Ritual, Conflict and Consensus:
Case Studies from Asia and Europe
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In contemporary political communication, social realities tend to be portrayed in two alternative ways – both of which can have a bearing on ritual practice. On the one hand, collective boundedness is stressed: nations continue to be taken as key categories in our understanding of the contemporary world (see Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), and nation-building has significantly buttressed ethnicity formation (Gellner 1983, Anderson 1983). The “ethnic explosion” (Hall 1996) has resulted in a collectivisation of the public understanding of contemporary sociability – which translates into all social spheres, including the economic markets that increasingly cater to “the ethnic lens” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). On the other hand, “the social” increasingly presents itself as fragmented, flexible, individualised, or even atomised. Mobility and reflexive scrutiny of established orders as well as conflictive dynamics of ethnic boundary-making (Wimmer 2008; Lamont and Molnár 2002) have contested holistic understandings of social boundedness. The second perspective challenges the first one, and in doing so it questions the salience of rituals, because their raison d’être is to forge collective cohesion and hence common belonging.

This tension will be in the forefront of this chapter, in which I ask how rituals face and evolve under the conditions of rapid social change and what their contribution is in a time when collective belonging is under siege. The empirical basis for this analysis will be the recent ethnification of political communication in Nepal, which has turned the ritual complex ‘Dasain’ – also known as ‘Durga Puja’ – into a moment of crystallisation in ethnic self-assertion. This Hindu ritual complex came into the focus of ethnic activism because in the course of the last two centuries its powerful architects instrumentalised it in order to forge a vision of national unity that co-evolved with a pronounced hierarchical order, rendering ethnic minority groups inferior to Hindu rulers and other members of high castes. Today, ethnic minority activists position themselves against hierarchies and inequalities as well as vis-à-vis Hindu domination. Their conflicts have evolved around these issues, even thrive on them, especially in targeting Dasain. Time and again, ethnic minority activists have questioned Nepal’s unity, by challenging the very bases of its self-depictions and the ensuing ritualisation of state power through this ritual form.

Policy challenges to the Durga Puja ritual complex became an intrinsic, almost ritualised element of ethnic activism in contemporary Nepal, inspiring extensive scholarly research. Before ethnic self-assertion and its going public started in 1990, the sheer magnitude and the elaboration of this Hindu festival prompted a number of academic inquiries. Scholars went into the specificities of ritual performance as well as into the relations of power and hierarchy (see in particular the collection edited by Krauskopf and Lecomte-Tifouine 1996) in Nepal’s political space. Bennett (1983) had a fascinating take on how the ritual was enacted in the interpersonal relations among kin. She demonstrated that the hierarchical nature of the polity was mirrored in the kin interrelations and showed how “the public” penetrated into “the private”. After 1990, the scholarly interest turned to examining why and how Dasain became a focus of political conflict. The ensuing publications revealed resentment of numerous Nepalese Buddhists seeking publicly to cleanse Nepal’s realm of the sin incurred through animal sacrifice accompanying the celebrations (see below). Other accounts discussed political conflicts in towns and villages conducted by ethnic minority leaders reacting to the way the ritual symbolised the political and economic supremacy of high-caste elites (PFAFF-CZARNECKA 1996) within a society characterised by a pronounced ethnic and religious diversity. Recent inquiries discuss the challenges to

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1 The author wishes to thank Christian Jaboda, Gabriela Klišanová, Michaela Ferencová as well as the participants of the Martin Chautari venue for their comments to the earlier versions of this article, while naturally accepting full responsibility for any shortcomings of this text.

2 For the sake of legibility, all Nepalese terms will be transcribed without diacritics.

the Durga Puja by ethnic minority activists aimed at transforming the political and symbolic framework of the polity (Hangen 2005, Shreiderman 2005, 2009, Holenberg 2010).

The opposition to Hindu ritualisation of the Nepalese politics and to Hindu domination in most societal realms, materialising in the Dasaain boycotts, is currently an integral part of a much larger project geared at restructuring state politics and at re-defining its nature and its legitimising features. Precisely because of its centrality, both in the Hindu ritual practices as well as in the agonistic movement(s), the negotiations surrounding Dasaain provide us with a fertile ground for a reflection on the process of shaping public meanings in contemporary Nepal’s political communication and on the even broader forces shaping political change. In order to grasp this centrality and the resilience of ritual practice it is necessary to pinpoint the central features of power rituals. Of course, it is impossible to do justice to ritual theory, which is thriving at the moment. Nevertheless, it is crucial to lay out five approaches that have shaped this inquiry and the following argument.

**FIVE RITUAL-THEORY APPROACHES TO THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF RITUALS**

First I follow David Geirner (1999), who distinguishes three types of religiosity, which translate into three forms of ritual practice. The first type relates to soteriology, i.e. turning towards God, quest for salvation. The second consists in the social character of religion and ritual, forging collective bonds. Third, Geirner highlights the instrumental character of religion and ritual. Ritual can aim at succeeding in any social venture, in attaining a religious merit, or in representing and stabilising political power. Many rituals combine all these three dimensions which usually results in their ambivalence. According to Kertzer (1989), the polysemies of the ritual meanings are what gives them their strength: actors tend to attach different notions to any given ritual complex and to select from ritual repertoires according to context (Pflaftz-Carnewa 1996). In order to understand the following analysis, all three dimensions of ritual must be acknowledged while paying attention to their interlocking nature.

Second I take up the central thesis of the large collaborative research programme since 2003 at the University of Heidelberg (Sonderforschungsbereich 619) examining rituals, suggesting that they need to be understood in their dynamics, as its title “Ritualdynamiiken” suggests. In particular, the tension between the ritual script and the ritual performance has dynamising effects (Harth and Michaelsen 2003). Texts, for instance myths but also the rules underlying the ritual performance, are understood here as “script”. The “performance” denotes the ritual action – in which numerous *dramatis personae* join in, all sharing in the production of meanings. The ritual performance therefore does not simply follow predetermined rules; it is embodied and transformative. Following from this, I suggest that the dynamic nature of rituals comes about with the multiplicity of social positionings evolving in the course of ritual practice and their negotiations over meanings. Victor Turner (1967) saw rituals as “of forest of symbols” to which actors relate in their negotiations. In this vein, Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) spoke of conflicting approaches to the world that come to light in the ritual production of meanings. In ritual practice, the negotiations result in symbolic compromises that can further buttress ritual dynamics. Furthermore, when we consider that today, under the conditions of reflexive modernity (to speak with Ulrich Beck et al. 1994), practices are subject to reflexive scrutiny, then rituals can become particularly embattled areas (Pflaftz-Carnewa 1996) – where visions of sociability, terrains of cultural transmission and collective memories are at stake.

Third, rituals are very dense social situations (see my analysis of Dasaain, Pflaftz-Carnewa 1996) and they reflect and reproduce social orders: hierarchies, norms of belonging, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries, indeed, frontiers of the social. Rituals can cement social orders (in their instrumental dimension), and since they represent normative orders they are particularly well-suited to becoming targets of dissent in times of social upheaval. When power can thrive so well in rituals, then challenges to power, to those in power and their representations, find very fruitful ground in the ritual language. Challengers can then deploy ritual symbols while creatively shaping their meanings.

Fourth, since neither the social, nor the political realm can be thought as devoid of time or space, these dimensions need to be taken into consideration. The research on rituals is not yet sufficiently developed in this field. In particular, it is important to grasp how rituals could and can evolve across significant spatial distances, how they produce the simultaneity and orchestration of ritual action in space-time and how they forge transcendence. With increasing transnationalisation, the way in which rituals are transplanted into new social settings and the dynamics that accompany these processes are also of interest. Also, what properties, what strength do rituals have that compel people scattered across the world to synchronise their ritual practice?

Finally, (fifth) I take up Michael Opperz’s (1999) idea that rituals consist of distinctive elements out of which they are constructed. They are put together, indeed assembled, as building blocks at a construction site in the course of ritual action. This metaphor makes it possible at least partly to grasp how rituals can be transported over long distances in time and space, how they can be transported into different cultural contexts, and how the ritual language can be enriched by continuously including new elements. In addition, it is important to note that the possibility of including new ritual units can render rituals all the more equivocal. In this vein, rituals tend to become polysemic communicative social facts that transmit between yesterday, today and tomorrow while gaining in the symbolic wealth of their repertoires – as has been the case with the Nepalese Dasaain.

When I speak of the power of ritual, I am not according it a primacy in shaping action and meanings. I follow Catherine Bell (1997: 73), who very nicely expressed that the rituals do not form people but that actors shape their rituals, which then influence their social worlds. What endows rituals with this power still needs to be researched. The Nepalese Dasaain provides us with some important insights, as I shall argue: the specificity of the ritual language; its cyclical, perennally returning character, which confers this ritual with a power of factual force; the equivocality as well as the repertoire of ritual elements, which can be exchanged, moulded and transported into new contexts. Furthermore, this ritual offers frames, i.e. semantics providing orientation for action, which allows actors to forge their belonging and to position themselves in political communication.

**ON THE ASYMMETRIC ENTANGLEMENTS IN NEPAL’S HISTORY**

The challenges to Durga Puja, on the one hand, and its resilience in today’s embattled times, on the other, reveal the embedded nature of political symbolisation within the country’s complex socio-political structure. Of importance here is the country’s cultural and religious differentiation, inequality as well as its territorial range and diversity. In order to grasp the cultural drama unfolding around Dasaain, I will use an analytical framework highlighting the entangled nature of political symbolisation in Nepal’s past and present. In Nepal’s political communication from the perspective of its entangled history means seeing political meanings enacted in ritual action – as resulting from on-going social negotiations through which meanings are shaped, where they interlock and acquire salience. Entanglements are complex interrelations between actors, discourses, and meanings. They come to light particularly well when rituals of power – such as Dasaain – are contested in their entirety or in their specific meanings. Furthermore, it is important to stress that their entangled history is a shared one in the sense that processes of change are multidirectional. This gives meanings imposed upon ruled populations, for instance, new local shades and connotations in the course of the negotiations through which they are incorporated into the local practice. This analytical figure takes up the idea of emerging salience of meanings through negotiated interpenetration – as the governmentality approach suggests (Li 2007).

Of course, historical entanglements throughout Nepal’s history have always been asymmetric. Durga Puja is a perfect case in point. When a united Nepal came into existence under the sword of Hindu rulers in the second half of the 18th century, Hinduism and its symbols came to embrace Nepal’s polity and society, with the Durga Puja from the first half of the 19th century emerging as the ritual of power (Pflaftz-Carnewa 1993). Hindu rulers played an active part in imposing the performance of this ritual throughout the kingdom and providing incentives for it, for instance by land donations to temples and priests performing the rituals and by contributing funds for the sacrificial animals. The entanglement perspective sees the subject positions –
for instance those embraced by ethnic leaders – as active in simultaneously contesting as well as incorpo-
rating ritual elements of those in power, which resulted in transporting them into the local meanings and
practice.

The concept of asymmetric entanglement(s) helps us capture the ways in which imposed symbolic orders
could become incorporated into subjugated life-worlds, by means of which they become durably established,
and how resentment could be nurtured over long periods – without overtly coming to the fore until the politi-
cal crystallisation moment of ethnic discontent. Numerous ethnographies published before the current public
ethnic self-assertion started have documented the ethnic elites’ use of Durga Puja to reinforce their own poli-
tical position (see Pfaff-Czarnecka 1996) and different ethnic performances populating the rites of the Durga
Puja in a fully affirmative mode (Hofér 1986). The nature of gendering in Hindu Nepal is fully re-
vealed through the lens of asymmetric entanglement: the scope of the rulers’ imposition of the Hindu ritual
framework throughout the polity, the negotiated nature of its interpretatio into the local political spaces
and life-worlds, and the mechanisms through which this state ritual acquired a salience among the majority
of the Nepalese population until the present day.

Mechanisms of incorporation through asymmetric entanglements refer to institutionalised practices main-
taining the durability of symbolic orders and making for their naturalness. Power rituals acquire salience
through expanding in space: politics thrive on the ritualisation of political communication by demonstrating
the territorial span of rule through ritual performance by local elites as well as by highlighting ritual inter-
connectedness between the diverse sites of ritual performance. Also, rituals become an intrinsic element in
practices of temporalisation in a given (national) society. Dates of political rituals are fixed in national calen-
dars following a given religious canon, dictating public holidays and, by doing so, shaping the pace and
rhythm of social practices, causing them to evolve. Furthermore, rituals contribute to creating meanings
that buttress collective differentiation and hierarchies. They evolve as reservoirs of knowledge and create rou-
tines interlinking actors across diverse social sites. The example of Durga Puja reveals how durable such
symbolic orders are and how they inspire dissent and challenges. It also shows how it provides grounds for
articulation and mobilisation against political contests because of the shared salience of meanings. But before intro-
ducing the Durga Puja ritual complex of Nepal and analysing its politicisation, it is important to consider
Nepal’s history in order to understand the momentum of ethnic activism today.

**ON ETHNIC ASSIMILATION SINCE THE FORMATION OF THE NEPALESE STATE UNTIL 1990**

Nepal came to being in its present form in the second half of the 18th century, after in 1742 King Prithvi Na-
rayan Shah of the small Himalayan princely state of Gorkha started military conquest of some 60 political
units within the current territory of Nepal. Under the Hindu sword, the forced unification brought not only
different political forms together but also very diverse populations – ethnically, linguistically and religiously.
I distinguish three different political phases that characterise three subsequent attempts at forging unity out of
the pronounced cultural diversity. The first phase culminated in the year 1854, when the rulers declared that
the diverse population formed a hierarchical caste society. The national Civil Code of Nepal promulgated in
that year declared Nepal’s population in its entirety to be divided into hierarchically ranked caste groups,
with the double-born Hindu-castes at the top, the ethnically defined groups – ranked within themselves –
forming the middle-range and what were called “impure, untouchable” castes at the very bottom. The caste
system saw the social whole as a differentiated hierarchy, defining the mutual rights and duties as well as
punishment and fines according to the hierarchical rank. Cultural distinction was the norm (Pfaff-Czarnecka
1989).

Hinduism as the rulers’ religion created the ideological framework for this social order. However, non-
Hindu religions and their ritual practices were not prohibited. Only the levirate was forbidden by decree as
clashing with Hindu values. Nevertheless, the rulers undertook decisive steps to highlight the importance of
Hinduism in the realm, by imposing a ban on cow-slaughter (Michaels 1997) and demanding that local
power-holders should hold the Durga Puja celebrations. Numerous documents reveal that the Nepalese rulers
repeatedly had to demand both of these – which provides us with a good illustration of local resistance to
these demands. The (until 1962) semi-autonomous region of Bajhang (far west Nepal) is a good case in
point. Documents reveal that fines were imposed for not performing Dasaın according to the political pre-
scription. In Bajhang Dasain being a public holiday is an occasion for visiting relatives, but it failed to ac-
quire the political pomp and public elaboration found in other parts of Nepal. Interestingly, the myth of Devi
Mahatmya recited in other parts of the country throughout the ten days of Dasain-celebrations (see below)
underlies the ceyrtu festivals that take place in Bajhang six months later – which are performed in a very
different form. These festivities consist of a 12-day ritual sequence, culminating in a ritual dismembering of
the demon Mahisasura. The climax is the villagers’ playing a team-game with a ball symbolising his head
(own field-observations). In most parts of Nepal, though, Durga Puja was accepted, along with other forms
of political ritualisation. The way in which Durga Puja firmly established itself as an important ritual
throughout most parts of Nepal is a perfect indicator of how a powerful ritual framework acquires salience in
political, social and cultural entanglements between the rulers and the ruled.

The second phase in ethnic minorities’ assimilation began by the mid-20th century, following Nepal’s
opening to the world in 1951 – when the 100 year autocratic rule of the Rana Prime-Minister dynasty came
to an end and the Hindu monarchs returned to full political power. King Mahendra (1955-1972) and his son
King Birendra (1975-2001) ruled Nepal while promoting modernisation (or their vision of it). They endorsed
an assimilatory ideology, propagating, and partly enforcing, homogenisation of the national culture, ration-
alisating their endeavours as necessary for the sake of communication and progress. Paradoxically, but not un-
expectedly, the measures at forcing national unity had divisive effects, maybe even creating deeper divisions
in society than before. The rulers promoted cultural homogenisation by enforcing the cultural mores of high-
caste elite groups upon the population. They declared ethnic cultural forms to be backward and protection of
them even as disdose. Symbols of the minorities were banned from the public sphere and were not permit-
ted to form any part of national representation. These historical dynamics are important for understanding the
growing ethnic discontent that challenges Hindu supremacy in most spheres of the Nepalese society (see
Gellner et al. 1997). In this vein, the Durga Puja, one of the most striking demonstrations of the hierarchical
order in Nepalese society providing a great deal of inspiration – at the same time being a weapon of insurrection
by engaging in agnostic ritual action. Before concentrating on how ethnic activism has evolved in the post-
1990 political phase – featuring rapid change of political institutions, politics of contention and a true “eth-
nicity explosion” – an account of Durga Puja celebrations will reveal the nature of the state-sponsored ritual
celebrations that have become bone of contention in the recent years.

**CELEBRATING DURGA PUJA IN NEPAL**

After Nepal’s unification was completed and Hindu rule firmly established, the kings and their advisers
sought to design and enforce an ideological pattern that would legitimate their supremacy. Unlike in most
parts of South Asia, the Nepalese Durga Puja emerged as the major occasion linking political power with
Hindu ritual (see Krauskopf and Lecomte-Tilouine 1996). It simultaneously combined worship of the God-
ness Durga, displays of military strength, representation of social and political order and clear-cut displays of
hierarchical patron-client relations with demonstrations of fertility and prosperity within the country’s terri-
ory. The ethnic minority population, largely adhering to other religions than Hinduism, was not forced to
convert, but it was compelled to participate in the Durga Puja. For the ethnic elites embracing local political
power, Durga Puja provided an avenue to reinforce contacts with central power and, by doing so, to enhance
their local strength (Hofér 1986). Along with other instances linking political power to ritual practice, Durga
Puja thus provided incentives to convert to Hinduism. Possibly, ethnic elites served as role models to the
bulk of the ethnic minority populations who embraced Hindu religion as well. They converted notwithstanding
the fact that the Durga Puja’s celebrations often also emphasised their inferior position (Pfaff-
Czarnecka 1996).

There is no ethnographic account of the Dasain celebrations in Nepal’s capital, Kathmandu. This short
description of the celebrations is based upon my own field research in the central Nepalese village Belkot
carried out in 1986 (see Pfaff-Czarnecka 1989) and it is enlarged by data published by Unbescheid (1986),

who gave a very thorough account of Dasaín celebrations in Gorkha – which largely conforms to the pattern found in Belkot – while revealing some interesting differences that due to space-constraints cannot be discussed here.1 Belkot is a multi-caste and multi-ethnic village situated between the national political centre in the Kathmandu Valley and the Gorkha region (considering the cradle of the royal Shah dynasty, which ruled Nepal until 2008). During the field observations underlying my account (1986-87) this local unit comprised ca. 1000 households. The inhabitants belonged to the full range of the Hindu caste hierarchy: starting from the highest Brahmin castes, including Chetris (who correspond to the Indian “Kshatriyas”), comprising a number of ethnic groups – notably the Newars, Magars and Tamangs – and extending to such “low” Hindu castes as the Kami, Sarkis and Damais – the last of these being tailors-cum-musicians. In the period under observation, the Hindu caste hierarchy provided a common ideological pattern. Simultaneously, the village was divided by power differentials, an unequal distribution of resources as well as a growing resentment by members of ethnic minority groups, in particular the Tamangs, against the established societal order (as will become apparent below).

It is impossible here to give a full account that would do justice to the complexity, the importance of individual ritual actions and the full ritual sequence of the Durga Puja celebrations. Some basic information will have to suffice. Durga Puja starts on the lunar fortnight of the month Asoj, in autumn, and continues for ten days. The activities follow the mythical events described in the famous Sanskrit script Devi Mahatmya,2 which Brahmins recite for the entire duration of the celebrations. This myth narrates the fierce battle between the demon Mahisasura and the Goddess Durga, which she eventually wins. The account culminates in Durga’s killing the demon on the eighth day (astami) of the battle and the victory’s celebration on day ten. On both these days, especially on astami, animal sacrifice demonstrating Mahisasura’s killing was performed in military fortresses all over the country.

The celebrations start on the first day of the waxing lunar fortnight of the month of Aswin (September-October). On this day the ritual specialists, the Dasaín priest (pandit) and the upayee, a member of the Magar ethnic group, installed themselves in a house specially designated for celebrating Dasaín. Besides fasting with the pandit inside the house, the upayee was supposed to perform several duties outside the Dasaín house. According to villagers, the important position of this Magar ritual specialist in the celebrations is to be traced to the political status of this ethnic group in earlier times. In particular he had to sacrifice animals and to carry a sword (khaba) on the procession of the 7th day. The Magars called it the “weapon of the Devi”. Some of them claimed that, along with other weapons, it was used during the unification war (1744-1816). In 1896, the upayee, being old, restricted his activities to fasting, while two younger relatives carried out his other duties.

The Dasaín house was small, not more than four metres square. Its entrance was well hidden from the outside. Only ritual specialists involved in Dasaín activities were allowed to enter. The Dasaín priest and the upayee stayed there together through the entire period, fasting, performing rituals assigned to them, reading and/or listening to the Devi Mahatmya. On the first day, the Goddess was invoked by planting jamur (barley) seeds and by establishing a water vessel (kalas). Throughout the day Brahmans arrived at the temple and read from Devi Mahatmya. The orchestra, consisting of musicians from the Damai caste, gathered and played music in the morning and evening. (The Damais are one of the Dalit communities, formerly belonging to the “untouchable castes”. Notwithstanding their low hierarchical and social status within the local community, as musicians they have played a crucial role on numerous ritual occasions, see Fig. 2 and 3.) In the course of the first day four stones were worshipped and covered with red powder in the vicinity of the Dasaín house. They were consecrated to the four representations of the Goddess located in the surrounding important temples: Bhaairavi of Nuwakot, Jalpa of Devighat, Kalika of Gorkha, and Ghyueswari of Deopatan.

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1 The following description of Dasaín-celebrations in Belkot is a shortened version of Pfaff/Czarnocka (1996).
2 The Devi Mahatmya (“Glory of the Goddesses”) is part of the Markandeya Parana, composed in Sanskrit around c. 400-500 CE.
On the tenth day the last goat was sacrificed in the morning. Its head was put on a leaf-plate and placed in the Dasain house. Outside, Brahmans gathered and they read from the Devi Mahatmya. A crowd gradually assembled in and around the sacrificial ground. Inside the Dasain house the pandit worshiped the objects symbolising the Goddess. Shortly before, he gave a sign for exchanging tika (an auspicious mark placed at a person’s forehead) outside and he distributed three tika inside the house: the first tika went to the King of Nepal, the second to the God Vishnu, and the third went to his own lineage deity. After the ritual objects, including the last goat’s head, were taken and arranged outside the Dasain house, the pandit gave the first tika (with some jamaro) to the political village head (i.e. to the dware under the Ranas and to the pradhan pane until 1983), the second to the apanye and the third to the pujari, who all received it with a bow. The apanye and pujari gave a tika to the priest in turn; however, he did not reciprocate the bow. Subsequently all ritual specialists distributed tika and jamaro to the crowd (see Fig. 5 and 6).

Durga Puja’s ritual sequence following a mythical event reveals one important facet of this celebration: the interconnection between the God and humans — with the latter seeking divine grace — which is evoked throughout (Gellner’s soteriology). The second facet consists in forging and reinforcing social interrelations (“social ritual”). Durga Puja takes place at a particularly nice time of the year, after the harvest has been brought in from the fields, when people have time for relaxation and engaging in social intercourse, in particular with their nearest. Following the Hindu calendar, the rulers prescribed prolonged holidays during this
festive season. All offices and most shops close during the final days of Dasain. This allows literally everybody to travel to places where they can meet their closest relatives. Migrants come home and almost everybody engages in extensive shopping before the celebrations start in order to make gifts when they meet and exchange a ritual tika on the tenth day of Durga Puja.

The third facet of this ritual complex consists in the instrumentalisation of the ritual action (Gellner's third function). The political architects of the Nepalese kingdom used the Durga Puja to remind the population of the forceful unification of the realm and to highlight the ruling dynasty’s victory and its presence at the apex of society. Whenever weapons, in particular swords have been paraded during Dasain-celebrations, they symbolised Durga’s triumph and simultaneously the strength of state’s monopoly on force as well as the bravery and loyalty of the population. Until 1990, Durga Puja in particular demonstrated the high-caste military leaders’ and the ethnic soldiers’ wit, strength and courage. It significantly contributed to reinforcing the fame of Nepal’s Gorkha soldiers, largely of ethnic origin, who capitalised on this fame in enlistings in the British Indian Army and later in Indian and British military service.

The instrumental value of the Durga Puja also consisted in the ritual depiction of the wholeness and interrelatedness of the entire Nepalese territory and in using ritual expression to highlight the political centre’s dominance over the peripheries. Worshipping of ritual stones linking scattered political and ritual sites as well as ritual itineraries followed through ritual processes evoked the ritual interconnectedness as well as the relations of power and allegiance. These displays of political and ritual hierarchies culminated on the tenth day, when people had to gather at power centres and fortresses and engage in ritual tika exchange: priests and power-holders distributed the ritual tika to political clients and ritual adherents – while the latter bowed and produced gift tokens symbolising allegiance and loyalty. Tika-exchange among relatives taking place in private homes mirrors this practice by evoking inter-familial hierarchies and allegiance, among the Hindus of Nepal.

Durga Puja’s elaborateness and its value-stress upon political, social and ritual hierarchies not only buttressed the importance of the monarchy, but in particular also the political predominance of Hindu and Hinduised elites, who used this celebration to show their own loyalty to the central power and their own centrality in the local political spaces. From the perspective of the amount of ethnic positioning against the Dasain, it is striking how well the members of the Magar ethnic group were incorporated into Belkot’s Dasain celebrations in 1986. On the other hand, the same year in Belkot marked an important moment of ethnic dissent, voiced here probably for the first time, by members of the Tamang ethnic group, who claimed that the ritual complex was highlighting their political inferiority (see Pfaff-Czarnecka 1996).

The participation of ethnic elites and ethnic minority populations in the Dasain-celebrations in previous times is today a contentious issue – as will be discussed shortly. Substantial data exists (Höfle 1986; Hagent 2005; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1996; Holmberg 2010; Shneiderman 2009) documenting broad engagement of ethnic minority populations in the celebrations with the ethnic elites grasping the opportunity to use the celebration for their political purpose as well as the local ethnic populations attaching their own meanings to this Hindu ritual complex. In many parts of the country, Dasain morphed into a vehicle for ritually evoking communal spirit and for practising Hinduism. In many ethnic minority enclaves the ritual developed its own logic; partly succumbing to the central rulers’ political rationalities, but often creating particularised meanings and hence memory-spaces for localised societies, evolving their own rituals and conferring their own meaning upon the celebrations. Ethnic minority activists today take a strong stance on their participation in Dasain-celebrations in the past, suggesting that they were forced to join in the ritual action. While Dasain had already been contested previously, as the example from Belkot reveals, 1990 brought about acceleration in the voicing of dissent, for instance through ritual communication.

**POST-1990 ETHNIC SELF-ASSERTION**

The assimilationist measures embraced by the Nepalese rulers in an over-simplifying pursuit of modernisation have evoked ethnic resistance. As early as the 1980s there was increasing critique in reaction to the rulers’ silencing of ethnic minority voices, to their preventing displays of ethnic minority cultures in public space and to their preventing the appointment of ethnic minority aspirants to office in politics and administration. In April 1990, shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall and the preceding political changes in the Soviet Union and Russia that made it possible and inspired political protest in many parts of the world, there was a confrontation in Nepal that eventually effected system change. Ethnic activism was not in the forefront of political mobilisation that led to a significant reduction of the then King Birendra’s prerogatives of power and to the introduction of a multi-party democracy, but it immediately gained momentum after the political sea-change. Ethnic-minority resentment feeling was all the more buttressed when a new constitution was introduced in November 1990, which declared Nepal to be multi-ethnic and multi-lingual – a significant departure from the rulers’ assimilatory measures that had been abandoned only few months earlier. Nevertheless, the new constitution declared Nepal would continue to be Hindu kingdom. This overt continuation of endorsing Hindu supremacy while not officially acknowledging the multi-religious character of the population has greatly contributed to crystallising ethnic discontent into a strong social movement (see e.g. Hagent 2010).

The ethnic projects in search for their own identity, self-representation and reassertion have further evolved since then. At the initial stage, ethnic minority activists engaged in politics of identity. It seemed to suffice merely to bring the existence of ethnic minority languages, religions and customs into public attention. Weighted against former silencing of ethnic minority voices, this already seemed to be a substantial political step forward. Against the backdrop of former state’s negation of cultural difference and the sheer wealth of a country displaying such cultural diversity, marking presence within the Nepalese polity was a substantial departure from former official rhetorical practice and a fertile ground for ethnic mobilisation to evolve. Memory constructions, entailing remembering past wrongs, on one hand, and the quest to preserve own ethnic groups’ cultural heritage, on the other resulted in a wide range of measures aimed at cultural re-form, revitalisation and cultural preservation. Almost all ethnic groups engaged in scrutinising their own myths of origin and inventing their own scripts. A reflection upon ritual practice quickly followed.

**DASAIN CELEBRATIONS IN PAN-NEPALISE ETHNIC ACTIVISM**

Given its symbolic weight and considering the political message it had to carry for almost two centuries, it is not surprising that Dasain quickly became the most cherished target of ethnic activism. At least three different fronts emerged in the course of ethnic minority mobilisation aimed at this ritual. The first reacted to ani-
mal sacrifice. Buddhist activists have been engaged in lavish purification ceremonies seeking to cleanse the sin incurred by killing animals on the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th days. They took this occasion also to remind the Nepalese and international audiences that Nepal has had a longstanding Buddhist tradition, which suffered under the Hindu rule. In a number of ethnic minority villages funeral rites for the animals sacrificed elsewhere were performed. This kind of boycott aimed both, at challenging the symbolic dominance of Hinduism and at a revitalisation of their own traditions. Simultaneously, (religious) dissent could be publically staged. The second front grew against the strong nexus between political power and Hinduism. Ethnic minority activists were supported by Maoist leaders – who noted here greatly contributed to the ethnic movement’s growing momentum – in their voicing critique that the sacrificial animals should be sponsored from (the ways scarce) state revenue. The more the new monarch King Gyanendra – enthroned after the assassination of King Birendra in June 2001 – came under criticism, and the stronger opposition grew calling for the abolition the monarchy and declaring the state secular, the less popular it became to appear in the King’s palace seeking to receive a tika from him King. State dignitaries from ethnic minority backgrounds came in for particular criticism.

The third front formed against the political suppression of ethnic minority people and its symbolisation through ritual performance. Speaking with Foucault (1991), the Nepalese Durga Puja excluded the ethnic minority population through inclusion. Other than in a number of ethnic areas where ethnic elites emerged in the focus of the ritual, in most areas with a mixed caste-ethnic composition the ethnic subjugation was mirrored and represented through ritual division of labour. Contrary to Halbwachs’ (1992), Nora’s (2010) and Assmann’s (1992) conceptualisation of the past as a source of identity formation and orientation, ethnic activism projects regarded the past embodied in Durga Puja as painful. They prefer a subaltern reading of the events burned into the Durga Puja performative script – as a remembering of organised resistance (Hangen 2005). The official historiography saw the concurrence unification of Nepal as a natural process that resulted in the Hindu dynasty’s coming to power and acquiring centrality and supremacy of ritual acts. The new historiography – ethnic activists are anthropologists, historians, sociologists, linguists, political science scholars and geographers – sees the subjugation and partial dispossession of ethnic minority population as a past wrong. The reaction not only envisages political and economic reforms, but also the symbolic readjustment. The National Shramik Organisation (the first political party based on ethnicity, established in the aftermath of the 1990 “revolution”) demanded for instance that Durga Puja be entirely banned from the Nepalese calendar, calling for a prohibition of its performance through public rites, but also in private homes (Hangen 2010).

Boycotting Dusain (Hangen 2005) is thus one important feature of ethnic activism. If the royal decrees demanded the performance of Dusain rites, then a number of ethnic activists agreed to perform them as a gesture of protest and to erase memories and the emotional dispositions entailed. The more mobilisation occurred against this ritual, the more prominent it acquires in the public sphere – even if providing mostly a negative script for the ethnic activists’ quest to find its own voice.

One important line of ethnic mobilisation lies in the new interpretation of Goddess Durga’s struggle against the demon Mahisasura. According to Hangen (2005) a number of activists suggest that this myth provides an account of a real-life battle between the Mongols (to whom the minority ethnic groups belong) and the Aryans (consisting of the high Hindu castes). In this reading, Mahisasura was not a demon, but a forefather of the Mongol tribes. By depicting him as demon in the Hindu myth, it brings a prejudice to the open. The ritual marker on the forehead (see Fig. 5) conferred on people by superiors is traditionally made out of raw grains of rice, yoghurt and red pigment. Now, the red pigment is read as the blood of the Mongols shed in this mythic/non-mycthic battle. This new reading has acquired an electrifying effect, because the new historiography not only highlights the historical injustice, but also has the effect of polarising the dramatis personae. The new reading of the Devi Mahishmari allows for discrimination between the Hindus and the ethnic minority population – which is in itself differentiated – in order to create a collective agonistic front. Speaking with Laclau and Mouffle (1991), the political acquires an antagonistic moment that creates a constitutive other – while producing a putative internal unity. (More moderate ethnic activists demand that at least the red should be got rid of from the Dusias-tika, so that it does not remind anybody of the inter-ethnic bloodshed.)

However, this act will reinforce the power of the ritual. The Hindu ritual can be used as a negative to buttress an oppositional Vergemeinschaftung. But precisely the efforts to get rid of Durga Puja highlight its tremendous importance in Nepal’s social life. This is not only coming evident in state practice and in the life-worlds of the Hindus, but it shows itself in manifold ways in ethnic social spaces. The second trend shows itself therefore in a void created wherever the activists have successfully managed to suppress Durga Puja (as Hangen, 2005, describes). A number of regions report a need to find new social forms to perform specific social interactions. The void calls for different forms of substitution, among which three forms are of particular importance. One calls for finding an occasion where ritual performance can take place that would draw upon the ritual elements of the Durga Puja while (in Oppitz’s terms) montaging them into a new form. Another form of substitution calls for finding activities to be performed during the Durga Puja holidays that are fixed in the public calendar. The third lies in the quest to find a vehicle for ritually performing all kinds of social interrelations that have traditionally been enacted during the Dusais.

Recent studies show that numerous members of ethnic groups find it difficult not to exchange tika on Dusais. Hangen (2005) reports that – besides exchanging a white tika – the ethnic groups in parts of the eastern Nepal started to perform marriage rites during the Dusais break – which, however, allows for exchanging tika with a partly different meaning. The marriage ceremonies will be performed by Buddhist priests, but display elements of Hindu rites that entail tika exchange at important points in the ceremony. This substitution has opened the possibility to perform a tika exchange without provoking the activists’ anger. Hangen, furthermore, shows that members of ethnic groups have not stopped eating meat during the Dusais season. In Nepal’s rural areas, Dusais was a rare occasion when meat – provided through dividing up the sacrificial animals – could be enjoyed. The bulk of ethnic minority population did not become vegetarian – notwithstanding embracing Buddhism and notwithstanding the critique of Hindu ritual animal slaughter.

Meat consumption is a good example of the embattled and also very multifaceted nature of ethnic positionings in the current trend towards self-assertion. Some activists may fight against animal sacrifice, others may perform ritual sacrifices for the sacrificed animals, others can eat meat without sacrificing the animals (but just killing them), and yet other sections of ethnic groups may continue, or even revitalise Buddhist Tantric practices, which are essentially blood-thirsty in some parts of Nepal (Shneiderman 2005, confirmed by my own observations in Devighat, Nuwakot district). This variety of life-world-practices is mirrored in the diversity of ethnic activists’ positions, which differ for instance in the question whether to engage in cultural reforms or rather in ethnic revitalisation. This is an important lesson for ethnicity research: in the local life-worlds, ethnic groups develop very different social practices to those their leaders try to enforce.

Dusais then has emerged as the focal point concentrating ethnic discontent and discontent by them into the ongoing analysis of ethnic positions, practices and representations. It provides a rich repertoire orienting ritual possibilities for promoting one’s own cultural forms and for forging practices against the established ritual scripts. While drawing upon the Hindu ritual repertoires, the activists have selected a path suited to remembering wrongs endured in history, while rejecting the ritualisation of subordination and oppression. While ethnic minority populations endured a common fate, it made sense to the activists to jointly challenge ritual practice that conveyed a representation of the past, while engaging in projects to perform and to represent simultaneously the ethnic minority peoples’ speaking with one voice, while retaining shades of individual ethnic groups’ particularities.

A third trend in ethnic activism utilises the Durga Puja to find a common voice in addressing the public sphere. A common ritual denominator was found in the New Year celebrations, commonly called “Losar” (but the diversity of ethnic projects results in different spellings of this term). Losar has Buddhist origins – a religion currently converting ethnic minorities and being revived and reformed. During the second half of the 20th century, Losar was performed in the Tibetan diaspora in Nepal, whereas hardly any ethnic group engaged in these celebrations. Throughout the 1990s, ethnic organisations drew up plans and pamphlets pre-
scribing when and how to celebrate the Buddhist New Year. It is impossible to give an account of the diversity of calendars that are presently in use by different ethnic groups, with their number growing every year. 6 A number of ethnic organisations have pressed for public holidays equal to those of Durga Puja to be declared around the New Year celebrations.

For a number of years now ethnic umbrella organisations have organised festivities staged on the Martyr ground, close to Thudchel, where the official Dasiain celebrations take place and where military parades were previously held (Toffin 2008). Ethnic activists are increasingly turning into ritual specialists, promoting change in their ethnic group’s ritual practice and defining ritual elements to be performed. The ritual practice acquires a reflective moment and one important facet of this reflection is the location of ethnic groups within the political sphere. Furthermore, for the social location of ethnic groups, their cultures and practices, it is crucial that they are currently scattered all over the world. Ethnic activism at home is significantly buttressed by the on-going activities in such far-away places as Hong Kong, Tokyo, Sydney, New York and Manchester. The diaspora activists have played a significant role in replacing Dasiain by the Lhosar celebrations, giving Lhosar a number of the social functions that Dasiain previously had. It becomes instrumental abroad to have a ritual moment creating simultaneity, strengthening interactions in any given geographic and virtual location. Lhosar makes it possible to structure time, by sticking to a calendar that would forge a link between the past and the future and give time a rhythm. The beginning of a year affects identity formation, giving it structure and meaning and forging a collective sense of co-existence all around the globe. You can be scattered all around the world, but unite in celebrations that will be staged and stored through photos, videos and communications media. This creation of simultaneity that the routine of the ritual makes possible is all the more conducive to instigating global reflexivity forging a sense of ethnic unity. Lhosar creates a horizon of the social that positions itself against Hindu hegemony while re-creating links of sisterhood and brotherhood (Hangen during a conference presentation in Freljus, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

Let me come back to the questions formulated at the beginning. I have asked how rituals evolve under the global conditions of mobility, challenges to established normative orders as well as the rapid social change. I have also tried to establish where the contribution of rituals lies while shaping these processes. I have presented the social drama staged within and around the Dasiain in order to grasp the ethnic challenges to public representations suggesting a wholeness of the polythism buttressed by hierarchical Hindu norms. Contesting Dasiain has significantly contributed to the ethnicisation of Nepal’s political communication. By using the ritual language, ethnic activists have time and again questioned the legitimacy and salience of Nepal’s national unity while trying to draw ethnic boundaries tighter. The ritual language has simultaneously been used to make public statements as well as for the sake of reflection on the values embraced by ethnic activists – which also reveal internal conflicts over meanings and values and the multiplicity of ethnic voices.

I hope that the discussion of the dramatic conflicts evolving around and within the Dasiain celebrations contributes to scholarly understanding of rituals. Rituals are actions that can acquire significant transformative properties (Harth and Michaels 2003). Throughout ritual action, the dramatis personae take an active part in instigating change. At the same time, the affirmative as much as the critical reflection on values transmitted through rituals provides a critical analysis of symbolic orders that shape ethnic boundary-

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* According to Holmberg (2010: 2): “Officially recognized new years are the official Nepal new year according to the Vikram Samvat, the new year of the Nepal Samah (Newary), of the Tama or Gorkhen, of the Goyang, of the on which the and others or Somu Lhosar, and of the Yeli era (Krit peoples).” According to Christian Jahood (personal communication, Jan. 12, 2011), “Somu Lhosar” seems to correspond to Somu Lhosar (1. so len lo gah), as it is/has been known for example in Ladakh, which is usually explained as “cultivators’ New Year” and represents a “local” differentiation from the so-called ‘King’s New Year’ (a New Year tradition associated with the new Tibetan tradition of past periods). There are another two new years – the Muslim Hijri and Tola Lhosar – generally acknowledged but not having the status of official national holidays (Koirala 2010).

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* References


INTRODUCTION

In October 2009 I asked an old villager in Pooh, a Tibetan-speaking village in Upper Kinnaur1 near the Tibetan border, about the participation of musicians in the upcoming celebration of the Sharchen festival.2 He said of these families who by customary law were obliged to perform on the occasion of this and other festivals—"only their bodies are still here, naked." What he meant was that the families, who are seen as belonging to a low caste by the dominant landowning population, were no longer willing to fulfil their customary obligatory social duties, as a consequence of which in his view they had lost all their dignity, and ties of cooperation with them were (to be) cut.

Similar accounts of growing tensions between the landowning population and groups of low caste musicians had also been reported before, in September 2009, in the neighbouring area of Spiti.3 There, too, in some places families of musicians who, in contrast to Upper Kinnaur, make up only a small percentage of the total population had refused to perform for village festivals. I had noticed conflicts like this in Spiti and Upper Kinnaur since 1997, when I started my research there, but they seem to have become more aggressive and visible in the recent past and also to have extended to more remote areas.

On the other hand, in February 2010, in the course of field research in Western Tibet (in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China), the participation and full cooperation of musicians belonging to similar groups could be observed in the performance of an important monastic Buddhist festival in Khorchag village in Purang county.4 As in Spiti and in Upper Kinnaur, also in Western Tibet, these groups of musicians and blacksmiths are considered as "Rigmen" or "low caste"5 by the local Tibetan majority population of

1 The research for this article was conducted within the framework of two research projects funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): "Oral and Festival Traditions of Western Tibet: Processes of Cultural Memory and Renewal" (P20657-G15) and "Society, Power and Religion in Pre-Modern Western Tibet: Interaction, Conflict and Integration" (P21806-C19). These projects are carried out under the direction of the author at the Institute for Social Anthropology, Centre for Studies in Asian Cultures and Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna. For helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper I would like to thank Christiane Kalantiari, Gabriela Kiličiová and Ernst Steinkeffner.

2 p'u in written Tibetan (WT). Names of villages, administrative units, etc. are rendered according to the most common present spelling or according to the popular pronunciation. On the first occurrence, a transliteration of the most common variant is given (based on the transliteration scheme originally developed by Turrell Wylie). In addition, due to the fact that in some instances the Tibetan origin and etymology of words is unclear or doubtful, the phonetic transcription in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is also given on the basis of sound recordings made by Veronika Hein (collaborator in the Oral and Festival Traditions Project).

3 WT. Khu nu.

4 August Herrmann Francke, a German Moravian missionary and since 1925 professor in the field of Tibetan studies in Berlin (see Jarab 2007b: 362), to whom we owe one of the earliest published references to this festival, used Shär rgyan as the version in written Tibetan (cf. Francke 1914: 204.). See below the section Sharchen Festival in Pooh for a discussion of the name of this festival.

5 WT. The Khor chags. Also the variant Khu char, Khu char, Khawa char, etc. can be found. In publications by Western and Indian authors until the end of the 20th century, the name of this place (or the name of the monastery) was commonly rendered in an Indianised form as Kharchar (see Jarab and Pasha-Khalani 2009: 352).

6 WT. The Khrig nang, literally "bad descent", is also translated as "low birth or extraction" (Jespokha 188: 528) and in a more modern context, also reflecting the Tibetan diaspora in India, as "low birth, outcast, untimed" (Goldstein 1975: 1088). The word riggs carries a variety of meaning in Tibetan, for example, family, lineage, descent, tribe, race, nation, etc. It was and still is also a key term in descriptions of the social stratification of Tibetan society and in this sense appears to have been used also to express dif...