḍa. Such a concept is not singular: the Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa (2.183–84) tells us that humans first had the skin of the cows and the cows that of the humans; they exchanged them since the poor cows could not stand the sun and the rain. At death, however, the deceased person is covered with the original skin, that of a cow, as a protection from the fire during cremation. In sum, the mythology and ritual of Indra and Yama are closely related, and some interaction in Bhaktapur is not really surprising. The interesting question to be asked is, of course, how could the medieval priests know of these? Were some vestiges of these myths known to them, or are they hidden behind some Epic and Purānic transformations?

Not surprisingly, now, the raising of the Indra Pole in Kathmandu happens on the same day that those of his twin brother Yama are erected in many of Bhaktapur’s twāhs, and all are left standing for eight days (458 [59]). Indra’s wife, Indrāṇī, is then taken through Bhaktapur to the Ta Pukhū Pond and left out for worship [61]. Note again that this has an echo in Bisket Jātrā. But it takes on special importance when we take a closer look at one of the main events during the Kathmandu Indra Jātrā, the appearance of the ‘main’ Kumārī and her two small ‘brothers’ and their procession on a larger and smaller chariot through the town, not unlike that of Bhairava and Bhadrakālī (but in reverse importance in Kathmandu).35

The role of Kumārī

The cult of the Living Goddess, Kumārī, is, by and large, medieval. The oldest specimens of Kumārī Tantra (cf. Allen 1975) are written on paper and date back only to the seventeenth century. However, there is a Kumārī pūjā manuscript of 1420 BCE, and Kumārī pūjā is reported, centuries earlier, in the Kālikā Purāṇa, chapter 62 (cf. Toffin 1996: 71f).

Why this connection of Kumārī with Indra Jātrā and the king? The close connection between Devī and King Harisimha of Mithilā is visible, at least, since December 1324, when this last independent king of Mithilā, defeated by the Muslims, ‘entered the mountains.’ Legend has it that he conquered Bhaktapur, but the almost contemporary Gopālarājavanśāvalī states that he came only as far as Tinpatan in the Mahabharat Lekh and died there, while his wife continued up to Dolakha. It probably is due to intentional legend-making under the upstart King Jayasthiti Malla and his successors that the introduction of the Taleju cult
was attributed to Harisimha (for similar cases, see Witzel 1980a). In a version of 
this tale (Witzel 1976) that is more detailed than the one used by Levy (347), the 
introduction of Taleju is attributed to the year after Harisimha’s exile, during 
which the Goddess also allowed the consumption of buffalo meat.36 The text 
also gives a long fanciful history of Taleju (Tulajā) worship, dating back to 
Rāma’s time at Ayodhyā, Turyāpura, and Simanagara. Nevertheless, it is clear 
that since Malla times Taleju has been the protective deity of the Malla and Śaha 
dynasties and that she had had several older places of worship, even some 
whose deities were masculine.37

A typical Tantric form of Devī worship is thus linked to origins in Mithilā 
(just as many other Tantric gods are said to have come from Assam in still 
earlier periods). Still, her priests belong to the local Rājopādhyāya Brāhmaṇs;38 
interestingly, local Taleju priests of Bhaktapur trace their origin back to Kanya-
kubjā, some 600 years ago (Witzel 1976; cf. 347).

The close relationship between Devī and King Harisimha is perpetuated in 
medieval legend about the Malla kings of Kathmandu who were supposed to 
have had a daily meeting with Taleju, playing cards with her, until the conditions 
on which she had agreed to appear were betrayed, and she disappeared forever 
(see Allen 1975) but agreed to periodically possess and manifest herself and 
speak through a prepubescent Vajrācārya girl who becomes ‘the Living 
Goddess,’ Kumārī. We do not know, of course, the exact nature of the relation 
between the Malla kings and Devī, but from comparable sources it should be 
clear that this also involved sexual tension or relationship. Nowadays this ten-
sion is specially emphasized by the fact that the female side is represented by a 
young, prepubescent girl, while in the case of the king, male potency is stressed 
(as, for instance, in Rājyābhiṣeka). As is well known, Kumārī has to give up her 
position as soon as her first menses set in. The wish of such a young girl for a 
husband has, however, already been highlighted in the famous Apālā hymn of 
the Rg Veda (8.91; Schmidt 1987). Apālā, which means ‘unprotected,’ is a self-
explanatory name for an unmarried young woman. It can also stand for ‘earth,’ 
which is Apālā’s position as the prospective wife of Indra, the king of the gods, 
in a marriage modeled on the primordial union of Father Heaven and Mother 
Earth. In the same fashion, a human king, too, is the husband of the earth, again, 
a concept modeled on the divine marriage, in this case, the well-known Epic 
myth concerning Prthu/Pṛthi/Pṛthi Vainya and the earth (cf. RV 1.112.15, 8.9.10, 
10.148.5). Similar relationships are not uncommon in the Rg Vedic dialogue 
hymns (Witzel 1997b).

We have already seen that Indra and Indrāni (and their opponents Vṛṣākapi 
and Vṛṣākapāyī) make an appearance at the Vedic New Year. This is accompa-
nied by a strong sexual tension between Indrāni and Vṛṣākapi. It can be deduced
from the hymns that Indra has become unpopular, unworshipped, and weak before new year and that his ‘friend,’ the bull-monkey Vṛṣākapī uses the opportunity to assail Indrāṇī (Witzel 1997b). A new year atmosphere of sexual carnival has also been witnessed in some of the Indra Jātrā festivals, discussed above. It is structurally congruent that the state of the king in the Kathmandu Indra Jātrā corresponds to the weakened state of Indra just before new year and that he must receive new strength in one way or another. In the Rg Veda (10.86) this is achieved by a strongly charged verbal competition between the two wives, Indrāṇī and Vṛṣākapāyī. At the same time, the refrain of the hymn praises, not only ironically but also magically, Indra as the highest. This hymn is outrightly obscene, but such limited obscenity, as we have seen, is part and parcel of New Year festivals; in Babylonic as well as in Vedic New Year ritual actual sexual intercourse is prescribed.

Another reflection of the Vedic situation is that Kumārī is accompanied by her ‘two brothers,’ just as the king is accompanied by the queen. The relationship between the various divine and human actors can be described as follows: the queen has the same position as Indrāṇī, the wife of Indra, the king of the gods; Kumārī has the same ambiguous, semipromiscuous position as Vṛṣākapāyī in the Vedic myth. The human king holds the same position among humans as Indra among gods. The two ‘brothers’ of Kumārī, the auspicious Gaṇeśa and the terrifying Bhairava, are reflected by just one Vedic figure, the ‘bull-monkey’ Vṛṣākapī, companion of Vṛṣākapāyī. In fact, if we view the two brothers of Kumārī in light of the open relationships of Yama with Yamī or of Gandharvas with Apsarasas, it may be worth noting that Vṛṣākapī has two aspects as well: he is the well-liked friend of Indra, but he also assaults Indra’s wife during the latter’s weakness at the year-end. All these relations between gods and humans, gods and gods, and humans and humans seem to explore the contrasts and oppositions between ‘open’ sexual relations and marriage relations. In this brief investigation these kinds of relationships can only be hinted at; further detailed study is required.

There is no indication of this complicated relationship in the public performance of the Kathmandu Indra Jātrā. On the contrary, the encounter is one of the king (who once a year is solemnly reconfirmed in his power by publicly receiving a tilaka from Kumārī) with a virgin Devī (but potentially sexually dangerous woman of unclear social status). The two are, thus, separated for the whole year but meet once a year (just like Bhairava and Bhadrakālī at the Bhaktapur Bisket Jātrā) in a reversal of the normative Hindu roles of the sexes, the female partner dominating the male one. The meeting once a year has been a prominent point in several dialogue hymns and in Vedic and other, non-Indian myths:39 the archetypal story is that of the human ‘king’ Purūravas and the semi-divine Apsaras
Urvaśī who lived together, like the Malla king and Devī, for a number of years until they both were betrayed by their household members and thus were separated for good. Eventually the (demi-)gods took pity and allowed them to meet again, once a year: in the Veda (BŚŚ 18.44; ŚB 11.5.1) to procreate, and in modern Kathmandu for the king to regain prowess and power.

We do not know, of course, how the medieval priests conceived the idea of attaching the Kumārī festival to the old Indra Jātrā, which already had a large accretion of rites and multiple layers of interpretation. It is, however, important to note that they inserted it just where we might have expected, in the complex interrelation between Indra/king and Indra’s wife/Taleju and Kumārī, incarnation of the Goddess, at a liminal point in time, just before the beginning of another year with the festival of Devī’s victory over Mahiṣāsura. (In Kathmandu this encounter has been shifted, it seems, from spring to the fall equinox.) In other words, an old Vedic myth of a mortal son of the gods (Purūravas) and an immortal semi-divine Apsaras (Urvaśī) has been retold, again and again, and has been reenacted, again and again, in ritual disguise: from Mahāvrata Vedic New Year festival (with the interaction of a Brahmacārin with a prostitute and of a Māgadhā with a prostitute) to the various encounters of the god and goddess on their chariots (as in Bhaktapur) or that of a god incarnate, the ‘walking Viṣṇu,’ the Nepalese king and the incarnation of Devī, the Kathmandu ‘royal’ Kumārī.

**Indra Jātrā and the Vedic Indradhvaja ritual**

Finally, it is interesting to observe that Levy recognizes that the Bhaktapur rites, corresponding in time and partly in nature to the September ‘Indra Jātrā’ of Kathmandu, are at Bhaktapur, in contrast to Kathmandu, ‘not integrated. They seem...[only] fragments of what may have been once in Bhaktapur—and that is now elsewhere—a coherent set’ (462). The question arises: when and how? And how does this fall festival relate to the older New Year festival in spring (March) and the still older one about the time of winter solstice (January 1 or 6)? Since creation is always related to ‘the first dawn’ in Vedic India, one would assume a January date. Be this as it may, the various layers in Newari festivals make for a fascinating study of layers of meanings that are constantly changing and become reinterpreted through time. However, we can approach a history of these festivals, even when restricting the study to the Newar culture of the Kathmandu Valley, only after more variants from Kathmandu, Kirtipur, Panauti, Patan, and so on, will have been compared.

To summarize, while not all the details of the modern and medieval Bhaktapur rites and festivals can be called direct descendants of Vedic rituals, it is however clear that the medieval rituals reenact, often with new means (for
example, the pulling of the Bhairava chariot rather than a round skin), the ancient oppositions in the macrocosmic world of the gods (the Devas) and their adversaries (the Asuras) and in the microcosmic world of the humans (the three Ārya classes of Brāhmaṇ, Kṣatriya, and Vaiśya versus the outcast Śūdra). In addition, the sexual conflict between a human (king) and an immortal (Apsaras or Goddess) is a feature of the New Year ritual as well. The force of the king (of the gods, Indra, or of the humans, the Nepalese king) is reconstituted by their encounter. These conflicts, which break out at the liminal point of time, the New Year, are depicted by the mesocosmic Vedic ritual (yajña) and are especially visible and ‘graphic’ on its Mahāvrata Day. In the mesocosm of festivals and pūjās of medieval and modern Bhaktapur, they both are brought into a new balance when the dangerous period between the years, the tension between the sexes and the classes of society, has been overcome and (the old) order has been (re)established.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Levy’s Mesocosm not only is an incisive and cogent analysis of Bhaktapur’s Hinduism but also allows us to draw far-reaching conclusions about the nature and development of Hinduism and its many local variants, from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka and from Cutch to Bali.

We now begin to understand the complex relations between the realms of the gods and the humans that result in the bewildering mass of rituals and festivals of Hinduism in all its variants found all over South Asia. And we begin to understand how they are set in the parameters of sacred and profane space and time. Within this framework the functions of gods, humans, and the ‘dance of symbols’ linking them become clear, for what was in the seventies the premodern Hinduism of Bhaktapur and, by extension, for the archaic one of the Vedic period. With the fruits of Levy’s study, we can begin to establish meaningful links between the structures of Vedic, Epic/Purānic, and medieval/modern Hinduism since his well-considered analysis is based on careful observation and examination, accompanied and supported by a wealth of descriptive materials from an undisturbed form of traditional, quasi-medieval Hinduism.

With Levy’s Mesocosm as basis, we can observe Hinduism as it might (ceteris paribus) have looked ‘at the ground level’ in medieval India, tempered and changed as it may be by the ultimately ‘tribal’ nature of Newar High Culture. In this context, we should not forget the obvious Newar penchant for the performance and elaboration of rituals—that is, the expression of their culture and
social relations through rituals ranging from eating to lineage. We may add that this stress on rituals has been accompanied by little theoretical expression in philosophical or religious texts, except for a few medieval Newari and Sanskrit stories.41

It is another, separate task that cannot even be outlined here to separate such ‘tribal’ elements from ‘general’ Hinduism in the rest of India (where much of it is ‘tribal’ or, at least, local). For the time being we can take Levy’s description and analysis as a standard representation and interpretation of medieval Hinduism which is largely untempered by outside Muslim and British influences. And this is, as has been pointed out, another important item indicating the value of the book: we get a peep into medieval customs, rites—and beliefs—not through the eyes of a medieval Brâhman who composed or redacted normative texts but through the picture of the living relation between the people and their gods and the relationship of various groups of people among themselves.

Robert Levy will expand this analysis, I am sure, by a series of articles, preferably and ultimately collected in a book, which will investigate the psychological side of these customs and beliefs, from the lowest Pođe to the high-caste Râjopâ-dhyâyas. This is another task that has not yet been executed in comparative psychology, at least not with this particular perspective in mind. We are eagerly awaiting this new work, and may we express the hope to see smaller or larger pieces of it appearing over the next few years.

Notes

1. We cannot deal here with the problem of this grouping of a multitude of local and regional South Asian religions and sects under a general rubric of ‘Hinduism.’

2. There are, it is true, a few intelligent analyses such as those by Louis Dumont or Madeleine Biardeau; however, they have some flaws of their own: Dumont overstresses hierarchy and purity, Biardeau the eternal, quasi-unchanging nature of Hinduism.

3. Leaving aside, for example, other useful insights, such as Levy’s interviews of people at many representative levels of society.

4. ‘Many of Bhaktapur’s local forms of behavior (like its material artifacts) are of great historical and theoretical importance for South Asian studies….They are not immediately relevant for the kind of place Bhaktapur was at the time of the study…and are either neglected or treated summarily in this report’ (Levy 1990: 687n1).

5. For the self-interest of Brâhmans in the early and middle Vedic period, see Witzel 1997a.

6. Compare also the strong views Tamils hold with regard to the clash between predestination and fate and karma (see Keyes and Daniel 1983).

7. In all subsequent references to Mesocosm only the page number will be given.

8. These include the ‘debt’ (ṛta) to the gods and the ancestors due a ‘line of progeny’
(prajātantu) connecting the living humans to these progenitors, represented in an exchange of “food stuff” (ānna) between gods and humans and living humans and their ancestors in a 'generational contract' and between the various social levels of humans (332); and one's going to heaven (divamgata; 215, especially 442, cf. 223) and eventual return to earth.

9. For offerings to the birds at the time of ancestor worship, see Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra 2.14.19–20; Gobhila Grhya Sūtra 1.8; Khādīra Grhya Sūtra 2.1.26.

10. Except for the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa tales of churning the ocean which detail the underlying structure and conflict of the universe between gods and countergods, the Asuras.

11. ‘Three times per day’ (RV 10.95.5).

12. ‘I am difficult to obtain like the wind’ (RV 10.95.2).

13. For extra-Indian parallel forms, see Witzel 1998.

14. This wish (by now thoroughly internalized and not necessarily justified in these terms) is, of course, one of the reasons that so many female babies are aborted today.

15. The numbers in square brackets throughout this article are the numbers Levy uses to designate and locate individual festivals in Bhaktapur's annual festival cycle.

16. This has been reserved by him for another work, based on interviews.

17. Yajñā is interpreted as ‘sacrifice’ in earlier translations.

18. Megha, ‘cloud,’ is derived from mih, ‘to urinate.’ One says devo mehāti, ‘the god urinates/rains.’

19. Interestingly, McKim Marriot was referring to modern status relationships and did not take account of the much older Vedic evidence which underlines the same kind of relationship.

20. From Sanskrit yajamāna, ‘someone who offers (to gods) in his own interest,’ that is, the sponsor of a ritual (see Wiser 1998).

21. The custom is still attested in battle in the Rājataraṅgiṇī of Jonarāja and further in certain hunting and slaughter rituals in England, Turkey, and other places; compare also the Hindu ash tilaka, received after fire rituals, and the Catholic Ash Wednesday ‘tilaka.’

22. Note, for example, the difficulty commonly experienced in Japan to guess the proper (half) value for the return gift.

23. Note the development in Nepal from the Vedic to the modern period of the Vedic Agnihotra ritual (Witzel 1986, 1992) and the complex of rites connected with the installation of a king (Witzel 1987a).

24. For a legend of their arrival and a family tree, see Witzel 1976.

25. Compare the similar raising of the English, Dutch, and German maypoles (for a study of such parallels, see Witzel n.d.b, 1998).

26. The seventeenth-century Christian missionaries, of course, wanted to see a cross in this, and they especially paid attention to the image of the caught and ‘crucified’ Indra (see Toffin 1993). Note that the smaller, secondary pole erected in the potter square of Bolāchān Twāh is popularly called ‘Yasin God without arms’ (475), while the main one has ‘arms’ (476). (Observe also the position of the potters as representative of the lower classes; 81.)
27. For extra-Indian parallels, see Witzel n.d.b.
28. For a detailed listing of the passages, see Kuiper 1983: 238n45.
29. In Maharashtra, there is, however, a brahmadhvaja or guḍhi pāḍavā on Caitra, śukla prāt (cf. Bühnemann 1988: 185). Ashok Aklujkar (pers. com. 1997) tells me that this is a home ceremony in which a relatively thin pole (guḍhi) is erected at the entrance or in the balcony or on the terrace of a home; it is decorated with a silk cloth and capped by a silver or brass vessel tied to its upper end with twigs of the kaṭu-limṭa (kaṭu-nimba) and a garland of flowers. On Divāḷī Pāḍavā (first day of Kāṛṭtiņa) there is no erecting of a pole; this is not, unlike in Nepal, considered the beginning of a new year except for the accounts of merchants.
30. The pole had been dragged into town from the surrounding hills.
31. This seems to be reflected in a grave of 2,000 BCE at Potapovka in the northern Krasnoyarsk region west of the Ural Mountains, an area that has long been suspected as being the home to the Indo-Iranian civilization. In one grave, a human skeleton whose head is missing has a horse head supplanting instead. At the foot of the skeleton lies a flute-like pipe together with a human head; the flute is an instrument typical of the other world, the realm of Yama (see Vasík‘ev, Kuznetsov, and Semenova 1994: 115, figure 11).
32. It is clear that one can even lose one’s head during the ‘domesticated’ Śráuta ritual (see Witzel 1987b); the Sattrins in the Juiminīya Brāhmaṇa (2.299), for instance, are killed by outsiders and female hunters. Clearly, all danger is not eliminated.
33. Note that the autumn equinox is accompanied in the Himalayas by the appearance of Ferris wheels for children.
34. Note also the little observed fact that Buddha was conceived when an elephant entered the womb of his mother (an Indian version of the Catholic immaculate conception). Humans and elephants are closely related mythologically because the elephant has a ‘hand,’ the trunk, and it is accordingly called ‘the one with the hand’ (hastin).
35. Note that all Indra-like and Indra-related figures aggregate here: his wife Indrā, his brother Yama, his own elephant (his uncle), perhaps his terrible form as Bhairava of the cremation ground (śmaśāṇa), the Rat-Ganëša Chuman Gandyah as Śiva’s/Bhairava’s son, and, finally, perhaps Viṣṇu as the one who expands the world, like Indra, by widely stepping beyond the earth.
36. Due to the hardships of exile? (cf. the Rājguru allowing the consummation of yak meat during the Nepalese-Tibetan war), or due to the fact that the Goddess kills Mahiśāsura?
37. Examples of a male predecessor during the Licchavi-Malla period are Māneśvara at Harigao (Witzel 1980a: 318ff) and Tanā Devī at Hanuman Dhoka (Kiauta 1977).
38. According to one story told to me in 1976, Bhaktapur Taleju was buried in a garden when its priest had been deposed due to a pratiloma marriage some three generations previous; and as I was told in the summer of 1979, the loss of Taleju at Patan was quickly repaired by importing an old (Newar) Taleju from Lhasa.
39. For example, Herodotus’ Amazones/Scythians; Amaterasu/Susa.no Wo in Japan; the cowherd/weaver goddess in China. Note also the myths of the stolen clothes of the
nymphs; of Krṣṇa’s cow girls; of the nymph’s hagoromo in Japan.

40. The development of Vedic rituals in Nepal cannot be discussed here. However, it may be briefly pointed out that, on the one hand, some of the ancient Vedic rituals have continued to this day in (almost) unchanged fashion, such as the Agnihotra ritual carried out by the Nepali-speaking Brāhmaṇs at Kumarigal, Thamel, and Pasupathinath (Witzel 1986) or many of the rites of passage. On the other hand, some Vedic rituals have undergone considerable change and reinterpretation, such as the Tantric Agnihotra of Patan Rājopādhyāyas (Witzel 1992) or the royal consecration ritual which changed from a simple abhiṣeka (Ṛg Veda) to an elaborate Śrauta ritual (the rājusūya of Yajur Veda Saṃhitās and Śūtras) into the post-Vedic rājyābhiṣeka (Nilamata Purāṇa, Viśuddharmottara Purāṇa, Agni Purāṇa, Nepalese manuscripts) (see Witzel 1987a).

41. Such as the Aṣṭamā Vrata Kathā, Svayambhū Purāṇa, and Nepāla Māhātmya—all of which await detailed analysis along the lines detailed above.

Abbreviations

| AB   | Aitareya Brāhmaṇa |
| AŚŚ  | Āpastamba Śrauta Śūtra |
| AV   | Atharva Veda Saṃhitā |
| BĀU  | Brahma Āranyak Upaniṣad |
| BDHS | Baudhāyana Dharmaśūtra |
| BŚS  | Baudhāyana Śrauta Śūtra |
| BṛhS | Bṛhat Saṃhitā (by Varāhamihira) |
| ChU  | Chāndogya Upaniṣad |
| DN   | Dīgha Nikāya |
| JB   | Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa |
| KāṭhA| Kātha Āranyak |
| KāṭhB| Kātha Brāhmaṇa |
| KāṭhU| Kātha Upaniṣad |
| KauŚS| Kauśikā Śūtra |
| KB   | Kauṭīkā Brāhmaṇa |
| KS   | Kātha Saṃhitā |
| Manu | Mānava Dharma Śāstra |
| Mbh  | Mahābhārata |
| MS   | Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā |
| NP   | Nilamata Purāṇa |
| PGS  | Pāraskara Grhya Śūtra |
| PS   | Paippalāda Saṃhitā |
| Rām  | Rāmāyaṇa |
| RV   | Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā |
| ŚŚŚ  | Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Śūtra |
| ŚB   | Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa |
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