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Nepal Style
Rites of Passage

The Newars are the indigenous people of Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. Most are Hindus. Their rites of passage are central to their strong social and religious traditions. These ceremonies express and celebrate the importance of the major landmarks of human life, including birth, first feeding and coming of age. Writer Ellen Coon came to Kathmandu as a Fulbright scholar in 2004 to study Newar ritual practice and concepts of feminine divinity. Over the years, she has developed a rich network of Newar friends and teachers who have generously explained their beliefs and way of life to her and even allowed her to share in their personal family observances. By Ellen Coon, Kathmandu

Sample spread from this article



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In Kathmandu, we are reminded constantly of how religion binds us to place and to each other. Everywhere there is evidence of worship, from vermilion and rice grains sprinkled at the stone in front of the entrance to a home, to rice pudding lovingly offered into the mouth of the neighborhood Ganesha, to the unexpected procession in which a gold-swathed baby, a shaven-headed boy in a loincloth or a magnificently dressed elder in a palanquin is paraded through the neighborhood to celebrate entrance into a new stage of life.

These are some of the "ten karmas" or life-cycle rituals--samskaras in Sanskrit--practiced by the Newars. Newars don't all agree about what the ten karmas are, but they do agree on their importance. "We call it karma konkyu, or making them see karma," one grandmother explained. "You could also say we are giving them their karma. When we do the ritual, we are praying, 'May you take the right path. May you always be in the right place. We are teaching you right from wrong. You are one of us.'"

The ten karmas are observed by both the Newar Hindus (85%) and Newar Buddhists, as these religious traditions are historically intertwined in the Kathmandu Valley. A local joke is that on a personal basis a Newar is "60% Hindu and 60% Buddhist." These rites, therefore, may be performed by either a Hindu or Buddhist priest (even for a Hindu family), with some practical and philosophical differences.

Of the ten karmas, I describe the seven most common, all of which I've seen first hand: blessing the baby, first feeding, ihi for girls, coming of age for girls and for boys, marriage and honoring one's elders. The remaining three are also for elders, but rare.

Greeting the Newly Born Soul

Birth is a powerful and dangerous time for a family, when everyday life is disrupted and the possibility of death lingers at the gate. In Newar families, the new mother is secluded in a darkened room with her baby. She does not bathe, nor comb her hair, nor look in the mirror. Her food is brought to her without salt. In the rest of the house, nobody does puja or goes to a party. Central to the birth process

is the aji. The aji is both midwife and priestess. In addition to providing excellent postpartum care, she invokes the protective influence of Chwaasa Ajima, the Goddess in charge of childbirth. The aji also performs the baby's first life-cycle rite, macha bu benkyu. Conducted between four and twelve days after birth, this ritual formally introduces the newborn to its family and ends the mother's confinement.

These days, most Newar mothers give birth in the hospital, but their families still observe birth restrictions when the mother and baby return home. Just as before, the midwife must come to conduct the macha bu benkyu ritual, for without the blessings of Chwaasa Ajima, the baby could suffer endless crying bouts and fail to thrive.

I was invited to observe a recent benkyu in the Kathmandu Valley town of Bhaktapur. In preparation for the arrival of the aji, Tara Shrestha, the baby's aunts had scrubbed and purified the house from top to bottom. In the kitchen, an area of the floor against one wall had been demarcated for the ritual with a purifying coat of cow dung mixed with red clay. Everyone had taken a bath in the morning. The new mother had risen at dawn, scrubbed herself from head to toe, and put on clean clothes. She sat outside on the kitchen balcony, cradling her tiny mite of a daughter in her hands. As soon as Tara arrived, she took the baby and gave her a good washing under the tap, massaged her with mustard oil, and wrapped her in a clean scrap of cotton sari.

Tara made food offerings for Chwaasa Ajima, Ganesha and other Gods which after blessing were shared with the mother and family. Cleansed and protected, the baby was formally introduced to her father. He joined his wife and baby in the kitchen, and Tara blessed them all with red tika on their foreheads. But before the father could take his baby, Tara snatched her. Tara held the baby close and refused to give her up until the father had held up a large banknote in front of her. At this, the tension of the ritual dissolved and the whole family burst out laughing.

In exchange for the money, Tara placed the baby on her father's lap. "At this moment, he is saying 'I am the father of this child. This is my child,'" Tara explained to me. "He's saying it to everybody: to the Gods all around us, to the family, and to the society at large. Now this baby is a part of this father's family."

Meanwhile, Tara collected a drop of the mother's milk to add to Chwaasa Ajima's portion of food offerings. Her milk was scanty and she was worried. The baby's aunt carried Chwaasa Ajima's offerings in silence down the stairs and to the crossroads, where she left them. Everyone else in the kitchen congratulated the father, and put money on the baby's forehead to honor the aji. Then it was time to eat. The new mother broke her fast first, with a hot drink of pachak herbs to help her digestion, then a full plate of rice, ghee, molasses, meat (few Nepalese are vegetarians) and other warming foods cooked with salt.

To conclude the benkyu ritual, Tara prepared gajal, or eye-black, for the baby's eyes. While the mother and baby went out into the sun to get an oil massage, Tara smeared a large iron knife with oil, placing it on top of the lamp which, in turn, was placed on top of a container full of rice grain. Slowly the flame blackened the oil. With her forefinger Tara scooped up some gajal, outlined the baby's eyes and gave her a large black tika, then handed the baby back into her mother's arms. It was early afternoon by now, and everyone was calm, content and sleepy. Taking her portion of the feast and the money offered her in a plastic bag, Tara left.

A few days later, Tara called: "Do you know, the puja went perfectly. As soon as it was complete, the mother's milk came in fully and the baby grows bigger and prettier every day."

First Feeding

The janko samskara is a joyful event, taking place at the age of five months for girls, and seven months for boys. This is the Newar baby's first feeding of solid food—specifically, rice cooked with salt. So complete is the identification of food with cooked rice in Nepal that the same word is used for both.

The auspicious moment for the rice-feeding ceremony is selected by the family astrologer based on the baby's birth chart. For poor families, the ritual can be conducted simply, without a brahmin priest; the baby is dressed up in new clothes and silver anklets, taken to the neighborhood Ganesha temple, and fed a bit of the blessed remainders of the rice pudding, sesame ladus, and goja cones of rice dough offered to Ganesha. With the God's blessing, the baby may now eat cooked rice, and can also wear the red tika blessing on his or her forehead—for the first time since the macha bu benkyu ceremony.

For most Newars, however, the rice-feeding ceremony of a beloved baby is an all-day festivity. Early in the morning, the brahmin priest comes to establish and worship an image of Ganesha. Next to him sit the mother and her baby. The head of the family gives the baby a set of clothes and a gold cloth cap, heavy silver anklets and bracelets and gold earrings.

Next, the senior family member offers the baby a plate bearing different objects, such as a pen, a piece of brick, a lump of clay and golden ornaments. Whatever the baby grabs first represents the occupation he will choose later in life. As the family laughs and exclaims over the baby's choice, he is dressed in his fancy clothes and new ornaments. It is time to visit the neighborhood Ganesha temple. But first, the aji must worship Goddess Chwaasa Ajima with offerings of broken rice grains and a bit of a vest the baby has worn. This signals the Goddess and the aji both that their primary responsibility for the baby is over. A new phase of life begins.

It is the maternal uncle and paternal aunt who take the baby to bow to the neighborhood Ganesha. The baby gets a bit of ladu prasad and returns home. The aji is thanked with a gift of new clothes and money.

Now the baby begins a lifetime of eating by being presented with a thaybhu, a ceremonial brass plate on a tripod, overflowing with cooked rice and "everything that grows from the earth." The feast represents the earth's plenty, and the wish that the child should never lack for good things to eat. After feeding the baby five little pinches of food, the mother can then eat whatever she likes from the plate. What remains will be given to the Goddess.

Next, the real fun of feeding the baby begins. It is the baby's grandfather or great-grandfather who gets the first turn, feeding a bit of rice-pudding on a golden coin or a silver spoon. The rest of the family takes turns feeding the baby, giving him presents of clothes, money, toys and jewelry, and adding to the tika blessing on his forehead. In the evening, the family will provide a feast to relatives, neighbors and friends that may bring several hundred people together.

Ihi: Marriage Divine

In a Kathmandu temple courtyard or square, I was startled one day to see one hundred four- to nine-year-old girls dressed as brides. Their clothes were

magnificent red brocade or gold cloth. Their hands and feet had been reddened, and they were resplendent with gold jewelry. These little girls were undergoing an initiation known as ihi.

Because there is no rite of passage for girls that explicitly corresponds to the upanayana or bartaman ritual for boys, Newars conduct the ihi ritual for pre-pubescent girls. The ceremony contains elements in common with the boys' ritual, including the taking of seven steps representing one's travel through all the worlds. But the central event of ihi is a symbolic wedding, in which the girl's father holds his daughter on his lap and gives her in marriage to a divine groom, represented by a bel (wood apple) fruit.

Within Hinduism, the divine groom is identified as Lord Vishnu or Suvarna Kumar, Siva's bachelor son, also known as Murugan or Karttikeya. In Buddhism, the groom is Sudhana Kumara, the ideal Buddha-like husband. Whichever the case, the ritual is not so much about a divine husband, but about a father and his daughter. Through ihi, a girl enjoys full membership in her father's family and caste. It is only after ihi that a girl can marry.

"They say that the size of the bel fruit you get will be the size of your husband!" Rajani Maharjan said. "My bel was a big one, and everybody teased me that I was going to have a fat husband." A grandmother in Patan said, "I made sure to choose a nice medium bel for my daughters and granddaughters. Their husbands should be just right."

After ihi, girls are reminded to act more grown up. "They say that after ihi, we shouldn't sit on our father's lap anymore," Rajani Maharjan continued. "My mother would say, you've had your ihi, so you should be careful about how and what you eat."

The ihi ceremony takes two full days. Involving far more than the symbolic wedding, it is a celebration of the girls' gender. Led by a brahmin or a tantric Buddhist priest and performed by their parents and other relatives, the girls are worshiped as auspicious, empowered and consecrated, just as a queen or a Goddess would be. The ceremonies convey the message that the girl's person is powerful, generative and good.

Perhaps that is why more than one Nepal-based Western father has had the ritual performed for his daughters. "I felt so much pride in my daughters," one said, "and getting them all dressed up and doing the ceremony was a reflection of that." Alexander von Rospatt, a Western scholar of Buddhism who is married to a Newar woman, said "the ihi and other rites of passage performed earlier have grounded the girls not only in the culture and religion of their mother, but also in her family." For ihi, like other Newar life-cycle rites, celebrates the development of an individual into a whole person, while at the same time weaving her into a sustaining fabric of familial and communal relationships.

Barah

When a girl begins menstruating, everything changes. She is no longer a child but a fertile woman, able to conceive and bear children. Her ability to hold and bring forth life is an auspicious thing, worthy of celebration. But menstrual blood, particularly the first time, is frightening and impure. The barah rite of passage reconciles this contradiction by "purifying the womb" before the first menstruation.

During barah a girl goes back into the earth. For twelve days, she stays in a "cave," a room in her house heavily curtained, with the windows papered over. Under no circumstances may she see the sun, or the face of any man, including her father, brothers and other relatives. For the first four days, she observes strict purifying restrictions. She may not eat salt, may not comb her hair, may not see a mirror, and must sit on straw wearing just a petticoat to eat her plain meal. Her family may still do puja and attend feasts during these four days. But on the fifth day, the family enters a state of pollution similar to that caused by childbirth, while the girl in barah ends her austerities and begins to beautify herself. Presented with a traditional beauty scrub made of roasted grains (kon) and mustard oil (chikan), she starts to "make herself fairer." She practices putting on her mother's old saris, wears silver anklets, and plays with makeup.

The reason for a ritual and how it is experienced can differ widely. Even though some of the elder Buddhist priests I spoke with clearly held women in high esteem, they described the ritual as primarily being one to safeguard the family against the powerful effects of the first menstrual blood. But the girls I spoke with experienced their barah as a joyful and even thrilling time, when they experienced at a profound level the positive value of their female bodies and the changes puberty would bring. "All of our female relatives have to come to feed us while we are in the barah,"

Rajani Maharjan remembered. "They feed us special foods--roasted peas and soybeans, corn, peanuts, sugarcane, yogurt, beaten rice--all kinds of things the earth yields to give us strength. We feel ourselves to be so special." With lots of cousins and friends in the barah room with them, the girls play games, dance, put makeup on each other and giggle.

In 2008, I visited Liza, the daughter of friends, while she was in her barah confinement. At least six other little girls, some of them cousins and some of them schoolmates, kept her company during the day. The girls were giggling, singing along to the radio, putting on lavish quantities of lipstick and eye shadow, and eating lots of roasted beans, peanuts, cookies and tangerines. We adult women, relatives and friends, sat on straw mats against the wall. "This is nothing compared to my day," reminisced her grandmother. "In my day, the old ladies danced so hard that puffs of dirt flew up from the mud floor!" Later, Rajani's mother said, "These girls don't have as much imagination as we had. We used to put on long plays and dramas. Some of the girls and grandmas would dress up as men. We laughed so hard we choked."

On the twelfth day of barah, the young woman is ready to emerge, strengthened and purified by her time held inside the earth, to see Surya Dya, the sun. Before first light, our Liza took a complete bath, while her mother and aunt scrubbed and purified the house from top to bottom. Then it was time for beautification. Dressed like a bride in cloth of gold and red brocade, her hair twisted up in an elaborate bun, laden with gold jewelry and the golden headdress of a bride, Liza glowed in the center of the fussing, loving the attention of her female relatives.

After hours of preparation, she was finally ready. Her mother put a shawl over her head and led her upstairs to the rooftop terrace, where the family's tantric Buddhist priest was offering puja worship to the sun and planets. Slowly Liza lifted her veil. To protect her eyes, used to darkness, from the full dazzling radiance of the sun, she first gazed at its reflection in a brass vessel filled with water in which a golden ring had been placed. Then she turned and, twisting her fingers into the characteristic mudra or gesture for sun worship, held up her hands and looked through them at the sun. It was a moment charged with power. In her own body, Liza was uniting the strength of the earth with the energy of the sun.

From now on, Liza would be an auspicious woman, ready to bring wealth, grain, children and light to everyone around her. She had become the Lakshmi of her

house, and as such, she held the emblems of the Goddess Lakshmi, the jal nakhan or sacred mirror, and the sinhamu vessel for vermilion powder. Her father, followed by her uncles and the other men present, came to look at her face, and offered her money to congratulate her.

To bless and celebrate her new status, Liza was taken by her paternal aunt and other relatives to show herself to the neighborhood Ganesha. On returning home, she sat again on the rooftop near the priest, who instructed her as she offered puja worship to the sun, the moon and all the planets, as well as to Deities. At last, Liza was offered thaybhu, the ceremonial feast plate heaped high with the good things the earth gives to eat, which is part of many of these ceremonies. Everyone broke their fast with the blessed food.

In the afternoon, Liza took off the heavy bridal sari made of Banaras silk and changed into a sumptuous new outfit given to her by her maternal uncle. Sitting in front of a large brass vessel, she extended her two cupped hands. Each relative or friend in turn poured three overflowing handfuls of unhusked rice grain into her hands, which she let fall into the vessel, and then presented her with a gift of new clothes and money. Soon the vessel in front of her was mounded high with grain and there was a stack of bright new clothes next to her, demonstrating the abundance that our young woman had come to represent.

In the evening, Liza sat at the entryway to welcome guests, the center of attraction at a feast for several hundred people held in her honor. All dressed up and wearing bridal gold, she received the love and good wishes of her family and community, who rejoiced in the presence of another Lakshmi in their midst.

Bartaman/Kayta Puja

Between the ages of four and thirteen, Newar boys undergo a rite of passage to become full members of their patriline and caste. Even if they are quite small at the time, they become, for religious purposes, men, able to conduct and participate in sacrifices and other rituals, marry and, most importantly, to perform the death rituals for their parents.

The bartaman or kayta puja rites vary between castes, between those Newars who use a brahmin priest and those who use a Buddhist tantric priest and even between

different parts of the Kathmandu Valley. But they are all based upon the brahmanical upanayana, or sacred thread ceremony, and they have in common "going away" from family life as the boy knew it, and "coming back" transformed. The boy renounces the life of a householder, has his head shaved and, naked, dons a loin cloth. He is turning to a religious life, leaving his parents to study the Vedas, or going out to the forest like Rama and Lakshmana of the Ramayana epic, or becoming a monk, like the disciples of the Buddha. He takes seven sanctified steps, marked out with leaves and flower petals, to signify his traveling all the worlds, and "goes forth" to the neighborhood temple or monastery--making sure that everybody sees him in his new state.

It is the maternal uncle who lures the boy back to family life by offering him money. The boy then promises to stay home and at the same time fulfill the duties of a religious student. He is now permitted to take an active part in all religious ceremonies.

Newars in the Kathmandu Valley take this rite of passage very seriously. They spend months preparing all the ingredients for the intricate rituals, and they spend lavishly on a celebratory feast for hundreds of relatives and friends. The whole family on both the father's and the mother's side get involved. After all, here is their son, who will carry on their family and caste lineage, and who will light their funeral pyres when they die.

But why would two casteless Americans, far from their relatives, want to perform the bartaman ritual for their sons? Photographer Thomas Kelly said, "We don't have enough rituals in our culture that help boys think deeply about what it means to be a man." Kelly and his wife, anthropologist Carroll Dunham, have lived in Kathmandu for 32 years. They said they have spent the last two years encouraging their boys to ask questions and explore the spiritual traditions around them, in a conscious process to help them come of age.

"I've taken them to the Pasupatinath temple and showed them sons cremating their parents," Kelly continued. "And I've said to them, this is what it is; this is what you will be doing for me. We shouldn't avoid thinking about it. They realize that death is a part of life." Liam Kelly, 13, said, "It was pretty embarrassing having my head shaved. But it was wonderful, too. I feel like I'm ready to take on more responsibilities now."

Wedding

To get their children married to a suitable partner is among the most sacred duties of Newar parents. Marriage turns a boy or a girl into a full human being, an adult with a future as well as a past, and a lineage of descendants as well as ancestors. Marriage also weaves two families together into a network of reciprocal obligations. From beginning to end, the rituals uniting two Newar families go on for over a year, and require large outlays of money and effort. But the central feature of a wedding is the kanyadan--the handing over of an auspicious woman by her parents to a man and his family.

After marriage negotiations are complete and the actual wedding nears, the groom's mother and a few other relatives bring betel nuts to the bride. With this ritual the betrothal is fixed. The ritual used to be quite simple and required only eight betel nuts, some vermilion powder and a lump of molasses. But it now includes gifts such as a sari, makeup and lavish presents of sweets and fruits. "This is the way the neighbors find out I am going to be married," Rajani Maharjan said. "They see them bringing all those things and then they start teasing, saying, who's the lucky boy? When are you going to feed us the feast? But what the ceremony really means is that his mother is saying, 'This girl now belongs to us.'"

The day of Rajani's wedding feast, she woke early, her stomach all in a flutter. The day before, as before all life-cycle rites, her close relatives had performed shraddha, making purifying offerings to her father's dead ancestors. Now she took a long and thorough bath. Out her window, she could see relatives from near and far gathering to start preparing the feast. Enormous heaps of ginger and garlic, tomatoes and cauliflowers, radishes and onions, meat and spices were being chopped and cooked in pots the size of bathtubs, all accompanied by laughter and gossip.

But Rajani was fasting. As was the custom, she walked to her maternal uncle's house, where her uncle's wife congratulated her with the ritual blessing of sagun and then fed her beaten rice and yogurt, fruits and sweets. This was worship of a kind, in which Rajani's maternal uncle's wife was feeding her offerings that celebrated her auspiciousness as the Goddess Lakshmi. After the wedding, all of her married aunts will invite her to their homes to feed her in the same way, turn by turn.

When she returned, Rajani had no time to inspect the cooking. It was going to take her all day to get dressed in a red and gold brocade sari, cloth of gold blouse, an elaborate hair-do, make-up and all the gold jewelry that relatives from every side could put together. Lots of female friends and relatives crammed into the room to help, tweaking and pinning, curling and combing. There was laughter, but tension, too, because it was a point of honor for all of us there to make Rajani into the most beautiful bride ever--truly a Goddess in appearance. Her face, hands, hair and clothes became a collective project.

Now that the Kathmandu Valley has been built up, there isn't as much space left for wedding feasts, so many city-dwellers hold their wedding feasts in "Party Palaces" rented for the purpose. At her Party Palace, Rajani sat in state near the entryway on a red velvet throne, dressed in all her finery. As each guest arrived, they handed the bride a gift. In return, she put a few betel nuts into their hands as a blessing. Six hundred guests filled the halls, taking turns to sit in rows to be served a feast of beaten rice and savory dishes off of disposable plates made of leaves stitched together with slivers of bamboo.

Rajani's maternal uncle had supervised most of the cooking, while other relatives and friends served the food and women of the family poured homemade liquors--rice beer and distilled rice whisky (not many teetotalers here, either)--into clay saucers. The bride and her closest friends and relatives eat last, when it is already late. Nobody from the groom's side attends. The wedding feast for Newar brides is more like a send-off, where everyone from her side comes to wish her well and give her a gift for her new home. It is all about her.

Early the next morning, Rajani began beautifying herself all over again. This was the most important day of all, the day when her groom would come to get her in a procession led by a brass band; when she would ritually choose him as her husband in the svayamvar ceremony and her parents would confirm her choice in the kanyadan ceremony, and when he would take her away with him to be formally welcomed into his home and his family.

Rajani was visibly nervous, twisting a handkerchief in her hennaed fingers. Two generations ago, Newar families of the farmer caste did not perform swayamvar and kanyadan. But now these Hindu rituals are performed at most Newar weddings, even though the swayamvar is rare in India itself. "I heard the band approaching, and I peeked out the window," Rajani Maharjan remembered later. "A bolt of

nervousness shocked through me. All those people, his family and his friends, all dressed up, were there for me! I wasn't ready yet. My hands started trembling. But still I felt grand!"

Brides are supposed to fast before the swayamvar ceremony, but many of them consent to drink a little pure milk or eat a biscuit or two. Rajani refused to eat a single bite. She wanted the power of her intention and the purity of her fasting to make her marriage rituals stronger.

"During the swayamvar ceremony," Rajani continued, "I put a garland on him, and he put one on me. I put a ring on his finger. I was afraid it would be too tight, but it just fit him. He put a ring on my finger. I walked around him three times, and I bowed to his feet. The whole time I was praying with all my heart, May this marriage last forever. May we help each other throughout life. May I never need to live without him in my life." Her bridegroom took a special box of red sindur powder and rubbed a large pinch of it into the parting of Rajani's hair. She would wear it for four days and keep the rest of the sindur powder carefully, for it represented the life-force of her husband, now entrusted to her protection.

At this point, the groom and those he brought with him left the room. They went downstairs to join the musicians and the rest of their people, to be fed an elaborate snack. Inside, it was time for Rajani to say goodbye. She sat cross-legged, her head bent, her face buried in a handkerchief. Close relatives approached to give her their wedding gift and receive betel nuts in return. Everyone began weeping, louder and louder, with Rajani weeping the most convulsively of all. I couldn't help crying myself, either.

By the time her mother and father approached her, last of all, they were crying so hard they had to be held up on either side. People murmured approvingly. It wouldn't do not to cry at your own wedding, because your tears demonstrate how much you love your parents and how painful it is to leave.

But now it was time to go. The groom's mother came in and, taking Rajani by the hand, raised her to her feet. It was time for the kanyadan ceremony, in which the bride and groom clasp their four hands together, with her father's hands holding them, top and bottom. Rajani's mother poured holy water through all the hands as

the priest recited sacred words. At the end, the priest asked Rajani's father to place her hands into the groom's hands and told her husband, "If you kill her, you will bear the sin, and if you cherish her, you will gain the merit. From now on, her welfare is your responsibility."

The bridegroom went downstairs. Blinded by tears, Rajani was carried downstairs on her maternal uncle's back. (Luckily for everyone, Rajani was slim and her uncle strong. Those with weak or tiny uncles must be content with having him lead her by the hand.) With Rajani sobbing on his back, her uncle circled the waiting car three times, then put her inside. She sat in the middle, with her husband on one side, and one of her own aunts to keep her company on the other. The groom's sister sat at the front.

While Rajani's family cried and looked devastated, the groom's procession began to perk up as the car slowly pulled away. The band began to play love songs and Hindi film tunes. Male relatives and friends of the groom walked ahead of the car, dancing all the way, celebrating their victory in bearing away such a beautiful bride.

By tradition, Rajani had to dry her tears when she passed her neighborhood Ganesha, where senior members of each family formally bade each other goodbye. Her own relatives and friends weren't supposed to follow her any further.

When she reached her new home, the senior women of her new family were waiting, with lamps lit, to perform *laskus*, or the ritual of welcome. Instructed by the family priest, the senior woman offered the new couple light and flowers, while the groom's mother washed Rajani's feet in red beer. Grasping one end of a large antique key that represents entry into the house at all levels, the senior woman gave Rajani the other end to hold, and led her into the house. From now on, this would be her primary residence.

Brought to the terrace, Rajani was seated facing east, her husband beside her, for the *honkegu* or "bringing together" ritual. With their heads touching, the bride and groom received showers of flower petals, rice grains, money and bits of fruit poured out from a rice measure by the senior woman. Whatever life brings them, they will receive together.

Next, the family offered the new couple a thaybhu, the feast plate of plenty. Eating from the same plate, the groom ate a bite of food first; then Rajani ate. She rinsed her fingers. He did not. They repeated this several times. Each time Rajani ate after her husband, she demonstrated her willingness to eat his jutho, or leftover food, which, for her, becomes prasad, a blessing and a public display of intimacy.

Finally, Rajani gave betel nuts to each family member in turn, receiving a gift of money from each, and then bowing to their feet. Last of all, she stood, gave betel nuts to her husband, and bowed to his feet in front of the whole extended family. Everyone cheered and laughed as the couple was congratulated with the sagun blessing and everyone participated by taking a red tika on the forehead.

Marriage here is not a single act, as it is for many in the West, but is cemented over a period of weeks or months, with numerous rituals. That very same evening, Rajani was brought back to a Bhairab temple in between her new house and her old one, for the khwa swoyu, or "seeing her face" ritual. With the idea that her own family needed to make sure she was all right, Rajani sat flanked by unmarried sisters or cousins, while each one of her male relatives and their friends came up to her in turn, peered at her face, and presented her with gold jewelry or money. Some also took the opportunity to bless her aloud, making heartfelt wishes for her happiness and ease during her married life.

Rajani's father approached her first, and gave her two heavy gold bangles. When it was my turn, I gave Rajani a gold chain. The gifts from senior relatives and friends endowed Rajani with some money of her own, but also showed her new family that she had powerful allies. Later, the mood lifted. Everyone began laughing as Rajani's younger brother and his friends approached, teasing, and showered several hundred rupees in one-rupee coins, one at a time, into her lap and her hands.

After khwa swoyu, Rajani went back home to her parents' house to sleep. There were more ceremonies to complete: she still had to appear at her husband's wedding feast, go with him and his family to the temple of the Goddess Bijeshwari, where people witnessed him putting more red sindur in her hair; and, finally, her groom had to be welcomed formally as a son-in-law by her parents.

Only then did she go home with her husband to sleep in the marriage bed. Even then, the process of transferring a young woman to her new home is a gentle one. During the first year of marriage, a Newar woman spends as much time at her parents' house as she does with her husband. She is given time to get used to her new identity and the responsibilities she will bear in a lifetime of marriage.

Bura Janko

When a Newar individual or married couple survives to old age, they begin to transform from ordinary people into divine elders. This elevation in status is confirmed and celebrated by a series of old-age rituals called bura janko, which take place when a man or woman reaches the specified age, or, in the case of a married couple, when the husband reaches the specified age.

Unlike other life-cycle rites, the bura janko rituals are not compulsory, but they are highly prized and increase the prestige of the family that performs them. A bura janko is in many ways as elaborate and public an event as a wedding, requiring lavish outlays, the cooperation of a whole network of relatives and friends, and months of preparation.

At the same time, it is powerfully auspicious, bringing all the Gods and cosmic forces in alignment, so much so that, for women, the inauspiciousness of widowhood is removed by the bura janko ceremony, allowing an elderly lady to resume wearing gold ornaments, red clothing and red tikas on her forehead for the first time since the death of her husband. New sacred images are often consecrated at a bura janko, and families make sure to perform other rites of passage, such as ihi, at the same time in order to benefit from the outflow of blessings.

Newar shastras detail four or even five bura janko ceremonies. The first of these takes place when a man or a woman reaches the age of 77 years, 7 months, 7 days, 7 gathis (24 minutes each), and seven palas (24 seconds each). The second takes place when the elder "sees the thousandth full moon," or at the age of 1,000 months, roughly between 81 and 84 years old, depending on how intercalary months are counted. A third ritual is celebrated at 88 years, 8 months, 8 days, and so on, and a fourth at 99 years, 9 months, 9 days and so on. A few handbooks even specify a ritual for the age of 110 years, 10 months and 10 days.

Similar rituals are still practiced in some parts of India; for example, some Tamil Brahmins perform the first ritual but at the age of 70 rather than at the age of 77. Elsewhere in India, an old-age rite is celebrated at the age of 60. Depending on who is doing the calculating, each of these ages can be seen as a full lifespan, with the rite of passage helping the elder move through the danger zone into a new, reinvigorated phase of life.

All of the bura janko ceremonies are similar to Hindu birthday rituals in India, in that they propitiate planetary Deities and the eight Deities of longevity and remove negative influences from a person's lifespan. But they go far beyond removing the negative. Joyfully, with pomp and fanfare, they introduce the elder to the company of the Gods.

The rituals are called ratarohana, which means "mounting the chariot." At each, the chariot to be mounted is identified with a specific Deity. The elders enact their identification with that Deity by mounting the chariot and taking the divine seat or asana upon it. This forms the most public part of most bura jankos, when the elder is carried or pulled in a chariot around town, in a procession nearly identical to a Deity's festival. Word spreads and the elder's fame grows.

Successive bura jankos vary with each level the elder has attained. For example, at the ceremony marking 88 years, the elder reenters the house via a ramp built up to an upper-storey window, bypassing the impure ground floor that would do injustice to his or her divine status. At the ceremony marking 99 years, the elder is placed in a huge clay pot made for the occasion, which functions as the womb. After rituals that enact conception and embryonic development, a hole is broken in the pot and the elder is "reborn" through the hole. These rites are, like centarians, rare indeed, and Newars believe that they rejuvenate the elder, causing him or her to grow a new set of teeth and black hair all over again.

Conclusion

The "ten karma" or life-cycle rituals described above aren't set in stone. They evolve as people adapt them to their circumstances and vary according to the caste, locality and religion of the Newars performing them. Some changes reflect the fact that they have less free time but more disposable income than before,

because instead of working at their hereditary occupations and making their own schedules, they are taking salaried jobs.

For example, many fewer families than before are confining their daughters for the full twelve days of the barah ceremony, with its demands on the whole network of married female relatives to come and feed the girl. Instead, the girl is sent to a Theravada Buddhist vihar, to spend a few days with the nuns there, learning to read and recite simple Buddhist texts.

Other families avoid the expense and work that a full barah entails by sending their daughters to join another girl for the last one or two nights of her barah, emerging when she does to see the sun, but skipping most of the ceremony and the feast. With the benkyu birth ritual, many families make things simpler by having the mother-in-law or other senior woman of the house perform a quick ceremony, rather than calling in their traditional aji. Weddings, on the other hand, are growing more lavish, a chance to show off with extravagant expenditures on food and goods.

No matter how they vary and evolve, though, these life-cycle rites point to an understanding that life is not experienced seamlessly, and that individuals take on different identities at different ages and stages of life. Newars make these individual transitions public and visible through ritual, each person made stronger by the presence and support of others. Plpi

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An American Adaptation

By Ellen Coon

When my father turned 80, I did not want to give him an ordinary birthday party. I wanted a ritual that would allow his relatives and friends to celebrate him and my mother as elders in their community. The bura janko ceremony provided us with a

beautiful model of such a ritual, though I knew that we would not, in the United States, be able to reproduce all of its details, especially without a Newar priest. Instead, we tried to convey the essence of the ritual and to follow the sequence of its most important elements. What followed did, like the original bura janko, reinforce and demonstrate family solidarity, while letting our elders, as well as the community at large, know how much we love and value them.

We began by welcoming my father, mother and aunt and escorting them to special seats under a tree. Next, as at a Newar ritual, we worshiped the sukunda lamp, which represents Ganesha. At bura janko rituals in the Kathmandu Valley, the Gods are invited and assembled by ritual means to shower the participants with blessings. At our bura janko, we held a "Convocation of the Gods" in which members of a local dance troupe, wearing sacred masks, came out one by one to greet the elders and to be offered light, flowers and incense. We presented our elders with coral and pearls, new clothes and, for my father, a turban.

The next part of the ritual, I thought, might be a bit tricky to convey to Westerners. In the Kathmandu Valley, the elder puts his feet into a large vessel, and family members line up one by one to pour water from a conch shell over the elder's feet, and bow down to him or her with their foreheads. In return, the elder blesses the younger person by dipping a bundle of herbs and flowers into the foot-water and sprinkling it over the descendant's head and into his or her mouth. To my surprise, all of the guests understood that washing and bowing to our elders' feet was an opportunity to express respect and receive a blessing in return. This part of the ceremony took longer than expected, as many people lingered, on their knees, to tell the elders how much they cared for them. Western life does not afford this opportunity often.

Our elders were amazed when we seated them in palanquins, decorated with winged horses, and carried them around the garden. Among Newars, elders can ride in either a palanquin that is carried, or in a wooden cart with wheels that is pulled, by descendants and friends. The procession can take one or two hours, as the divine elder sees and is seen by the Deities in most of the major temples and shrines in his locality. When the elder returns home, he or she is no longer the same person, and so must be formally welcomed into the house with the laskus ceremony. We welcomed our elders through a beribboned archway in the garden, and then led them to their seats of honor at the table. Like Newars, we concluded our bura janko with a feast, with the Western additions of speeches, songs and musical revelry. At the end of the day, guests and relatives struggled to put into words how much more this ritual had meant to them than an ordinary party.

Perhaps most telling of all, my father has asked me when we will perform his second bura janko.