Hindu and Buddhist Initiations in India and Nepal
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Initiation as a Site of Cultural Conflict among the Newars*

The meanings and uses of initiation

Rituals of initiation have loomed large in the anthropological imagination. They are among the most dramatic of rituals that anthropologists encounter in the field. Initiation rituals frequently challenge or invert the conventions and expectations of normal life, thereby both drawing attention to those conventions and breaching them. At the same time, such rituals play a crucial role either in creating new social units or in recruitment to, and the perpetuation of, existing units.

As Van Gennep was the first to point out, the three-phase structure of initiation rituals—separation, liminality, and reincorporation—helps to create new persons. Whether the liminal phase simply reinforces existing rules, or actually opens up the possibility of change and resistance, has been an important line of debate and development within anthropology. Thus Victor Turner’s interest in the ritual and symbolism of the Ndembu developed later into a theory of communitas and an interest in pilgrimage. Some, such as Kapferer (1997) and Grimes (1991), have seen in the liminal nature of ritual potentials for innovation and creativity. Others, such as Kertzer (1988) and Tilly (2004), have seen the same in new political uses of ritual.

Initiation rituals have also been at the centre of Bloch’s attempts (1986, 1992) to define ritual as such. His global theory is built on the examples of Merina circumcision and the frightening initiation of the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea: in his view all ritual is built on “rebounding violence”, i.e. the revitalizing force that initiates come to embody, once they come out the other end of the experience, thanks to being subject to, and going through, the process of the ritual.1 In a radically different approach, Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) have outlined a sophisticated theory of ritualization based on a very different kind of ritual, the Jain practice of pūjā in Rajasthan. Finally, in the new cognitive anthropology of religion, Harvey Whitehouse argues that frightening initiation rituals form one of two major poles or ideal types of religion, the other being

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1 I have criticized Bloch’s theory for being overly monistic, i.e. for forcing all types of ritual into the Procrustean bed of Durkheimian, community-focused rituals, among which festivals and life-cycle rituals are the most common (Gellner 1999).
The problem with all these anthropological approaches is that the empirical basis on which they are built is too narrow. They all are illuminating so far as they go, but they illegitimately generalize insights about one kind of ritual to all ritual. I believe that one must recognize at least three fundamentally different kinds of ritual action, namely, 1) soteriological, 2) social or communal, and 3) instrumental. Each kind of ritual has a characteristically different intentional stance. Soteriological ritual is undergone as a kind of training or discipline, social or communal ritual in order to carry out one’s obligations and/or to achieve a social result, and instrumental ritual in order to bring about some advantageous change in the material world. Another way to put this is to say that the three types of ritual are oriented respectively towards 1) the other world and transforming the self, 2) society, and 3) nature.

From this point of view, one must ask whether Humphrey and Laidlaw’s characterization of the ritual stance—action that is intentionless, in which the normal relation between intention and action is “disrupted”—provides a good model for all types of ritual, or whether, rather, it fits their soteriological example, but is less appropriate to the other two types. Likewise, Bloch’s model is based on the example of a violent initiation ritual, and he struggles to apply the model to Japan (which lacks animal sacrifice) as well as to other, less obviously communal rituals. Finally, Whitehouse’s model, though it has the virtue of positing two types and not just one, is, in my opinion, too simple, and too Judaeo-Christian in its assumptions, to grasp the full complexity of ritual types.

In the present case, I shall be considering boys’ and girls’ initiation rituals among the Newars, leaving to one side other kinds of initiation, such as dīkṣā (tantric initiation). These sacraments are, or at least were, considered essential for all “clean”-caste Newars, and no one could be married without having been through them. There were prescribed methods of going through them, all of which required the presence of a priest, either a Brahman or a Vajrācārya. Some were normally carried out in large groups, others in small groups or singly. All involved at least some expense for the household of the child. For most households they did not trigger an extravagant feast, as with weddings, but a trend towards large-scale celebrations of initiations has been observable for some years. These rituals are—for the boys—cast in a soteriological idiom, for all that they are paradigmatic social-communal rites. For the traditional girls’ rituals, by contrast, the dominant metaphor is that of marriage. It is surely no coinci-

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2 What Whitehouse’s theory may not capture is the way in which initiation rituals are highly routinized in South Asian culture, and therefore are not particularly traumatic for those who go through them. The means by which their exegesis is passed on is closer to doctrinal religion than to imagistic religion, in his terms, and thus there is a thorough muddling of the types and not the tendency in complex ritual systems that he predicts for them to be “attracted” to one pole or the other; presumably he would explain this by saying that “lay versions of the world religions [often] migrate away from both of our modal attractor positions and settle around more easily acquired, intuitive concepts and practices” (Whitehouse 2004: 74). The problem here is that most of learned and Sanskritic Hinduism becomes a “lay version” of a world religion.

3 On the latter among the Newars, see Gellner (1992: ch. 9) and Levy (1990: 314–7).
ence that the main re-modelling in the modern period should involve the introduction of a girls’ initiation rite that is also in a soteriological idiom.

In addition to flagging up the obvious and important gender contrast, one must note that we are dealing here with a hierarchical world. In this world, the divide between gods and humans is far from absolute—in the terms that Eriksen introduces for the discussion of ethnicity, the divide is analogical rather than digital, a question of more or less rather than either/or (Eriksen 1993: 66–7). But while the cosmos is seen in this essentially graded and hierarchical form (cf. Levy 1990), the purpose of initiation rituals is often either to create a clearly bounded social group (so that people are unambiguously either in or out) or clearly and unambiguously to establish belonging to a pre-existing social group on the part of the individual passing through the rite. In other words, ritual is used to impose digital precision on an analogue universe. Some are made unambiguously to belong; others are left unambiguously as excluded. Thus Dalits, deprived of high-caste priestly services and denied the opportunity to go through Sanskritically legitimated initiation rituals, are condemned for being “without dharma” and are correspondingly viewed, traditionally, as being non-persons or lesser persons.4

Ritual among high-caste Newar boys

A striking aspect of initiation among the Newars is its connection to social status. The form of the ritual, i.e. by whom it is done and in what ritual idiom, is determined by the caste of the parents. None the less, there is a sense in which the ritual is an individual matter, conferring adulthood, but not of itself granting membership in any collectivity beyond the household. Thus the sons of lower-caste mothers were entitled to the same kind of initiation, but simply going through the ritual does not of itself confer membership in the lineage organizations of the father. That membership is conferred by the combination of the ritual and the acceptable status of the mother. For most Newars the ritual takes place at home and the question of belonging will be decided elsewhere, at the annual worship of the lineage deity or similar ritual. By contrast, for Śākya and Vajrācārya boys, the fact that initiation normally takes place within the father’s monastic complex (vihāra, colloquially bāhā or bahī), means that these two social events—symbolic entry into adulthood and joining the descent-based socio-religious guild of the father—occur through a single ritual event. For this reason, sons of a Śākya or Vajrācārya man by a lower-caste woman may not go through the initiation ritual in their father’s bāhā or bahī but must do it elsewhere, either at a convenient caitya, or, nowadays, in a Theravāda vihāra instead, a procedure which is understood to “make the boy a Buddhist” but which confers membership in no social grouping.

Because of this overwhelming need to belong to an established bāhā or bahī, Śākya and Vajrācārya families, until the end of the Rana period in 1951, used to trek at enormous expense in time and money, from all over Nepal, in order to have their boys intiti-

bārhā. For men it has to do with educating girls about menstruation. Women denied this and said it was about training girls for daily ritual, and also getting them accustomed to the fasting and denial of performing vrata. The one thing he did not mention was the introduction of Theravāda life-cycle rituals. The reason is, no doubt, that both Theravāda monastics themselves and reflective laypeople are somewhat uneasy at the thought that the monastics are coming to resemble Vajrācāryas—that is to say, that their main raison d’être is the performance of ritual services for lay people. In their view Theravāda Buddhism is not about providing priestly services, and in this they are certainly true to long-established views within Theravāda Buddhism, a point which has not always been properly understood.

None the less, in the struggle to reform Newar Buddhism, and in the move to distinguish Buddhism as far as possible from Hinduism, the provision of alternative life-cycle rituals was a key step, just as it was a key step in the survival of Newar Buddhism in a Hindu environment in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This move—using life-cycle rituals to define a separate and to some extent oppositional social identity—is a strategy that is now being followed, quite consciously and deliberately, by other ethnic groups, such as the Magars, who have no verifiable history of Buddhist practice at all. It is entirely consonant with the egalitarian ethos of modernizing Buddhism, and the stress on female empowerment, that an older ritual with a symbolic focus on marriage and the dangers of menstrual impurity should be replaced by a renunciatory ritual with a message of hard work and book study, one that parallels the rituals for boys. It is perhaps a sign of a continued attachment to much of traditional Newar culture that girls continue to go through the other female initiation rite, namely mock marriage to a bel

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17 Emmrich also notes that bārhā is often identified in handbooks with garbhādhāna. Ancient commentaries differed on whether garbhādhāna is to be performed for the unborn embryo (and therefore has to be done frequently) or for the woman, in which case it is done just once after she is married. If ihi is the marriage, then bārhā is garbhādhāna.

18 The remarks he cites about riṣiṇi pabbajjā and sāmaneri pabbajjā (where the girl shaves her head and undertakes 10 precepts, not just 8), bear out the interpretation I have given of motivations for replacing the traditional way of doing bārhā.


fruit. In other words, discourses of “superstition” are mobilized contextually and rarely systematically.

Both the traditional forms of these initiation rituals and the new modernized adaptations must be seen primarily as expressions of identity—in the first case of particular caste and religious identities, in the latter of new understandings, and contestations of older attributions. In the case of the traditional girls’ rituals it was a question of taming powers (of sexuality), rather than of using liminality to imbue vitality as Bloch would have it. In the more soteriologically oriented boys’ rituals, based on values of renunciation, once again the symbolic load is not obviously to do with violence or the incorporation of sources of vitality. In all of them it is a question of transforming the child into a particular kind of adult in a highly structured and plural society. Where there is a social unit into which the boy is being initiated, as with Newar Buddhists, there are plenty of other social forces supporting and reinforcing that identity: the group does not need to be created by the inherent power of the ritual; in those cases where a large group of boys are initiated together, no specific bond is created between them, other than that they all belong to the monastery where the initiation takes place. There is no need for the ritual to be particularly dramatic or traumatic in order to impress itself on the boy’s memory forever—though becoming a monk for four days, or an ascetic for one day, is a dramatic and unusual enough break from everyday routine that it is hardly likely to be forgotten. In short, the pressures which would push the initiation ritual in the direction of what Whitehouse calls imagistic religion are also largely absent. What there is instead is a public demonstration of the religious allegiances of the child and their household. Given that religion is a highly salient aspect of identities in Nepal, it is not surprising that these rituals have, just as religion has, been subject to considerable modification, change, and substitution in the last fifty years. Naresh Man’s use of the bhikṣu luyegu ritual is a response to and an imitation of the Theravādins’ temporary pabbajjā rite, which is itself a response and potential replacement for the Vajrācāryas’ traditional bare chuveyegu ritual, which in turn is an ancient adaptation of monastic initiation going back almost to the Buddha’s time.21 Naresh Man’s innovation is thus one more link in the on-going debates between Buddhists over the meaning of renunciation and over the consequences of the ritual of renunciation for relationships with significant others.

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