

II BUDDHIST RITUAL AND CASTE HIERARCHY IN NEPAL

6 Buddhism without Monks: The Vajrayāna Religion of the Newars of Kathmandu¹

CONZE, a distinguished Western scholar of Buddhism, once wrote:

The monks are the Buddhist elite. They are the only Buddhists in the proper sense of the word. The life of a householder is almost incompatible with the higher levels of the spiritual life. This has been a conviction common to all Buddhists at all times. They have differed only in the strictness in which they adhered to it. (Conze 1951:53)

In this paper I give a brief descriptive outline of the main features of a form of Buddhism still practised amongst the Newars of Nepal in which there has been no organized monasticism for at least the last seven hundred years. I do not present the material in order to challenge Conze's statement, for he could defend its validity by maintaining that the Newars are no longer true Buddhists, but rather to examine the main bases of support for such an unusual form of

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the religion. I hope to establish that whereas orthodox monastic Buddhism is primarily dependent on the support of a powerful minority, the unorthodox non-monastic Buddhism of the Newars is dependent on mass popular support.

Monastic Buddhism is a direct outcome of a very ancient Indian belief, one that dates back at least to the sixth century BC when the Upanishads were written, which asserts that the main religious goal is to achieve a form of tranquillity and calmness that can be found only through withdrawal from the everyday world of sensory experience. When this renunciatory ideal is taken, as it is in orthodox monastic Buddhism, in such a literal sense that only full-time professional renunciators are accorded any real chance of achieving the religious goal, then support must come through the patronage of a powerful minority rather than the enthusiasm of the general laity. There is considerable historical evidence to support this proposition. For example, in India large-scale monastic institutions appeared to flourish during three major periods of royal patronage: under the Emperor Aśoka during the third century BC; during Kaniṣka's reign in the first century AD; and during the long reign of the Pāla dynasty in Bengal from about AD 750-1150 (Smith 1958:116-35, 150-2, 200-2 and Conze 1951:72).

From the foregoing argument it follows that any significant reduction in such patronage must be matched, if the religion is to survive at all, by a corresponding increase in popular support. And for this to occur it also follows that something more attractive must be offered to the laity than the remote and not very enticing prospect of full-time monastic celibacy. The history of Buddhism in India may indeed be interpreted as a series of doctrinal and organizational developments aimed specifically at broadening the basis of popular support.

Hināyāna Buddhism, which survives today in its Theravāda form in Sri Lanka and much of mainland South-East Asia, is ideologically the least accommodating in that enlightenment is said to be attainable only by those who either are now, or have been in the past, monks. The main hope offered to the laity is to build up a pool of merit through observing the basic precepts and by support for the monks and their monasteries. The reward offered is the hope of future rebirth as a monk and hence perhaps a chance to attain

enlightenment. In Thailand, an additional and most important accommodation of lay interests has occurred through the extensive practice of short-term monasticism (Tambiah 1970:97-115). By this means a wide sector of the population has been given the opportunity to attain the religious goal.

Spiro has described the various ways in which the Burmese have transformed orthodox Theravāda Buddhism into a popular religion (Spiro 1982). In addition to both short-term monasticism and a proliferation of protective rituals (Apotropaic Buddhism), they have developed a non-renunciatory soteriology (Kammatic Buddhism) in which the laity are offered more tangible rewards than the annihilation of individual existence (*nirvāṇa*). Though Spiro himself interprets the Burmese development of Kammatic Buddhism by reference to their psychological make-up, I suggest that an equally relevant factor may be the gradual reduction of royal patronage.

Mahāyāna Buddhism, which began to develop in India shortly after the death of Buddhism's first great patron, Aśoka, is an ideological development specifically based on the desire to assist the laity to attain salvation (Weber 1958:236). Whereas in Hināyāna doctrine the ideal man is the *arhat*—the monk who, having attained enlightenment, then ignores the rest of suffering mankind—in Mahāyāna the ideal is the *bodhisattva*, a reincarnated being who having achieved *nirvāṇa* returns to the world of the suffering in order to help others achieve the same goal. Furthermore, orthodox Mahāyāna Buddhism, though still commending monastic celibacy as the surest way to gain enlightenment, does not exclude the possibility that the virtuous layman may have similar success.

It was not, however, until about the seventh century AD that Indian Buddhism began to develop in a direction which challenged the superiority of monastic renunciation. I refer to the introduction of Tantric doctrines, most probably via the agency of individual *yogins* who were themselves operating outside the monastic system. The essential feature of Tantricism, whether of the Hindu or Buddhist variety, is a belief in the efficacy of ritual and hence in the miraculous powers of those who possess the most effective rites (Snellgrove 1957:51). Those who can generate sufficient power through meditation and various associated ritual procedures gain immediate salvation. Furthermore, whereas orthodox Buddhists

place great stress on the transmission of knowledge through books, which are stored in monasteries, the Tantric *yogins* spurn scholasticism and instead stress the value of personal instruction. Another characteristic feature of Tantricism is the ritual importance attached to sexual union. In Vajrayāna Buddhism, the Tantric sect that has been dominant in Nepal for perhaps a thousand years, the innermost secrets are available only to those who present themselves for initiation in male-female couplets.

It is, I suggest, no accident of history that the Tantric cults first began to develop in north India during the eighth century AD, a period that coincides with the beginning of Islamic conquest and hence a reduction in the power of traditional Hindu/Buddhist monarchs. It was most especially during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, immediately prior to the final destruction of the great monasteries by the Muslims, that the Vajrayāna *yogins* achieved their greatest popularity. But in sad confirmation of Conze's assertion that Buddhism cannot survive without monks, they too have disappeared from the Indian scene. Indeed, with the exception of Nepal, I know of no country where any form of Buddhism, Vajrayāna or otherwise, has managed to survive on a significant scale without a well-defined monastic core.

Background data

The Newars, of whom there are today approximately a quarter of a million in Kathmandu valley, and a smaller number scattered in other parts of Nepal, are a non-Indo-European speaking people who are the inheritors of an ancient and rich culture.² They are, and have been for at least 2,000 years, an essentially urban people, though with an economy in large measure based on rice cultivation.

I carried out the greater part of my field-research in Patan, a city of some 50,000 persons which is almost wholly Newar, strongly Buddhist, highly nucleated and little affected by industrialization or indeed any other form of modernization. Prior to the Gorkha conquest of the valley in 1768, Patan, in common with its sister

² Works consulted usefully for this article, in addition to those cited elsewhere, include: von Fürer-Haimendorf (1956), Hodgson (1972), Lévi (1908), Nepali (1965), Regmi (1952), Snellgrove (1966).

cities of Kathmandu and Bhadgaon, was the capital of an autonomous Newar Kingdom. Of these three, Patan is the most ancient, and for most of its history has been the main centre of both the cultural and political life of the Newars.

Though the early history of Patan is still obscure, it was without doubt a major Buddhist centre with numerous monasteries and thousands of monks during the early centuries of the Christian era. Indeed, a plausible legend asserts that the Emperor Aśoka visited the valley during the third century BC and found a substantial community settled at Patan. Yuan Chwang, a Chinese pilgrim of the seventh century AD, was informed in India that there were some 2,000 monks of both the Hināyāna and Mahāyāna kind in the Nepal valley (Snellgrove 1957:101). The Tibetans, who regularly visited Patan in search of texts and teachers from the seventh century AD onwards, leave us in no doubt as to the great strength of Buddhism during the next few hundred years. Snellgrove has referred to the Patan of this period as

... a kind of vast university-city, differing little in its mode of life from similar towns in medieval Europe. In fact its buildings, its traditions, its way of life, must have been modelled on the great monastic universities of central India. (Snellgrove 1957:102-3)

Drastic changes were, however, about to take place. Dharmasvāmin, a Tibetan monk who came to Nepal in 1226 AD and stayed eight years just outside Kathmandu, recorded in his diary that by then monasticism had almost disappeared. I quote from the Nepalese historian, Regmi :

Dharmasvāmin's account testifies to the growing popularity of *Vajrayāna* beliefs and esoteric practices, but it seems that pure *Mahāyāna* without esoteric features had not wholly lost ground. There were people who did not subscribe to esoteric cult and discouraged its practices. It also appears that there were still extant a few monasteries in Nepal, where the monks received shelter and food. But most of the *Vihāras* had been deserted. . . . We learn from Dharmasvāmin that there were monasteries in Nepal both with monks and without them. It seems however that the number of the former was quite small. (Regmi 1966, Vol. 1:561)

From the evidence of Dharmasvāmin and a few additional sources it is beyond doubt that monasticism went into decline during the twelfth century and had virtually disappeared by the end of the thirteenth. This can be explained in part by noting that the Islamic destruction of the great north Indian monasteries preceded the Nepalese decline by less than a hundred years. The loss of communication with the Indian monastic centres must have weakened the position of the Patan monks, for it is clear that in earlier centuries there had been regular contact. Perhaps of even greater consequence was a period of Newar political instability followed by a new dynasty which, though tolerant of Buddhism, switched most of its patronage to the temples of the great Hindu gods (Snellgrove 1958:174). There are only three major dynasties that cover the whole history of the Newars; the Licchavi, Thakuri and Malla, and it was at the end of the twelfth century AD that the strongly Buddhist Thakuris gave way to the high-caste Hindu Mallas.

My aim, however, is not so much to explain why monasticism has disappeared, but rather how it is that Vajrayāna Buddhism has continued to survive for some seven hundred years. From what I have already said it should be evident that I will argue that it has primarily done so by shifting its support base from the powerful minority to the general population. I will give a brief outline of Newar society, and of the place of Buddhism and its adherents in this wider context and then discuss in turn each of the main ways in which the religion may be said to provide some kind of valued service for the laity.

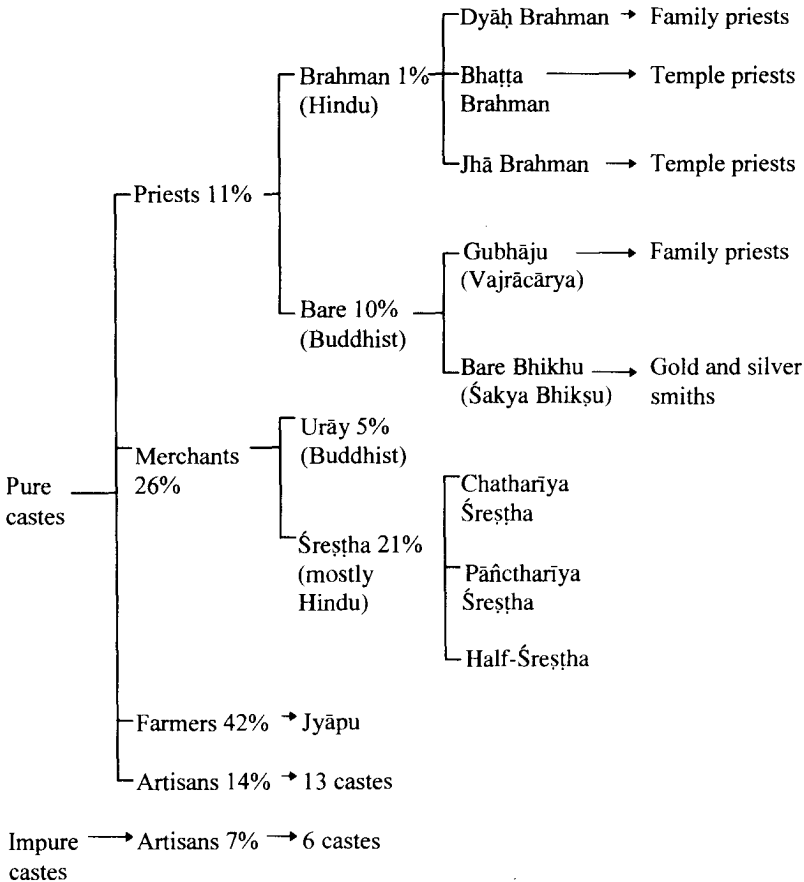
Buddhism and caste

Newar society is today, and has been for at least seven hundred years, organized on a classic Hindu caste basis. By this I mean that the total community is divided into a large number of named hereditary groups, each of which is endogamous, associated with one or more traditional occupations, and the members of which relate to the members of other like groups by reference to notions of relative purity.

Table 4 gives a schematic outline of the caste system. The castes, which are referred to as *jāt*, fall into five broad categories which

roughly correspond with the *varṇas* of classical Hindu texts. The most noticeable difference is the absence of any Kṣatriya (rulers or warriors), and this is in accord with the absence of either kings or armies for over two hundred years. There were castes of a Kṣatriya kind in the past but they have merged into the large merchant category of Śreṣṭha. Three of the castes (Bare, Śreṣṭha and Jyāpu) between them constitute about 73 per cent of the population. Some castes are regarded as Buddhist, others as Hindu and yet others as

TABLE 4 Newar Castes



mixed. The unequivocally Buddhist castes are the Bare and Urāy, with the Jyāpu regarded as traditionally Buddhist but increasingly turning to Hindu priests and rituals. Indeed, with the exception of the Bare and Urāy on the Buddhist side, and the Brahmans on the Hindu, it is difficult and in many ways meaningless to try to identify the great majority of Newars as either Hindu or Buddhist. Most attend the great festivals of both religions, make offerings to deities of both kinds and perform rites that are either mixed or outside both traditions. As previous observers have noted, the only useful distinction that can be made is by reference to the kind of family priest or *purohit* employed. Those who use Brahmans may be classed as Hindus while those who use Gubhājus may be classed as Buddhists. On the basis of this criterion I would estimate that 80 per cent of Patan Newars must be classed as Buddhist.

The Bare are the principal custodians of the Buddhist tradition. Indeed, they claim to be the direct descendants of the medieval monks and most of them still live in or close to one of the numerous courtyard-type buildings known as monasteries (*vihāra* in Sanskrit, and *bāhāh* or *bahī* in Newar). A small section known as Gubhāju are the direct Buddhist parallel to the Dyāḥ Brahman—they have the hereditary right to practise as *purohits* or family priests. The remainder, sometimes known as Bare Bhikhu, sometimes as Śākya Bhikṣu, but most commonly simply as Bare, though excluded from the priesthood are nevertheless counted as members of Buddhist associations known as *saṃgha*—a Sanskrit word which means ‘celibate monastic order’. There is, then, an endogamous hereditary community whose members have for some seven hundred years regularly inter-married and borne children, yet live in buildings which are both called and look like monasteries and are members of associations known as *saṃghas*.

In architectural terms, Patan is still very much a monastic city. I quote from Snellgrove:

On all sides there seem to open portals and low archways. One finds oneself within a tranquil little courtyard, with carved casements all around the upper stories and on just one side another tiered and gilded roof, marking the presence of the divinity in the shrine beneath it. These courtyards lead one into another, some

small and paved with stones, some large and grass-covered.
(Snellgrove 1957:94-5)

I obtained a list of some 142 *vihāras* that still stand in Patan. Though many of these are small buildings housing just one or two families and containing a single Śākyamuni Buddha shrine, others are large and architecturally splendid, house many families, contain many images, shrines and other sacred objects, and as institutions are very ancient. Though none of the actual buildings is older than perhaps three to four hundred years, they all preserve an undoubtedly ancient style and many occupy sites that have been occupied by similar buildings for at least 1,200 years.

There are two major criteria for differentiation between *vihāras*: first, a distinction between some 25 that are known in Newari as *bahī* and the remaining 117 known as *bāhāḥ*; and second, a much more important distinction between those in which initiations are performed and those in which they are not.

Some 25 per cent of the total Bare population of Patan are recognized as members of one of two *bahī samḡhas* or associations. They stand apart from their fellow caste members as a somewhat inferior section, and none of them can become Gubhāju or family priests. Indeed, they themselves take pride in their independence of Gubhāju priestly services and claim that they alone are the true descendants of the celibate monks. Certainly, some of the leading *bahī* are very ancient buildings, and the members are known as Bare Bhikhu whereas all other caste members are simply Bare.

In the much larger *bāhāḥ* category, there are eighteen which are known as the main or great *bāhāḥs* and all Bare, other than those associated with the *bahīs*, are counted as members of separate *samḡhas* each associated with one of these eighteen *bāhāḥs* (see Table 5). It is in these main *bāhāḥs* that all male Bare take a compulsory initiation rite in early childhood which not only confers *samḡha* but confirms caste membership. Though any individual family or group of families may construct a *bāhāḥ* and have it recognized as such by performing the great *bāhāḥ* ceremony, no initiations can ever be performed in its precincts, and hence it can never have a *samḡha* or membership association. In other words, though new residential *bāhāḥs* are occasionally built, the list of main initiatory ones remains fixed at eighteen. Thus, wherever a

Bare may live, whether in Patan, somewhere else in the valley, or even in some more remote part of Nepal, he must always bring his sons to be initiated at that particular *bāhāḥ* in which he himself was initiated as a boy. The rite can, with only one recent and still highly controversial exception, be performed nowhere else, and if it is not performed the boy not only fails to gain *bāhāḥ* membership but is no longer counted as of Bare caste.

The following are the main features of a typical leading *bāhāḥ*. Images of Mahākāla and Gaṇeśá, two protective Hindu deities, stand guard each side of the entrance. The central part consists of a rectangular courtyard with a recessed shrine directly opposite the entrance and containing an image of either Śākyamuni Buddha or of one of the great non-Tantric deities such as Avalokiteśvara, Akṣobhya or Mañjuśrī. Stone *caityas*, a very ancient form of Buddhist monument, stand in front of the non-Tantric shrine. Magic circles (*maṇḍala*), thunderbolts (*vajra*) and statues of benefactors are scattered around the courtyard. Immediately behind the main courtyard is a large residential courtyard which usually contains a very substantial *caitya*. The buildings that form the main courtyard are always two-storied, and though in some cases they are occupied by families, more commonly they are used as storerooms for surplus images, additional shrines, elders' gossip centres and as locations for the performances of secret ritual.

Two of the rooms, one known as the *digi* and the other as *āga(n)*, are especially important. The *digi*, which is usually located on the second floor over the entrance, is used by a group of distinguished elders known as *ājus* for private discussion, and also for the performance of some parts of the first initiation ceremony that should not be seen by the general public. Though the *digi* is likely to contain the image of at least one important Vajrayāna deity, it is nevertheless more of a senior club-room than a sacred shrine.

The *āga(n)*, which is generally located directly over the main non-Tantric shrine, is the centre of Vajrayāna ritual. It consists of two rooms, a large outer one which is used for both feasts and various rituals, and an inner and much more sacred chamber which contains images of Vajrayāna divinities—frequently Cakrasaṃvara, Yogāmbara and Hevajra. Once a month the most senior member of the *saṃgha*, either alone or accompanied by a Gubhāju priest,

worships the resident divinities and then joins some nine other senior men in the outer room for a feast consisting of foods and liquids that are normally avoided by devout Buddhists—meat, fish, fowl, beer, and wine.

Much of the internal organization of *bāhāḥ* membership, both as regards recruitment to office and the distribution of routine maintenance tasks, is based on the principle of ordination or initiation seniority. Each *bāhāḥ* keeps a written list of all male

TABLE 5 Main *bāhāḥ*s of Patan

	Total	members Gubhāju Branches	
1 Tanga Bāhāḥ (Jyesthavarṇamahāvihāra)	18	-	-
2 Dhum Bāhāḥ (Guṇalakṣmikirtimahāvihāra)	25	25	3
3 Cuka Bāhāḥ (Cakravarṇamahāvihāra)	-	-	-
4 Kwā Bāhāḥ (Hiranyavarṇamahāvihāra)	1600	250	29
5 Om Bāhāḥ (Suryadharmasaṅskāritavajrakirtimahāvihāra)	52	-	3
6 Dau Bāhāḥ (Rudradevagargagotravarṇasaṅskāritadattanamahāvihāra)	23	23	1
7 Ta Bāhāḥ (Bhuvanakāravarṇasaṅskāritasridharmakirtamahāvihāra)	33	33	1
8 Vu Bāhāḥ (Vighadhabrahmasaṅskāritayaśodharamahāvihāra)	505	50	11
9 Ha Bāhāḥ (Lakṣmikalyangavarṇasaṅskāritāratnakaramahāvihāra)	160	159	2
10 Jyo Bāhāḥ (Rudradevagapalasaṅskāritajetarṇamahāvihāra-Jetarṇamahāvihāra)	25	-	2
11 Guji Bāhāḥ (Vaisravarṇamahāvihāra)	171	-	3
12 Binchhe Bāhāḥ (Mayuravarṇamahāvihāra)	297	-	5
13 Oku Bāhāḥ (Rudravarṇamahāvihāra)	520	-	29
14 Yachhu Bāhāḥ (Baladharaguptasaṅskāritamahāvihāra)	-	-	-
15. Sau Bāhāḥ (Jayamahāvihāra)	41	-	2
16 Kirtipur Bāhāḥ (Padmakastagirijagalamahāvihāra)	92	50	1
17 Co Bāhāḥ (Katishapalagirimahāvihāra)	61	-	-
18 Si Bāhāḥ (Śrīvatsamahāvihāra)	235	-	5
	3858	590	97

initiated members, with each new batch of initiates added at the bottom in age order. From this list is selected, provided the membership is large enough, a governing body of ten men known as *āju* with the seniormost known as *thakāli*. In large *bāhāḥs*, such as Kwā Bāhāḥ, the ten *āju* are necessarily all very old men, in smaller *bāhāḥs* they may include a number of young men. The figure ten is regarded as highly desirable for, as in orthodox Buddhist monasteries, this is the number of monks required to be present at the ordination of new members. Likewise, ten *āju* must be present for *bāhāḥ* initiations. In the larger *bāhāḥs* the position of *āju* is highly respected and much coveted. Incumbents are installed in office in splendid ceremonies, they wear beautiful robes and insignia of office on formal occasions, they can worship the great Tantric Gods in the *āga(n)*, and are responsible for the administration and protection of the substantial property owned by the *bāhāḥ*. They are expected to meet once a month to worship the *āga(n)* divinities.

In the larger *bāhāḥs* the *āju* delegate property administration to the next three most senior men on the ordination list—men who are next in line to become *āju*. *Bāhāḥ* property consists of three main kinds: the *bāhāḥ* itself and a number of surrounding buildings—in some cases substantial residential squares and even whole streets; the images of divinities and associated paraphernalia such as ornaments, bowls, staffs of office, paintings, religious books; and some agricultural land occupied by tenants who must hand over a fixed proportion of the crops to the *bāhāḥ*. In the days of the Newar Kings, especially during the Thakuri dynasty (c. AD 750-1150), the landholdings of leading *bāhāḥs* were most extensive. Indeed, I was assured by my informants that most of their land was not lost until the Ranas confiscated large acreages in the nineteenth century in order to finance their wars with the Tibetans and the British. Today, the agricultural landholdings of leading *bāhāḥs* seldom exceed twenty acres, and are mostly a great deal less.

An additional source of *bāhāḥ* wealth is a constant flow of petty cash, grain, ghee and other like items which worshippers present at the Śākyamuni and other important *bāhāḥ* shrines. These offerings are collected by a member known as the *dyahpāhlāḥ* (lit: 'deity guardian') whose chief duty is to perform *pūjā* four times a day at the main shrine. As with all other tasks, the *dyahpāhlāḥ* duty is

allocated on the basis of ordination seniority, and according to size of *bāhāḥ* may last for either a month or a fortnight. When a given individual's turn comes he must either accept the task, pay someone to act as his stand-in, or pay a fine to the *bāhāḥ*. In large and famous *bāhāḥ*s, where literally hundreds of worshippers visit each day, the work of the *dyahpāhlāḥ* is both onerous and profitable.

It should by now be evident that the Bare may be said to be practising Buddhists insofar as they are members of well-organized associations based on the possession of specifically Buddhist sacra. Furthermore, because they maintain and administer these Buddhist shrines, it can also be said that they provide the general public with an opportunity to gain merit by performing *pūjā* and by making offerings to the main *bāhāḥ* divinities. The only castes excluded from *bāhāḥ* worship are those few whose members are regarded as impure—approximately 7 per cent of the Newar population.

I would now like to give a brief descriptive account of three important Bare initiation rites—*bare chuyegu*, *ācāḥ luyegu* and *dikha*. I hope not only to convey in more positive terms something of what the term Buddhist means for these people, but also to provide a framework for discussion of two of the most important ways in which the Bare cater for the religious needs of other castes—by acting as family priests and by organizing popular cults.

Bare chuyegu

Bare chuyegu, which means literally 'Bare making', is a ritual that all male Bare must undergo in order to be recognized as members both of a *saṃgha* and of the Bare caste. Because this involves considerable expenditure, parents prefer to wait until they have sufficient sons amongst them to stage a joint ceremony. The boys, who are usually aged from about one to six years old, are first ritually purified at home and then brought to the *bāhāḥ* where they have their heads shaved, are given monastic dress, and take vows identical to those taken by novices entering a Hināyāna *saṃgha*. The ceremony, which is a solemn though colourful affair, lasts the whole day and is presided over by the ten *āju* dressed in their curious semi-monastic garments. For the next four days the boys, wearing their tiny and perfect replicas of monastic garb including gown, sandals, begging bowl and staff, act the role of monks. Every day they must

visit seven houses as mendicants, and they are prohibited from eating meat, salt, onions and rice. On the fifth day, however, they all solemnly return to the *bāhāḥ* where they inform the senior *āju* that they have found the vows too hard and would like to be released in order to become lay followers (*upāsaka*). During a long and complicated disrobing ceremony the boys are told that though they have renounced the monks' life (referred to here as Sravakayāna—a term commonly used by Mahāyāna Buddhists to refer to what they regard as the inferior Hināyāna doctrine), Mahāyāna Buddhism nevertheless offers them the chance to achieve enlightenment as lay householders. Later in the same evening the boys return home where their family priests introduce them to a number of elementary Vajrayāna rituals in which the chief Tantric God, Cakrasaṃvara, figures. After showing the boy a painting of Cakrasaṃvara and explaining some of his characteristic features a good priest should say something along the following lines:

You have gone through Sravakayāna, that is, through Hināyāna monasticism, and now come to Mahāyāna, the greater of the two main Buddhist *yānas*. You have also participated in some Vajrayāna rituals and after going through some higher ordinations you will really know what Cakrasaṃvara is.

In sociological terms *bare chuyegu* is a simple initiation rite in which the boy gains membership of his father's *bāhāḥ* and through it of his caste also. In cultural terms the rite initiates the boy into a Buddhist tradition in which the three great doctrines of Hināyāna, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna are represented as increasingly higher forms, and of increasingly greater relevance for the boy.

Ācāḥ luyegu

As previously noted, the Bare caste is divided into two sections, the smaller and superior Gubhāju and the larger and inferior Śākya. Though the two sections freely eat together and inter-marry,³ the Gubhāju stand apart through their exclusive right to act as family priests, a right which is confirmed by taking a second ordination

³ Rosser (1966:126) refers to the rarity of inter-marriage in Kathmandu; a fact which he relates to the growing status insecurity of Kathmandu Gubhājus.

known as *ācāḥ luyegu*. *Luyegu*, like *chuyegu*, is a Newar word which means 'making' or 'fashioning', while *ācāḥ* simply stands for Vajrācārya (literally 'thunderbolt master'), the proper Sanskrit term for the Gubhāju. In other words, the name of the rite indicates its precise meaning—it is a 'making of a Vajrācārya or a Gubhāju'. The importance of the ceremony is evident in that if the son of a Gubhāju should fail to take it he not only loses his right to practise as a family priest, but will cease to be known as a Gubhāju and become a Bare of the Śākya kind.

The main part of this most interesting ceremony takes place in the *āga(n)* of the *bāhāḥ*. The initiator is a Vajrācārya *purohit* (and not a *bāhāḥ* elder), and the novice is presented with the paraphernalia and insignia of a *purohit* Vajrācārya. One of the rites indicates most graphically the radical anti-celibacy of the form of Buddhism associated with the Gubhāju priesthood. After the youth has had all his insignia and garments presented to him he dons them and performs his first *pūjā* in the *āga(n)*. Placed in front of him is a metal bowl known as *pātra* which contains red beer and is covered by a blue cloth. He lifts the cloth, drops a small piece of gold in the beer, dips his fingers in the liquid and rubs his eyes with it, and then lets three drops fall on his tongue. Finally he takes the gold piece from the bowl and carefully places it on his forehead. My *purohit* informant interpreted the rite as follows: the red beer is female, literally womb-liquid, while the gold piece is male spermatozoa. The female part stands for *prajñā*—the wisdom of Vajrayāna Buddhism—while the male part stands for *upāya*—the method or practice of wisdom. When the boy rubs his eyes with the beer he is literally opening them with knowledge, when he tastes it he has the direct physical experience or sensation of wisdom. Furthermore, the act of dropping the gold in the beer is, as are all such symbolic fusions of male and female, a means of gaining enlightenment. The gold piece placed on his forehead is called the third-eye; the eye that sees truth, the eye of wisdom or *prajñā*.

After some further ritual the novice then descends from the *āga(n)* to the *bāhāḥ* courtyard where he is met either by his wife or by some female relative such as sister or niece. He is wearing his full priest's regalia and he asks his female relative to take the role of his client or *jajmān* so that together they may perform *pūjā*.

Ācāḥ luyegu confers on the novice the right to perform only a limited range of Vajrayāna rituals. It consists of all those routine rites that a family priest might be expected to perform, mostly associated with the client's life-cycle, and with purificatory rites. *Ācāḥ luyegu* does not, however, give the right to perform esoteric Vajrayāna rituals known as *guhya* (literally 'secret' or 'hidden') *pūjā*. These are the Tantric rites performed in the *āga(n)* including those associated with a third important initiatory complex known as *dikha*, to which I refer below.

The priest-client or *purohit-jajmān* relationship is analogous to the typical Brahman-client relationship found all over India—it is hereditary, and centres on the performance of a wide range of domestic rituals. The Gubhāju of Patan have as their clients all Bare and Urāy, a substantial though declining number of Śreṣṭha, most of the Jyāpu and a majority of the artisan castes. The *ācāḥ luyegu* ceremony simply confers the right to act as a *purohit* priest and I would estimate that only about one in five Gubhāju in fact enter the profession. The rest take up metal-work, teaching and either clerical or administrative work in Government departments. Despite the hereditary transmission of the priest-client relationship, the fact that many Gubhāju decline their inheritance means that there is a regular and substantive market in clients. By this I mean that a Gubhāju who inherits clients from his father may sell such rights to any other practising Gubhāju.

Dikha

The third major initiatory complex is known as *dikṣā* (Sanskrit) or *dikha* (Newari). Where *bare chuyegu* may be said to constitute a symbolic initiation into monkhood, and *ācāḥ luyegu* into the profession of family priest, the *dikha* ceremony constitutes an initiation into a still narrower circle of Vajrayāna mystics. As in many so-called primitive societies, the *dikha* is essentially a ritual in which the novices are brought into the presence of objects and actions of great ritual potency. In local terms it is an initiation into some of the mysteries of Tantric Buddhism.

The ceremonies are always large-scale affairs with fifty to one hundred novices, and they take place at irregular and infrequent intervals. They begin whenever a Gubhāju of outstanding fame, not

only as a priest but also as an exponent or teacher (*guruju*) of Vajrayāna doctrines, decides to hold one. He is known as Guruba and his wife as Gurumā, and together they take the roles of senior joint initiators. Another leading Gubhāju is appointed as *upādhyāya*, that is, chief assistant and he too is joined by his wife. An additional ten senior Gubhāju who have themselves taken their *dikha* in the past, together with their wives, join the group initiators. Another small group of previously initiated Gubhāju perform as Tantric singers (*cācāpa*), and finally a further ten couples act as assistant organizers of various kinds.

When all of the organizers and initiators have been arranged the Guruba then hires a large building for the occasion and three rooms are set aside for the ceremonies—one is a large outer room where various preparatory and purificatory rites take place, another is referred to as the 'outer' *āga(n)* and is the scene of instruction in basic Tantric ritual procedures, while the third is the inner or secret (*guhya*) *āga(n)* where the great Tantric divinities possess the Guruba and Gurumā. For some weeks the organizers try to muster as many novices as possible—the more they get, the better the chance that entrance fees will cover the huge expenses involved. Novices must all be initiated Bares, i.e. have taken their *bare chuyegu*, and in order to be accepted as novices they must enrol at the *dikha* house together with a female partner, either their wives or such close relatives as sisters or nieces.

The rites take place over a period of about ten days and may be roughly divided into three categories each of which is progressively more secret, Tantric and powerful than that which precedes it. The first consists of purificatory, protective or power-invoking rites which take place in the novices' homes or in a large outer room in the *dikha* house. The second, which takes place in the outer *āga(n)* is the instruction of the novices in some basic Tantric ritual actions—they learn hand-movements, *sūtras* and chants and they also witness dances performed by experts. The third, which takes place in the inner sanctum, the secret *āga(n)*, focuses on bringing the novices directly into the presence of the chief Tantric divinities. In symbolic form the deities are in the *āga(n)*, represented by paintings and images, and these are shown to the novices. But the Gods are themselves present in the *āga(n)* through possession of the

Guruba and Gurumā, the head initiator and his female partner. Indeed, the most distinctive feature of the whole *dikha* complex is the notion that Vajrasattva and his female counterpart Vajradevī are in continuous possession of the Guruba and Gurumā, a fact which they periodically and stylistically affirm by shakings and twistings.

The novices, themselves paired off as male and female, worship a divinity who is fully bisexual and in possession of a man and a woman. The *dikha* takes the bisexual theme first hinted at in the *ācāḥ luyegu* ceremony to an extreme—some texts indicate that ritual copulation takes place during the *dikha*. It might well be asked just how such an ideology relates to the fundamental Buddhist notion that enlightenment is wholly dependant on perceiving the unimportance, indeed unreality, of all forms of sensory experience. For a well-educated follower of Vajrayāna the answer is simple. Monastic Buddhism with all its vows and abstinences is the appropriate road to enlightenment for those of weak intellect. The vows protect the weak from the suffering that would otherwise result from attachment to sensory experience. But the belittling of sensory experience is a means and not an end in itself, it is a means to the universally agreed aim of extinguishing the source of all suffering—the pernicious notion of the self. Provided one has a strong intellect, or so argues the Vajrayāna philosopher, there is no need at all to reject sensory experience; indeed, to do so merely gives it an exaggerated importance. On the contrary, the quickest and most effective way to gain enlightenment is to obliterate the self not by abstinence but by self indulgence.

Whatever we may think of Tantric logic, it is I think clear enough that much of the religion is based on a simple inversion of orthodox monastic Buddhism—sex in place of celibacy, long hair instead of shaven pates, indulgence instead of abstinence, consumption of alcohol instead of sobriety (see Dasgupta 1974:179-98; Eliade 1958:200-73; and Rawson 1971).

I now revert to the issue raised in the first part of the paper—the necessity for Buddhism without the patronage of the powerful to move from elitist monasticism to popular folk religion. From what I have said it is evident that the Newars have done so in part by maintaining their *vihāras* as temples open for public worship, in part by offering their priestly services to pure castes, and in part by

espousing an ideology that places high value on women, meat, drink and other good things of the sensory world. But in all three contexts major limitations arise from the fact that Newar society is organized on a caste basis. Though all pure castes can enter the *bāhāhs* and worship at the main shrine, only senior members of that particular *samgha* can worship the most powerful deities in the *digi* and *āga(n)*. Impure castes cannot avail themselves of Gubhāju priestly services, and only members of the Bare caste are permitted to participate in the powerful *dikha* rites.

If these were the only contexts in which Newar Buddhism were operative I very much doubt if it would have survived as long as it has. There is, however, a fourth and most important context, the development of a large number of popular cults based on the worship of deities which though usually equated with recognizable Buddhist Gods, are nevertheless revered for their miraculous powers either to harm or assist mortals. Each God is housed in a *bāhāh*, usually one of the leading initiatory ones, and the Gubhājus of that *bāhāh* are the custodians of the God, the organizers of regular festivals and *pūjās* in its honour, and the recipients of large quantities of offerings made by devotees.

To take one example, Matsyendranāth, one of the two most important divinities in Nepal, is housed in a splendid three-tiered pagoda-style temple in the centre of the courtyard of Tanga Bāhāh in Patan. The great God stands ignored for most of the year, but in April, a short while prior to the usual beginning of the monsoon, he is taken out of his house and put in another temple mounted on a huge cart and surmounted by a gigantic pole. He is then brought on a triumphant procession around the city visiting every locality where residents come out to do *pūjā* and make offerings. At the end a dirty red shirt is exhibited, and from then on everyone has supreme confidence that the rains will come soon. Once every twelve years the ceremony is even more splendid for the God is first brought to his country residence in Bungamati, a small town 4 miles out of Patan. Over a period of about one month the huge cart is pulled laboriously across country to Patan, for its tour of the city. Altogether thousands participate in the pulling, hundreds of thousands make offerings and perhaps half a million see and worship the God. Hindu devotees equate Matsyendranāth with Śiva

and Buddhists equate him with Avalokiteśvara, Lord of the Universe. He is worshipped by all Newars regardless of caste or religion, but he is wholly owned, administered by and ritually controlled by Buddhist priests.

Though Matsyendranāth towers over all other *bāhāh*-housed popular divinities, there are many others of a similar kind. In each case they are kept in free-standing temples, *bāhāh* members organize festivals during which the image of the presiding deity is brought on procession in a ceremonial cart, and the deities themselves are regarded as having special powers that are highly relevant for the populace at large. Thus, some are responsible for both the affliction and curing of smallpox, others bring wealth, and yet others protect from demons or devils.

Perhaps I can best conclude with the somewhat ironic observation that just as these popular cults provide the main basis of support for the Bare and their way of life, they are also the furthest removed from that which is recognizably Buddhist in Bare traditional culture. This is true not only of the nature of the deities, but also of the associated ritual and mythology. The Bare are, and perhaps have been ever since they forsook monasticism, Buddhists of such a highly eclectic kind that formal identification is no longer a simple matter. In this paper I have suggested that such a development has been significantly correlated with the progressive reduction of political patronage.

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