The Sacred Town of Sankhu

The Sacred Town of Sankhu: The Anthropology of Newar Ritual, Religion and Society in Nepal

By

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To my parents,
Krishna Maya Karmācārya and Purna Bhakta Ghori Shrestha

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FOREWORD

Bal Gopal Shrestha's book, *The Sacred Town of Sankhu*, covers the whole history and culture of Sankhu with an encyclopaedic thoroughness, detail, and depth of knowledge as perhaps only a local anthropologist, embedded in Sankhu's various networks, could aspire to. It bears comparison with Robert Levy's great work, *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Hindu City in Nepal* (1990, University of California Press), on the city of Bhaktapur. However, Levy, working in a large city by Nepali standards, could hardly expect to achieve the same density of coverage as Shrestha in a much smaller town.

Sankhu is one of the oldest sites in the Kathmandu Valley. Inscriptions show that there was a Mahāsānghika Buddhist monastery there in the Licchavī period (4^{th}-9^{th} centuries); there is still a rock-cut monastic cell on the way to the Vajrayoginī temple, popular with religious visitors and picnickers, similar to those found in the famous Buddhist sites of western India. Thanks to the centrality of the goddess Vajrayoginī in the imagination and collective ritual life of Sankhu's inhabitants, Buddhist associations remain strong to this day, despite the gradual Hinduization of the town, especially in the last two centuries or so. In his three-volume classic history of Nepal (*Le Népal*, 1905 1: 29), Sylvain Lévi famously wrote that Nepal (i.e. the Kathmandu Valley), with its combination of Hinduism and Buddhism, and its many archaic features (such as the worship of the god Indra), was 'India in the making' (*le Népal, c'est l'Inde qui se fait*). In the same way one could say that Sankhu is the Kathmandu Valley in the making.

This is true in yet another sense: Sankhu is the home of the famous Svasthānī cult. It is here that people come to hear the story of the goddess Svasthānī every year and many women participate in a month-long fast in the hope of obtaining a good husband and a happy family life. It is from Sankhu that the fasting practice (*vrata*) has spread out, not just to other Newar settlements, but – translated into Nepali – to the whole of the Nepali-speaking world. Today this includes Nepalis settled in the USA, UK, and Far East.

The astonishing architecture and cityscapes of the Newars, now under unprecedented pressure from massive in-migration and unchecked modern developments, go back to models worked out in first millennium South

Asia. The old city centres of Kathmandu, Lalitpur (Patan), and Bhaktapur have long been UNESCO-designated World Heritage sites. Sankhu is part of this same civilization and culture. Bal Gopal Shrestha's volume will therefore be indispensable reading for future scholars of the Kathmandu Valley.

David N. Gellner
Oxford

PREFACE

I was born to a religious Newar family in which the religious traditions described in this monograph were part of daily life for every member of my family. I remember that, during my childhood, the worship (*pūjā*) of different deity images at my home and in our neighbourhood was part of my family's daily routine. Such worship (*pūjā*) varies, depending upon the occasion. Among the Hindus, a service of worship in five steps (*pañcopacāra pūjā*) or in sixteen steps (*ṣoḍaśopacāra-pūjā*) is common, but lay people do not follow such rules strictly (Tachikawa 1983:104–86). Traditional Newar households are organised as joint families, and ours was no exception. I spent my childhood sitting on the lap of my grandmother, who was the oldest woman in the house and who had to take care of the children at home. I never saw my grandfather because he passed away long before I was born. As the oldest person in the house, my grandmother was free from all household duties, so as a pastime she played with the children. Every evening we used to turn the big living room in our house into a sleeping room for children to sleep together in. Children liked to sleep as close as possible to our grandmother, because she used to tell folk stories until they all fell asleep. She had many stories to tell, about ghosts, witches, gods and goddesses, animals, and good and bad people. She was our beloved grandmother.

She used to get up very early in the morning, usually before dawn, to ritually wash her face. She also took her grandchildren to the neighbourhood centre for ritual cleansing. I remember that she carried me many times, to ritually wash my face. I must have been less than three years old. Washing our faces was the first ritual we learned in our childhood.

After washing my face, she used to carry me into the temple of Gaṇeśa, the god of health, wisdom and prosperity, situated in the centre of our neighbourhood. She taught us how to bow before the stone statue of Gaṇeśa or other images in the temple in a gesture of worship. She also taught us to put a red and yellow mark (*ṭikā*) on our foreheads and to put flowers on our heads as blessings from those statues. She knew by heart some hymns (*ślokas*) that praise Gaṇeśa and other deities, and used to recite them. We were taught to walk clockwise around the temple. Taking a ride on her back, I used to ring a bell hung on the temple wall. Standing at the back of the temple, she used to pray to Vajrayoginī (Hyāumkhvāḥ māju

or the red-faced mother) facing north, because her temple could be seen from there.

A few years before her death, my grandmother was unable to go outside our home, because she lost her eyesight as a result of cataracts. Her eyes were not operated on, but a local traditional doctor put certain herbal medicines on them, though to no avail. I was about six years old when she passed away. By then, her grandchildren had learned the duties of washing their faces and worshipping gods and goddesses every morning.

Slowly, we also learned how to bow to parents and elders, offer food to gods before taking our meal, use the right hand and not to touch others while eating our meals, and wash hands and rinse our mouth after a meal. In this way, from our early childhood onwards, we learned to practise many customs and manners in our day-to-day life.

I learned to climb up to the hill of Vajrayoginī with my father, who used to go to the temple every morning to worship that goddess. Every day, he also participated in singing devotional songs (*bhajan*) in the temple sanctuary. On several occasions, I followed him when he went to sing devotional songs at other *bhajan* places in the town. When I was about eight years old, I learned to climb the Vajrayoginī hill by myself to worship gods and goddesses at the sanctuary. I used to carry some grains of rice in a small tin container to offer to the deities and also to feed the monkeys. The main gate of the Vajrayoginī temple used to be crowded with devotees in the early morning, who came to offer worship and to receive flowers, holy water, red and yellow powders (*ṭikā*), and black soot (*mohanī*) as blessings. As a small child, I had to push myself through the crowd to have a glance at the goddess Vajrayoginī and to receive her blessings from the priest. Except for the Buddhist priests on duty, nobody is allowed to enter the temple or to touch the idols of the goddesses. As a mediator between the goddess and the people, the priest on duty can distribute blessings but he cannot touch the worshippers. People worship the goddess by throwing grains of rice over the images. In the temple of Mhāsukhvāḥ māju, where processional statues are kept, people are free to enter. On the first floor of this temple, we used to grind a sandalwood paste (*candan*) on a stone to take its dust as *ṭikā*. We also used to apply ashes on our foreheads from the eternal fire kept on the same floor. I had to carry some *ṭikā* and flowers later, for distributing to other members of my family and sometimes to bystanders as blessings of Vajrayoginī. On the way back home from the temple, it was customary to greet bystanders by saying "*tāre mām"* (save us mother).

Besides these daily practices, we learned more about our ritual traditions during annual calendrical festivals, feasts, fasts and processions of deities in the town (Chapter 10). We learned to follow these rituals and traditions without knowing anything about their meanings. The ritual traditions became deeply embedded in our minds. This is how a Newar learns the religious traditions of his society from early childhood.

However, as soon as I began to attend school and study modern geography, history, sciences and biology, all these religious and ritual beliefs were challenged. Most of the religious ideas that I had learned and practised at my home and in my local society faded away soon after I finished high school. Gradually, I began to avoid religious ritual practices and to disbelieve their purposes. Later, during my university days and as a journalist, I could no longer appreciate Newar culture and religion. It was many years later, when I was engaged in doing research with Bert van den Hoek, that I began to investigate Newar religious practices, and this eventually led me to carry out research on the town of Sankhu and its society, the place where I was born and grew up.

From a modern anthropological point of view, I am an "insider" to Sankhu, because I was born in the town and spent my childhood and youth there. To be a local researcher was, on the one hand, an advantage, but it also had its difficulties. Before I started the research, I was overconfident about carrying it out. However, as soon as I began my research, I started to realise my weaknesses. As a local researcher, the most obvious difficulty for me was to see things objectively. Slowly I began seeing things from distance and to acquire a more balanced view of the town. This proved challenging.

My insider identity privileged me in many ways. I knew the town; I was acquainted with its people, customs, manners, feasts, festivals, rituals and traditions. I am a native speaker of Newar, the language spoken in Sankhu. It was easy for me to obtain the data I needed. Usually, people were helpful and provided me with any information they could give. However, I also had difficulties in gaining access to certain rituals, especially the rituals categorised as "secret." For instance, on one occasion I was permitted to witness the fire sacrifice performed eight days before the procession of Vajrayoginī; but on another occasion, I was refused access. Similarly, one time I was allowed to see the fire sacrifice performed at the Dhalaṃpu *sataḥ* on the last day of the Mādhava Nārāyaṇa festival; on another occasion, I was forbidden to do so. In this respect it became clear to me that some rituals were not actually secret in themselves, but that it was their particular practitioners who decided whether or not they were to be secret.

In spite of being a local person, my identity seemed to change as soon as I started my research. Sometimes, when I had to witness certain rituals or needed to have something explained, I was ridiculed because people did not treat me as an "outsider." To what extent I managed the shift in identity from local insider to researcher is left to the reader to judge. However, my being a part of the Sankhu community remained important throughout my research, as is reflected in this book.

There are many historical and culturally important monuments in Sankhu. In the past, socio-religious associations (*guthi*) were responsible for maintaining them; but nowadays such associations do not function, because of the financial constraints. So, for several decades, numerous cultural and religious monuments have remained in a dilapidated condition in Sankhu, including the Mahādev temple and surrounding monuments, the Vajrayoginī temple and the Dhoṃlā Mahādev temple.

An innovative aspect of this research was that I was able to contribute to the preservation of these monuments. As part of my research budget, I obtained some money from the Leiden Research School CNWS to contribute to the restoration of the Vajrayoginī temple and the Mādhava Nārāyaṇa god house (*dyocheṃ*). In the case of the restoration of the temple of Vajrayoginī, the small contribution I made enabled the Friends of Sankhu, a local NGO, to carry out an initial survey of the temple that eventually enabled them to obtain a larger amount of money from the Netherlands Development Assistance (NEDA) to accomplish a major restoration in 1998–2000. The Friends of Sankhu also received financial support from the board of the Vereniging Nederland Nepal in The Netherlands for this purpose. Similarly, during the time I was carrying out my research, I was able to keep in touch with the Friends of Sankhu in raising funds for the restoration of the Mahādev temple (1996–7) and the surrounding monuments in the Sālkha quarter, and for the restoration of Sarāvata Sataḥ and Datta or Lāyku Phalcā, both traditional rest houses or shelters in the Iṃlā quarter, in 2001–2. SNV Nepal and Vereniging Nederland Nepal gave financial assistance towards the first and second phases of the restoration of the Mahādev temple and the surrounding monuments, while, Cordaid and Vereniging Nederland Nepal assisted the restoration of the Sarāvata Sataḥ, and, similarly, Wilde Ganzen, the Netherlands, provided funds to restore the Lāyku Phalcā. My involvement in these restorations played a very positive role in obtaining the best possible support from the people of Sankhu during my research.

I was also allowed to film the Vajrayoginī and Mādhava Nārāyaṇa festivals for the first time. The audiovisual recording of rituals was an important method in the overall research, especially for describing the

rituals. I also succeeded in recording several other rituals. These will be edited and, in due course, may prove a valuable by-product of the research in their own right.

I spent six years producing this book. During this period I was associated with the Research School CNWS, University of Leiden (September 1996 to August 2002) as a Ph.D. candidate (Assistent-in-Opleiding). Having followed courses and seminars provided for Ph.D. students, I drafted my research questions, and went on to spend a total of fifteen months in Nepal doing fieldwork during my Ph.D. research. I began my first period of fieldwork in Sankhu, which lasted nine months, in April 1997; my second period was January–March 2000; my third was May–July 2000. On this last occasion, my stay was more personal, as I went to see my ill mother and to attend to her funeral rites afterwards. After this, I returned to Leiden to finish writing this monograph and to defend it at the University of Leiden, the Netherlands, as my Ph.D. dissertation in September 2002. After my graduation I have been able to revisit my research field in Nepal on a number of occasions, and this has been invaluable in allowing me to update its data and to revise my manuscript for the present edition.

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I received immense support from many individuals and organisations in The Netherlands, Nepal and other countries during the time I was writing this monograph. Without their kind support and inspiration, I could never have accomplished this task. A list would become too long to include them all, but I would like to mention those persons whose support and cooperation have been of great value to me.

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Before concluding my words, I remember my late parents, to whom this book is dedicated. My mother passed away on June 18, 2000, before seeing its completion. My father departed on January 4, 1980, long before its inception. They would have been happy to see the book. Their blessings, and those of many others, have helped me to complete it.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In this monograph I have tried to use as few native words as possible, but where unavoidable they are presented with their English equivalents. In most cases, I have put them between brackets immediately after their English equivalents. The glossary of native (Newar, Khas-Nepali and Sanskrit) words presented here may help readers to obtain a better understanding of the issues involved. In most cases, Khas-Nepali (Nep.) and Sanskrit (Skt.) words are indicated between brackets. In those cases that the Newars no longer perceive them as foreign words, they are treated as Newar words. Such loan words and Newar words are listed in full; variations are given between brackets. Diacritics are not used for personal names or names of popular places.

I have used Sanskritic tradition in applying diacritical symbol to Romanise Newar, Khas-Nepali and Sanskrit words. I have transcribed and transliterated the Devanāgarī scripts in the following manner:

a	ā			
i	ī			
u	ū			
ṛ				
e	ei			
o	au			
ṃ	ḥ			
k	kh	g	gh	ṅ
c	ch	j	jh	ñ
ṭ	ṭh	ḍ	ḍh	ṇ
t	th	d	dh	n
p	ph	b	bh	m
y	r	l	v	
ś	ṣ	s	h	

In Devanāgarī *ā* is pronounced as the *a* in *father*, *ī* as *ee* and *ū* as *oo*. Retroflex consonants are transcribed as *ṭ*, *ṭh*, *ḍ*, *ḍh* and *ṇ*. Similarly, *ṅ*, *ñ* and *ṃ* are used to represent nasal sounds. Differences between *b* and *v*, and *ś*, *ṣ* and *s* are also maintained.

ABBREVIATIONS

BCE	Before the Common Era.
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CNAS	Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies
CNS	Contributions to Nepalese Studies
CPN	Communist party of Nepal
DDC	District Development Committee
FoS	Friends of Sankhu
GC	Guthi Corporation
HHN	Household Number
HMG	His Majesty's Government
MG	Manuscript Guṃbāhāḥ
MHP	Ministry of Housing and Physical Planning
MM	Maṇiśaila Mahāvadāna
MMC	Maṇiśaila Mahāvadāna Copy
MMC-1	Maṇiśaila Mahāvadāna Copy 1
MPP I	Mādhava Nārāyaṇa Pratisthā Pūjā copy I
MPP II	Mādhava Nārāyaṇa Pratisthā Pūjā copy II
NKNP	*Nepālvarṣa Kriyā Nakhaḥcakhaḥ Pustakaṃ*
NLPRC	National Languages Policy Recommendation Commission
NMK	Nepālbhāṣā Maṃkāḥ Khalaḥ [Association of the Newar Speakers]
NS	Nepāl Saṃvat
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
SV	Svasthānī *Vrata* Kathā
SVSS	*Sakvayā Vajrayoginī Jirṇoddāra Pratibedana* [Report of the Sankhu Vajrayoginī Renovation]
TU	Tribhuvan University
UML	United Marxist Leninist
VDC	Village Development Committee
VNN	Vereniging Nederland Nepal [Netherlands Nepal Association]
VS	Vikram Saṃvat

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The location

Sankhu is an ancient town populated by the Newars, the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. This town, believed to have been a kingdom in the ancient past, is situated about twenty kilometers northeast of Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. The foundation of the kingdom of Sankhu is attributed to the goddess Vajrayoginī, whose shrine is located in the forest above the town of Sankhu. The temple of Vajrayoginī is an important pilgrimage site for Buddhists and Hindus alike. The yearly festival of the goddess is also the main event in Sankhu's ritual cycle. According to the legend of Maṇiśaila Mahāvadāna, Vajrayoginī instructed the priest, Jogdev, and the first king, Saṅkhadev, to build the town of Sankhu in the shape of a conch. The oldest inscription found in Sankhu is dated AD 538 (Śaka Saṃvat 460).

This monograph's major focus is on the rituals that shed light on the town's system of values. My study of Sankhu takes into account the complete festival cycle of the town and its connection with the network of ritual relations in the Kathmandu Valley at large, and records thirty-four of the festivals performed in the town.

During the procession of the statue of Vajrayoginī, a series of ritual activities involve the whole society without any barriers of caste (*jāt*). The month-long winter festival of Mādhav Nārāyaṇa in the town also attracts pilgrims from all over the Kathmandu Valley and beyond, but it is prohibited for low castes to participate in it. In contrast with the festival of the goddess Vajrayoginī, it is a Brahmanic festival. At the same time, several religious activities take place in the town, and these correspond to nationally observed festivals, such as Dasāin, Tihār and others.

Once Sankhu was on an ancient trade route from Nepal to Tibet. Nowadays, its 5,430 inhabitants mainly make their living from agriculture, and from a variety of services in greater Kathmandu. Trade is still important, but less so since the loss of Sankhu's trade route to Tibet in the late 1950s.

The research on Sankhu's ritual composition deals with the relation between Hinduism and Buddhism, with the interrelationships between the town's twenty-two castes, and above all with the numerous socio-religious associations (*guthi*s), which uphold its ritual life. The social life of the Newars in Sankhu is highly organised. Many socio-religious associations (*guthis*) are active in carrying out complex rituals. These *guthi*s have their roots in antiquity. Licchavi inscriptions such as the one found in Lele (dated AD 604)[1] already refer to *goṣṭhi* (the Sanskrit word from which *guthi* is derived) carrying out rituals and social work. The most important *guthi* in Newar society are the *sī guthi* and *sanā guthi,* which are associations for carrying out funeral rites. They are caste-bound and determine a person's social identity.

Everyone has to be a member of a *guthi*. These associations, which sometimes have other functions as well, are typical of Newar society and make it distinct from other communities in South Asia. In this book special attention is given to the socio-religious associations, and in particular to the *sī guthi* and *sanā guthi* funeral associations.

Purpose of the research

The history of Sankhu is fascinating, but has so far neither been studied in detail nor been the subject of any published monograph. This book presents details of the town's myths, history and society. It will be the first to provide a complete socio-religious analysis of the town. Besides the legendary stories, the attested history of the town is also of great importance. No archaeological excavations have thus far been carried out that throw light on the early history of the town. Only a few Licchavi inscriptions testify to its antiquity.

In Newar society it is hard to discern a division between Hindus and Buddhists except at the priestly level (Brahmins as Hindu priests, Vajrācārya as Buddhist priests): generally people employ Buddhist or Hindu priests according to the religious occasion. The elaborate caste system of the Newars adds to the complexity of the society. On the one hand the different castes are separate (twenty-two in Sankhu), but on the other, they are also dependent on each other. In this research, I have attempted to understand the social organisation of Sankhu from the perspectives of (a) caste distribution; (b) their duties; and (c) the *guthi* and their socio-cultural responsibilities.

In the last decade, certain ritual practices have disappeared because of economic constraints. Most socio-religious associations are dependent on land endowments that are cultivated by tenants. Since the land reforms of

1964 in Nepal, the position of tenants, at least in the Kathmandu Valley, has improved considerably. Nowadays they can pay very little rent, sometimes nothing at all, without the risk of being expelled from the land. Due to this diminishment of *guthi* revenues, however, many ritual activities observed today may not be sustainable over the years to come.

Method of the research

The study of a complex literate society and its rituals poses many methodological problems. There are not only ritual practices, but also oral traditions and written texts to be considered. But the interpretation of oral traditions and written texts varies according to the practices and beliefs of the informants. This fact raises several problems regarding the relation between texts and the contexts in which they are used.

Many Indologists and anthropologists have ignored the problem altogether. Anthropologists tend to ignore the texts, and Indologists study the texts only. The pioneering scholar Srinivas (1952) insists on the study of texts alongside people's beliefs and practices. He argues that the religious texts constitute a Sanskritic overlay of the actual beliefs and practices of specific communities. Tambiah (1970:372) also refuses to draw a distinction between popular and Sanskritic Hinduism, because the two levels are historically and contextually interwoven.

Following Tambiah's approach, I investigated ritual practices together with the relevant texts. Sankhu is my hometown, and I am thus familiar with most of the rituals practised here. I observed how they were practised and interviewed the people involved in them. In several cases it was not easy to witness the rituals, because some were practised in secret. The fire sacrifice, which takes place eight days before the procession of the goddess Vajrayoginī is "secret". Only the Vajrācārya priests with *dikṣā*, a priestly initiation, can attend. In Sankhu, the yearly offering of food to the ghosts, the nightly feeding of the virgin girl embodying the goddess Kumārī and the worship of Taleju during the festival of Mohanī also falls into this category. Nevertheless, I was able to observe many so-called "secret" rituals. In situations in which I was unable to observe their rituals directly, I obtained information by interviewing the people involved in them. A characteristic feature of Newar rituals is that they are related to castes and caste-bound *guthi*. Certain rituals can be confined to one caste, while others require the participation of many castes. The household survey I conducted in 1997 provided me with the exact number of people in each caste and information about their economy, their education and participation in different *guthi*.

I also focus on the oral and mythical aspect of the town's history, rituals and traditions, feasts and festivals. People in the town feel the myths are important because they believe they assert their historic past. However, they are well aware of the differences between a mythical past and their historical past, as has been shown by Oosten for the Inuit (1976:42).

Fieldwork and sociographic survey

Although I was already acquainted with the town and its social life, I carried out thorough field research from April 1997 to January 1998 and from January to March 2000. I designed detailed questionnaires to collect information on the myths, history and topography of the town. I also constructed questions regarding social structure, aimed at the different castes, their functions, inter-caste relationships, occupations, income, and so on. The questions also dealt with the social life of the town, including the division of castes into high and low, the Hindu-Buddhist mix, caste-bound life-cycle rituals, the uses of ritual specialists, and so on. There are more than eighty *guthi* in Sankhu, and to specify the *guthi* and their functions on different occasions I formulated elaborate questions, relating to the number of *guthi*, the kinds of *guthi*, the functions of the *guthi* and their financial resources (land endowments, memberships fees, business and so on). Many *guthi* have already disappeared from the town's cultural scene in recent times, and my questions also dealt with those *guthi*s that no longer exist. My investigation also focused on the socio-economic situation, land distributions, employment situation, trade and business, including the political and administrative organisation of the town.

During fieldwork, observation of all ritual performances was a priority. This was possible in most cases, but in some cases it was not. My next step was to collect information through interviews with selected people involved in the ritual performances. I also further conducted a sociographic survey of the town. My intention was to get a total view of Sankhu's ritual complex.

At first, I hesitated over whether to conduct a survey of the whole town or of selected houses only. I eventually chose the first option, because a sample survey could not provide a significant overall view of Sankhu due to its multi-caste nature. I realised that a survey of the whole town would be time-consuming, but it was necessary in order to obtain a comprehensive result. My own resources were too limited for such a survey, but fortunately the members of the Friends of Sankhu (FoS) agreed to assist me. Such an intensive survey would never have been accomplished without their support.