

THE SVANTI FESTIVAL: VICTORY OVER DEATH AND THE RENEWAL OF THE RITUAL CYCLE IN NEPAL

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Introduction

Religious and ritual life in Newar society is highly guided by calendrical festivals. We can say that the Newars spend a good part of their time to organise and perform these festivals. They are highly organised when it comes to organising ritual activities. Not only in Kathmandu but also wherever the Newars have moved and settled, they managed to observe their regular feasts and festivals, rituals and traditions. Almost every month, they observe one or another festival, feast, fast or procession of gods and goddesses. As we know, almost each lunar month in Nepal contains one or another festival (*nakḥaḥcakhah*). All year round, numerous festivals are celebrated, processions of deities are carried out and worship is performed.¹ Although all major and minor feasts and festivals are celebrated in every place in many ways similar the celebration of these feasts and festival in each place may vary. Moreover, there are many feasts and processions of gods and goddesses in each place, which can be called original to that place. One of the most common features of all Newar cities, towns and villages is that each of them has its specific annual festival and procession (*jātrā*) of the most important deity of that particular place. The processions of different mother goddesses during Pahāncarhe in March or April and Indrajātrā in August or September, and the processions of Rāto Macchendranāth in Patan and Bisket Jātrā in Bhaktapur are such annual festivals.

Besides observing fasts, feasts, festivals, organising processions of gods and goddesses, and making pilgrimages to religiously important places, another important feature of Newar society are the masked dances of various deities. In the Kathmandu Valley several masked dances are performed at different times of the year. Among them are the Devī dances, performed around the Yamyā festival in Kathmandu. As we know most Newar socio-religious and ritual activities are taken care of by *guthi*. All these feasts and fasts, festivals and processions of gods and goddesses, rituals and traditions of the Kathmandu Valley are characteristic for Newar culture.

Scholars agree on the fact that most feasts, fasts, festivals and procession of gods and goddesses celebrated in present day Nepal date since the Malla period some of them even date from the Thakuri period and the Licchavi period. Analysing some names of festivals found in the Gopālarājavarṇāśavalī, the oldest chronicle of Nepal, and an inscription dated 1441 AD (NS 561),

Sharma stresses that Newar festivals developed their present shape already during the reigns of Jayasthiti Malla (1382-95 AD) and Yaksa Malla (1428-1482 AD).² Even after the 1769 Gorkhā conquest of Nepal, the Gorkhā rulers accepted most of Newar culture as their court culture (Hoek 1990). This helped a great deal in continuation of Newar culture and its rituals in modern Nepal.

Depending on the nature of the celebrations, Newar festival rituals can be classified in various categories. For example, some festivals like Svanti (Tihār), Holi, the day of worshipping divine serpents (Nāgapañcamī) and Mohanī (Dasain) are celebrated by most Nepalese without ethnic or caste boundaries. These festivals can be considered national festivals. They are celebrated not only in Nepal, but also in India in a grand manner. Of course, celebrations of these festivals in Nepal are immensely different from the way they are celebrated in India. Inside Nepal too, each ethnic group may celebrate them in a distinct way and sometimes within one group, the way of celebration may vary from place to place and from family to family.³ For the Newars, Mohanī and Svanti are very important annual festivals (*nakhaḥ*). For the Newars, Nāgapañcamī and Holī are important, but not celebrated with any feasts, while the people in the Tarāi and in India celebrate both these festivals in a grand manner.

Most other festivals can be considered as characteristic of the Newar, because during such festivals no other ethnic groups of Nepal directly participate. Even in case they celebrate them, their way of doing so is significantly different from the Newar way. For instance, Sakimilāpunhi is observed only by the Newars; every family worships the full-moon in the evening and eats fried beans, sweet potatoes and roots of the arum lily (*caladium arumacia*); Newar girls may observe a day long fast on this day. Other ethnic groups do not have this tradition. Similarly Yomaripunhi, Pāhāncarhe, Digupūjā, Gathāmugaḥ, Kvātipunhi, the processions of the cows (Sāyāḥ), the day of giving alms to Buddhist priests (Pañjārām), Cathā or the day to worship the crescent of the moon and Gaṇeśa, the festival dedicated to the god of rain Indra (Yamyā), are celebrated by the Newars only.

Ritual Cycle

When we look at the nature of the celebrations of these festivals, we can discover an important impact of the agricultural cycle on them.⁴ It can be said that the social life of the inhabitants of the Valley is still to a large extent determined by the agricultural cycle. Until today, many feasts and festivals and processions of gods and goddesses are in one way or the other related to agriculture. However, it would be wrong to conclude that only the agricultural cycle regulates the ritual calendar of the Valley, because there are

many festivals not connected to agriculture, such as the festival of Mādhavanārāyaṇa in Sankhu.

The chain of ritual celebrations in Nepal is cyclical and it is difficult to mark one celebration as the beginning and another as the end of a cycle (Hoek 2004). Most Newars in the Valley consider that the ritual year begins on the day of Gathāmugaḥ in August, the day of expelling ghosts, and ends on the day of Sithinakhaḥ in June, the day of worshipping lineage deities. When we look at the gorgeous way of celebrating the festival of Mohanī (*Dasain* in Nepālī, *Daserā* in Hindī), the September celebration of the divine victory over the demons, coinciding with the harvest of rice, we are inclined to consider this the most important festival. Those who relate rituals with agriculture consider this festival as the beginning of a ritual cycle because the main crop, rice, is harvested around this festival.

Svanti, which falls two weeks after Dasain, is another great festival of the country. It is also the time of the beginning of the lunar eras known as the Kārtikādi eras, as they change in the month of Kārtik (October/November), which includes the New Year's Day of Nepal (Samvat). Many, therefore, take this festival of Svanti or Tihār as the beginning of the ritual cycle. The New Year's Day of the Nepal era falls on the fourth day of this festival, which is based on the lunar calendar. Since Nepalese people celebrate almost all their festivals according to the lunar calendar, the change of the Nepal era is an important day.

In Nepal, the lunar year begins either in the spring or fall. If it begins in the spring, it is known as Caitrādi if in the fall as Kārtikādi. The first one is also known as Pūrōmāntaka month, ending on a full moon day, while the latter one is Amāntaka, ending on the new moon. The Pūrōmāntaka month begins from Kṛṣṇapakṣa or the dark half while the Amāntaka month begins from Śuklapakṣa (the bright half of moon).

Historians believe that the tradition of celebrating New Year's Day and Mhapūjā is much older in Nepal than the Nepal Samvat (Shrestha 1982: 48-53). As the New Year, many people consider this occasion as the beginning of a ritual cycle in the country. *Nepālvarṣa Kriyā Nakhaḥcakhāḥ Pustakam*, a manual of Nepalese Festivals (NKNP), takes the festival of Svanti as the beginning of the ritual cycle in Nepal.⁵ Haribodhinī Ekādaśī, the eleventh day of the bright half of Kachalā Sukla (November) marks the end of the Caturmāsa, the four-month-long sleep of the Hindu god Viṣṇu. The Caturmāsa is considered to be an inauspicious time of the year, and rituals related to the lifecycle are avoided as much as possible during this time of the year. Many people in Nepal also consider the end of Caturmāsa as the beginning of the ritual cycle. However, in Bhaktapur, Bore, Thimi and in Tokhā people celebrate their important festivals during the change of the

Vikram era, based on a solar calendar (Gutschow 1996 and Vargati 1995: 184). Because of these festivals, many people believe there that the ritual cycle begins on the New Year's Day of the Vikram year.

Seasons are important factors in determining the time of particular festivals. Many festivals are named after seasons. Nepal observes six seasons, namely Vasanta (spring-*Sillā-Cillā*), Griṣma (summer-*Caulā-Bachalā*), Varsā (rain Tachalā-Dillā), Śarad (*autumn Guṃplā-Yamplā*), Hemanta (winter *Kaulā-Kachalā*), and Śiśir (frosty *Thiṃplā-Pohelā*), each season occupying a two-month time span. Similarly the devotional songs at the places of devotional singing (*bhajan*) change according to the change of season. People consider that Vasanta marks the renewal of seasons because it is considered to be the king of the seasons. However, festivals like Gathāmugaḥ, which Newar people consider to be the beginning of ritual, fall in autumn.

It may be clear that there is no common opinion about the beginning or the end of the ritual year in Nepal. Any of the aforementioned festivals or ceremonies may be considered a beginning of the ritual cycle in the Valley, because there is no real break of the chain of the ritual cycle. However, the NKNP takes the festival of Svanti as the beginning of the ritual cycle in Nepal. Since Svanti falls during the change of the Nepal era (October/November), more conveniently it can be taken as the beginning point of the ritual cycle, because it is one of the most ancient traditions in South Asia and Nepal.

Svanti

Svanti is one of the national festivals of Nepal celebrated throughout the kingdom by the Hindu and Buddhist population. This festival is known by several names: Svanti, Pañcaka, Yamapañcaka, Tihār and Dipāvalī. Both the words 'Tihār' and 'Dipāvalī' are derived from the Hindi words 'Tyauhāra' and 'Divālī.' Svanti, Pañcaka and Yamapañcaka are words from Nepalese origin (Naghabhani 1991: 39). The Newar people call the occasion 'Svanti' origin (Naghabhani 1991: 39). The Newar people call the occasion 'Svanti' and celebrate it on their own special way. It is called the festival of light, because during this festival people illuminate their houses, streets, quarters, villages, towns and cities with as many lights as possible. On the fourth day of this festival, Newar people celebrate their New Year's Day. Performing *bhailo* and *dyausi* (dances with special songs) on the third and fourth day of this festival is a typical tradition among the Parvates. In the evening of Lakṣmīpūjā, unmarried girls singing and dancing *bhailo*, go to their neighbours, where they are treated with delicious foods, while the following evening males perform *dyausi*.

During this festival, Yama, the god of death, is invoked and so it is called 'Yamapañcaka' or 'Five days dedicated to Yama'. People assume that,

during these five days, Yama descends on this world. On the first and second day of this festival, Yama's messengers, the crow and the dog are worshipped. On the third day, the cow is worshipped. Although the cow is worshipped as Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth, she is also respected as an animal associated with the realm of Yama. Yama's assistance is sought in order that recently deceased people may cross the river Baitaraṇī to reach heaven. Honouring Yama and his messenger Yamadut on the day of Mhapūjā and worshipping Yama and his bookkeeper Citragupta on the day of Kijāpūjā clearly mark the relation of this festival to death. On the day of Mhapūjā, Yama is honoured as a protective god, while on the day of Kijāpūjā he is worshipped as an elder brother and Citragupta as a younger brother (A. Vajracarya 1987: 9-10). Although Yama is invoked on each of the five days during this festival, many people disagree with the name "Yamapañcaka" because the lofty ways of celebrating Lakṣmī, the worship of the self, and the worship of brothers have weakened the worship of Yama considerably (Naghabhani 1991: 47).

The NKNP suggests to begin this festival by worshipping Gaṇeśa on the first day, Kachalagā (Kārtik) Dvādaśī, making it a six-day festival (A. Vajracarya 1987: 3). However, in practice, people begin this festival on Trayodaśī by worshipping the crow and they consider it a five-days' festival.⁶ The manners of workshops now popular among the Newars are:

Kvapūjā (first day): worship of crows, messengers (of Death);

Khicāpūjā (second day): worship of dogs;

Sāpūjā and Lakṣmī pūjā (third day): the worship of cows and Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth;

Mhapūjā (fourth day): the worship of the self, start of the New Year; and

Kijāpūjā (fifth day): the worship of brothers by their sisters.

Kvapūjā (first day), worship of crows, messengers (of Death): On the first day of Yamapañcaka, people worship and feed crows. In Newar households, it is common to offer a portion of food to crows every morning before its members eat their own meal. Crows are believed to be messengers. They are supposed to carry messages of close relatives and friends from far-away places. People assume the crows are delivering these messages while cawing. Depending on the voice of that crow, people guess whether it is delivering a good or a bad message. When it caws near the house with a sweet voice, this is taken as a good message. Sometimes the cawing is also taken as an announcement of the imminent arrival of some guests. However, if the sound is harsh, then it is supposed to be an indication of something bad that is going to happen. The crow is also supposed to be the messenger of

Yama, the god of death. People believe that, when somebody dies, the departed soul (*preta*) finds its temporary shelter in a crow. At least for the first ten days of the impure period after a death, the departed soul is supposed to reside in a crow. Every morning during the first ten-day's mourning period, the chief mourner has to perform *śrāddha* by offering a rice ball (*pinḍu*) and food stuffs to crows in the name of the deceased person.

Khicāpūjā (second day), the worship of dogs: The second day of the Svanti festival is Khicāpūjā, the day of worshipping dogs. This day is dedicated to please the dogs. Not only pet dogs, even wandering dogs are respected and worshipped with garlands and delicacies. In Nepal, keeping dogs as pet animals is very common and there are many stray dogs too. On this day, from early in the morning, people are seen worshipping dogs in the streets. The dogs are considered to be the guards at the doors of Yama's place and people believe that their worship helps the soul's passage at the time of death. Like crows, dogs are supposed to be an abode for the recently deceased. The chief mourner performs *śrāddha* to offer *pinḍu* and foodstuffs to dogs in the name of the deceased during the first ten days after somebody's death, just like he does to crows. Even when stray dogs enter the house of a deceased person, they are not supposed to be chased away, because people believe that a dead person visits his or her house disguised as a dog. Dogs are also regarded as the vehicle of the fearful god Bhairav and of Nāsadyo (Nātyaśvara), the god of dance and drama. They are also the gatekeepers of different temples in Kathmandu Valley.

Sāpūjā, the worship of cows as Lakṣmī and Lakṣmīpūjā (third day): *Sā* or cow is considered to be a representation of Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth. On the third day of the festival of Svanti, the cow is worshipped and fed generously. Today, only a few families in Kathmandu have a cow at home, so those who do not have one, have to visit a place where a cow can be found or they request to bring a cow to their house for a *pūjā*. People believe that the worship brings them good fortune. They attach sacred threads, which they had received from Brahmins on the day of Janaipurnimā on the tail of a cow⁷ and believe that this act enables them to receive the cow's support in crossing the river Baitaraṇī, which is said to create frightful barriers to sinful men. To give a cow as a gift to Brahmins is a religious task for Hindus that enables them to reach heaven after their death. For them, the cow is the most sacred animal and her five products: milk, curd, butter, urine and dung are considered to be pure objects.

On the same day in the evening, after the worship of the cow, people worship Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth. For this occasion, the houses are

cleaned and decorated with lights to receive her. Lakṣmī has been represented by the word 'Śrī' which means the sum of beauty and betterment. Since ancient times, the meaning and interpretation of Lakṣmī has been vast and wide. Eight (*aṣṭalakṣmī*) or sixteen (*ṣoḍśalakṣmī*) names are invoked to please her during her worship.⁸ Traditional painters provide a special picture of Lakṣmī: she has four hands; one of her right hands is carrying a traditional mirror (*jvalānhāyakaṃ*) and the other is in *abhaya mudrā*; one of her left hands is carrying a vermilion container (*sinhaṃṃhu*) and the other is in *bara mudrā*; she is seated on her throne, adorned with glittering dresses and ornaments on her body, wearing a golden crown on her head; her right foot is touching a tortoise and the left one is in *padmāsana mudrā*; two gods of wealth (Kubera) and two benevolent ghosts (*khyāḥ*) are represented in front of her.⁹

The preparation for the worship of Lakṣmī begins early in the morning in every household by smearing every floor with cow dung mixed with red clay and water. A line of cow dung and red clay leads from the front of the house to the secret shrine of Lakṣmī. This is to let the goddess Lakṣmī find her way to the place of worship so that she may bestow wealth on them there. They also garland the doors of the houses and paint them with coloured powders (Newar: *sinham*), especially in shops. Those who own a shop away from their own house, worship Lakṣmī at their shop first, then join their family to worship Lakṣmī at home. As soon as the sun sets, every family begins to decorate each door and window of their house with *pālācā* lamps, shallow earthen bowls with cooking oil and a wick. Two to three decades ago, people began replacing the traditional *pālācā* by candles. Today, many families also decorate their houses with coloured electric bulbs.

In every house, Lakṣmī is kept in a secret place of worship called *āgam*. All the family members must join the worship. The eldest male member of the family (*nāyo*) is in charge of the worship, while women are responsible for preparing *pūjā* plates and cleaning the house. Worship ingredients are generally red and yellow powders, incenses, rice, popped rice, garland of threads (*jajamkā*), yoghurt, flowers, seasonal fruits, sweets and other foodstuffs. A painting of Lakṣmī made by a traditional painter is used to represent the goddess in the worship room. Old and new coins, money, gold, silver and all the treasures of the house are exhibited to receive worship on this occasion. At least one new coin must be offered to Lakṣmī or added to the stores. New utensils, new grains (paddy, rice, and wheat), measuring objects (*mānā*, *kule*, and *pāthi*) and weighing objects (*dhaḥ*) are also worshipped. Offering grains from the new harvest to Lakṣmī is an essential

ritual on this occasion, because people must offer the cereals before they consume them themselves. They believe that Lakṣmī is the goddess of grain whose benediction is necessary to gain good crops. The main reason for honouring Lakṣmī is to achieve her blessing to increase one's wealth and prosperity. People worship her every day; they believe that this worship brings them great fortune.

After the worship, follows the family feasts. Dried meat (*sukulā*) of various animals, kept from the festival of Mohanī two weeks earlier, is consumed today. Of course, each foodstuff is first offered to the goddess before the family eats itself. For three nights, Lakṣmī's presence is assured by keeping her in the same place and worshipping her everyday with great respect. Then, on the day after Kijāpūjā or on the fourth day's morning, is the day of *svām kokāyegu*, i.e. to bring out Lakṣmī's blessings (flowers, *fikā*, and food) from the secret place and distribute among the family members.

Gambling, which is legally forbidden during other times of the year starts from the day of Lakṣmīpūjā and lasts for three days and three nights. People believe that gambling is auspicious during Svanti, and might bring them good fortune. It is notable that gambling was freely permitted during the Rana regime and was abolished in 1951 but revived after a year. It was finally abolished in 1963 through an act but it is still in practice.

Mhapūjā (fourth day), worship of the self, start of the New Year: Mhapūjā is one of the oldest traditions of Nepal. It is older than that of the Nepal era (Nepal Saṃvat) itself. Bhuvanlal Pradhan assumes that one of the Licchavi kings, most probably Mānadeva I (464-505 AD), began this festival (B. Pradhan 1998: 38). Paying of all the debts of the Nepalese, a generous trader called Saṃkhadhar Sākhvā began the Nepal Saṃvat on the 20th October 879 AD, during the reign of King Rāghavadeva.¹⁰ It so happened that the Nepal Saṃvat was introduced on the day of Mhapūjā. Malla rulers in the Valley of Nepal continued this era as the official one till their rule ended in 1769. In 1769 AD, after the Gorkhā conquest of Nepal, the Shah rulers began to use Śaka Saṃvat, which was later replaced by Vikram Saṃvat by the Rana Prime minister Chandra Shumshere in 1903 AD.¹¹ As the Nepalese Historians states, the reason the lunar calendar was replaced with the solar calendar was because this shrewd and despotic Rana Prime Minister wanted to cut down the burden of paying salaries for a thirteenth months to government staff every two years. The use of Nepal Saṃvat never completely died out. Since the 1950s, the Newar elite began to celebrate the New Year's Day of the Nepal era as a public event.¹² Since it is called Nepāl Saṃvat, their demand is to recognise it as a national era. As the demand

came from the Newars, it began to be labelled the Nevāri Saṃvat by many non-Newar people. In 1999, Nepalese government declared Saṃkhadhar Sākhvā, the founder of the Nepāl Saṃvat a national hero (Rāstriya Vibhūti) of Nepal. Nepalese people have taken this decision as a token of recognition of the Nepal Saṃvat as a national era. So far, the government has taken no steps towards recognising Nepal Saṃvat as an official calendar for any purpose. Those in favour of Nepal Saṃvat argue that since all religious ritual activities in Nepal are based on lunar calendar it should not be a problem to recognise it for the purpose.

On New Year's Day, Mhapūjā is celebrated in a great way. On this day, Newar people perform Mhapūjā to all the deities located in their neighbourhood before they perform the worship of the self (Mhapūjā) at their houses. Usually, Mhapūjā is performed in the evening on the top floor of the house. The floor is cleaned and smeared with cow dung and red clay. Then a *mandala*, a cosmic circle of flour, is drawn for each person. *Mandalas* are also drawn for those members of the family who are absent and for the guests who are present on the occasion. They also draw some *mandala* in the name of the three hundred thirty million deities (*tetisakoḥ dyo*), of Yama, of his messenger (Yamadut) and of Śiva's messenger (Śivadut); and for household items such as broom, winnow, grinding stone, pestle, mortar, measuring pot (*mānā* and *pāthi*), water container (*karuvā*), and earthen pitcher.¹³ I observed the Mhapūjā ceremony in my own family and in a Jyāpu family in Sankhu. In both cases, steamed rice-flour figures of Yama, his messenger, Gaṇeśa, Lakṣmī, Kubera and Balirāja were displayed. In the centre of each *mandala*, a small oil *mandala* is drawn. Then, red powder, flowers, popped and husked rice are showered over the *mandala*. A small kind of rice pastry (*lvahacāmarī*), walnuts, incense, chestnuts, wild lime, common citron (*taḥsi*), citrus fruit (*bhvagatyā*), threads (*jajaṅkā*), flower garlands and long wicks (*kheluitā*) are placed around a *mandala* to be handed over to the person sitting in front of the *mandala*. As far as possible, all the members of the family sit in a single row in front of one's *mandala*, facing east. Facing south is believed to be inauspicious. In my own (Śreṣṭha) family, the eldest male member (*nāyo*) of the house sits at the head of the row; then, his juniors, unmarried daughters and other women are seated according to seniority. In the Jyāpu family, I observed that the eldest women representing the dead head of the family sat at the head of the row as the head of the family, then her juniors according to seniority. To consider eldest women as the head of the family even when there are adult sons is a significant difference between Śreṣṭha and Jyāpu families.

The *nāyo* worships a small lamp containing a figure of Gaṇeśa (*sukundā*) before he begins other ritual activities.¹⁴ All other members of the family also throw a few grains of rice to Gaṇeśa in a gesture of worship. Then the eldest woman (*nakiṇṇ*) of the house puts a *tikā* on everybody's forehead; other elder women assist her in handing over the *kheluitā*, *jajamkā* and fruits. The person who is thus blessed throws a few grains of rice over these things in a gesture of worship. Everybody must light his or her *kheluitā* and place it on his own *mandala*. This act can be seen as the actual moment of worshipping the self. The eldest woman pours worship items (*luigu*) on the mandala of each person, and then she also pours them three times over the body of each person. This is to wish the person worshipped's good, health, happiness and prosperity. Then fruit, threads and garlands are handed over. Towards the end of the ceremony, the persons worshipped are given *sagam*, a ritual blessing which is composed of a boiled egg, a fish, pieces of boiled meat and bread made of lentil (*va*) together with liquor to wish them happy and prosperous days ahead. Before the ritual ends, pieces of *taḥsi* and other fruit are eaten.

Walnuts, *taḥsi*, *kheluitā* and *mandala* are the crucial items of the ceremony. The mandala represents the person worshipped, the *kheluitā* his life, the *taḥsi* his purity and the walnut his strength. It is necessary to keep *kheluitā* lighted until the worship is finished. It is considered a bad sign if it extinguishes during the ritual, because people link the light with a person's lifespan.¹⁵ The Mhapūjā ceremony ends with the sweeping away of the decorated mandala simultaneously from the bottom to the top of the row and from the top to the bottom. After sweeping away the mandala, the ceremony is finished, and a family feast then starts marking the actual end of the celebration of Mhapūjā.

By celebrating Mhapūjā, people anticipate a successful and prosperous life during the coming year. The worship is also supposed to provide people with good health and a long life (Munakarmi 1975: 60). The way of celebrating this festival may vary from one family to another, but the significance of the celebration is not differently understood. Like in all other Newar festivals, women play a major role in arranging the necessary items for the worship. In my family, they also take the responsibility of worshipping all the male members of the family, while male members usually do not reciprocate such tasks. If a person is living alone he must perform his Mhapūjā himself. In such a case this can be considered a real worship of the self. Worship of the self means to recognize a god in oneself. The celebration of Mhapūjā indicates that the one who realises his capacities may turn himself into a god. To be a god means to be able to sacrifice oneself for the wellbeing of others. According to Baldev Jaju, a Newar

culture specialist, the ultimate aim of a person is to attain the level of a god.¹⁶

During the Mhapūjā, the charitable demon king Balirāj is also worshipped (Naghabhani 1991: 44-45). A myth tells that he was pushed to the netherworld (*pātāla*) by the god Viṣṇu to prevent him from conquering heaven. By the power of his vow of giving gifts, Balirāj was about to conquer heaven. This alarmed all the gods, so one day the disguised Viṣṇu arrived at Balirāj's door as a saint and begged for some space to make three steps. Generously, Balirāj granted the disguised Viṣṇu permission to step wherever he wanted. Viṣṇu used this opportunity to deceive Balirāj. Viṣṇu covered the whole heaven with his first step and the earth by his second step, so Balirāj had nothing left his own head for Viṣṇu's third step, which enabled Viṣṇu to push Balirāj down to the netherworld. However, after this unpleasant task, Viṣṇu asked Balirāj if he had any wishes. Balirāja now requested permission to visit his kingdom once a year to see his people. Viṣṇu granted him the day of Mhapūjā as his day on earth. The myth tells that the joyous celebration of Mhapūjā is to assure king Balirāj that his people are living happily in his kingdom. Although the demon king Balirāj is respected in Nepal during the festival of Svanti many people do not agree that Nepal is Balirāj's ancient kingdom. K.B. Uday believes that the worship of Balirāj is a tradition, which has its origin in India (Uday 2000: 2).

On the day of Mhapūjā, the Parvate people in Nepal worship the "mountain of the dung of cow (*gobardhan parvat*) and the ox (*goru*). According to a myth, Lord Krishna began this tradition to commemorate the day he protected the Braja people of Gokula from Indra's attack by creating a mountain of cow dung (*gobardhan parvat*). Noted Nepalese historian, Triratna Manandhar, states that the tradition of *gobardhan pūjā* started in Nepal only during the nineteenth century i.e. during the Shah rule (AD 1769 to till date). According to Hindu mythology, Kriṣṇa performed *gobardhan pūjā* before the harvest in July but not after the harvest in October, as it is the case in Nepal.

Kijāpūjā (fifth day), worship of brothers: This is the final day of the five-day observance of the Yamapañcaka or Svanti festival. Today, sisters worship their brothers to bring them health, happiness and prosperity. This festival is celebrated in Nepal, not only by the Newars, but also by the Parvates and the people of the Tarāi. Among the Newars, this day is known as the day of Kijāpūjā, while the Parvates call it Bhāitika. For most Newars, it is the occasion to worship both younger and elder brothers, but for many others it is the day to worship only their younger brothers. On this day, married sisters return to their parental homes to worship their brothers, or

brothers visit their sisters to receive worship from them. The reigning king also observes this festival by receiving *ṅikā* from his sisters. Every year, a royal astrologer announces the most auspicious moment to receive *ṅikā* from sisters, but apart from the king, people choose their own convenient time for the worship.

On the day of Kijāpūjā, together with brothers, Yama and Citragupta are worshipped. So *mandala* are drawn for them too.¹⁷ In my family, on the day of Mhapūjā, these are placed on the top of the row of worship, but on the day of Kijāpūjā they are placed at the bottom while in the Jyāpu family I observed, their position did not change.¹⁸ Most ingredients used at Kijāpūjā are similar to those at Mhapūjā, such as the drawing of *mandala*, oil *mandala*, and the worship items mentioned before. The way of worshipping brothers by their sisters is also similar to Mhapūjā, but this time the actors are sisters. The most important items of the day are oil *mandala*, walnuts, *taḥsi* and *gvaysvām* (a small nut-shaped flower).

Explaining *ślokas* from *Satkarma Ratnāvalī* and a traditional calendar (*pātro*), Naghabhani states that the worship of brothers by their sisters on this day is a tradition derived from the legendary worship of Yama by his younger sister Yamunā. He thinks it is wrong to call the day 'Kijāpūjā' or 'worship of the younger brother' because the texts do not specify this aspect of brotherhood. He thinks it would be more appropriate to worship both younger and elder brothers (Naghabhani 1991: 46 and Upadhyay 1996: 225-231). Yamunā is also identified with Yamī. According to a Hindu myth, Yama and Yamī are son and daughter of Vivasvat (the sun) and Ū Saranyū and are twins. Yamī tried to persuade Yama to marry her, but Yama refused the proposal of an incestuous marriage, as he was afraid of being called evil (O' Flaherty 1978: 64). Another myth tells that on this day a sister was preparing a worship of her brother, but Yama, the god of death, arrived to take away her brother because his life span on earth ran out. The clever sister persuaded Yama to wait and witness the worship. She worshipped Yama together with her brother, which moved Yama. Consequently, Yama saved her brother's life. This myth tells that she requested Yama not to take away her brother until the oil *mandala* dried up and *gvaysvām* faded away. People believe that a *mandala* made from oil never dries up; so nut-shaped flower (*gvaysvām*) never fades away, and Yama had to give up the idea of taking away her brother. It is believed that from that time onwards sisters began worshipping their brothers on this day believing that it will bestow a long life on them. The myth makes it clear that people assume it is possible to conquer death by worshipping Yama, the god of death. Hence, this occasion can be taken as a celebration of the victory of life over death.

The day of Kijāpūjā is also meant to exchange gifts among brothers and sisters. Not only do sisters worship their brothers and bless them with happiness and a long life, but they also feed them with delicious foods, sweets, fruits, walnuts, chestnuts, betel nuts, pistachio nuts, cashew nuts, almonds, raisins, cinnamon, chocolates and cloves (*masalā pva*). In return, brothers give money or clothes or other items to their sisters.

The end of the worship of brothers is considered to be the end of the five-day long Svanti festival, but the real closure of the festival takes place on the day following Kijāpūjā. On this day, early in the morning, the final worship of Lakṣmī is performed and the *prasād* of Lakṣmī are taken out from the *āgam* to be distributed among the family members. The blessings include flowers, *ṅikā*, sweets, fruits and a feast. Married daughters and sisters are also invited to receive the blessings and to attend the feast.

Significance of the rituals

Pañcaka is a Sanskrit name given to this festival, which means 'consisting of five' (Monier Williams 1988: 578). To call this festival 'Pañcaka' seems appropriate since it is celebrated for five consecutive days. 'Pañcaka' is generally considered an inauspicious period, which may occur twelve to thirteen times in a year.¹⁹ Auspicious tasks like sowing the fields are avoided during such a period. It is considered dangerous for a family when a member dies during any of the days of the Pañcaka. People believe that in such a case as much as five members from the same family will die. To avoid such a disaster, adequate attention is given when somebody dies during a Pañcaka period: during the cremation of the dead body, eggs are added to the corpse as a substitute of human lives.

As the god of death, Yama is accountable for determining the moment of death of all the creatures in the world. Therefore, Yama's predominance during the Pañcaka festival is clear. In this regard the name 'Yamapañcaka' or 'Five days dedicated to Yama' given to the festival is significant. Pañcaka as a festival is considered a good period but, because of Yama's presence, it is not without danger. Unlike during other festivals the chief deity of this festival does not have any processions, but Yama's presence from the first day of the festival to the end is obvious. To celebrate a festival in the presence of Yama, the god of death, can be considered a most risky enterprise. Therefore, people may have taken this festival as an opportunity to appease Yama so that they receive his bliss. By worshipping Yama, people solicit his grant of a long life in the world and in heaven after one's death. Hindus believe that, as soon as one dies, one's departed soul moves to Yama's court. There all souls are judged; either they are awarded heaven or they are sent to hell. Remembering, worshipping and appeasing deceased ancestors (*pitṛ*) are dominant feature of Newar ritual life. Every morning,

sons must offer water and food to their deceased ancestors. During all major and minor festivals, the ancestors are presented food (*jugibvah*), and they are involved during any special family ceremony like marriage or other lifecycle rituals. *Śrāddha* is performed once a year to worship and feed them. Therefore, the worship of Yama, the god of death, during the Svanti festival is not to be surprised at, but is just another occasion of appeasing Yama who might otherwise cause untimely death or trouble after one's death.

However, as it is now, the main focus of the festival is not Yama, but Lakṣmī, the worship of the self and the worship of brothers. Although people celebrate this festival for five days, they consider these three days as important and to be celebrated it with pomp. Scholars agree that the Newar name 'Svanti' for this festival is derived from the words '*Svanhu Tithi*' or 'Three-day festival.' On the third day of the festival, the worship of Lakṣmī is celebrated with great fanfare. It shows, although social life in Newar society is principally represented in a religious and spiritual way, material prosperity and happiness are recognised as essential elements for social continuity.

The worship of Lakṣmī and the worship of brothers are not an unimportant part of this festival, but the Newars take Mhapūjā or the worship of the self as the most important event of the festival. Mhapūjā is only prevalent among the Newars. In many respects, Mhapūjā can be considered a unique Nepalese tradition. Worship of the self or worship of one's body (*mha*) and soul (*ātmā*) is Mhapūjā. For religious-minded people, body and soul are two different phenomena. They believe that their body is temporal while their soul is immortal. They believe that in a person a god is residing, so the worship of the self is an occasion to respect or recognise the god in oneself. The Nepalese tradition of worshipping gods and goddesses is to invoke their power (*śakti*) (Juu and Shrestha 1985: 67). Hence, the worship of the self is to understand one's capability and to utilise it for attaining the level of a god or goddess and as such to work for the betterment of human beings and the whole universe.

The fifth day's worship of brothers is another important day of this festival. This tradition is one of the most popular customs in South Asia. It is not only religiously meaningful but also significant from a social point of view, because it plays a great role in strengthening the relation between brothers and sisters. A balanced relation between brothers and sisters is one of the essential aspects of Nepalese social life. Especially the relation between married sisters and brothers is crucial. If not handled thoughtfully the bond may turn very unpleasant. In such a situation one may lose one's dignity in society. The day of Kijāpūjā provides brothers and sisters an opportunity to keep up their relationship.

One of the most important aspects of this festival is the turn of the lunar year. It is clear from our earlier discussion that celebrating the turn of the year on this day is an ancient tradition in Nepal. Therefore, it is appropriate to call this occasion the renewal of the ritual year in Nepal, because apart from two festivals, Ghycākusalhu and Bisketjātrā,²⁰ all the feasts and festivals in Nepal are celebrated according to the lunar calendar. In India too, those who follow the Kārtikādi lunar calendar take this occasion as the renewal of the ritual year and celebrate it as their New Year's Day. As Tyauhār or Divālī, this is a widely celebrated festival among the Hindus in India and other countries. It could be assumed that the tradition of the celebration of the New Year might, over the years, have created the wonderful festival of Svanti or Yamapañcaka. Although Mhapūjā was invented earlier the celebration of the New Year is itself a 1127 years old tradition thanks to Saṃkhadhara Sākhvāla. 'Nepal' is now the name of present-day country. Hence it will be erroneous to call the Nepal era a Newar or Newari Saṃvat. There is no reason that only the Newars would feel proud of the Nepal era, because the name 'Nepal' implies that it belongs to all Nepalese.

Conclusion

The Svanti festival contains five major components: the worship of the crow, dog and cow; the invocation of Yama by worshipping his messengers and himself; the worship of Lakṣmī; the worship of the self on New Year's Day; and the worship of brothers. The combination of these five different ritual activities in one single festival is difficult to explain. The most obvious feature of this festival is the presence of Yama. However, if we consider this to be the festival of Yama only, then the worship of Lakṣmī, the self and brothers cannot logically be fitted in. Crow, dog and cow are in one way or other related to Yama and his realm, therefore their worship during this festival makes sense, but Yama's worship together with that of the self and that of brothers is difficult to comprehend. The relation between two ritual sequels, the worship of the self and the worship of brothers, is not clear to me either. Although the nature of worship during these two days is similar, the actors who carry out the rituals are different; so the meanings of each ritual are different too. Why the worship of the self and brothers occurs after the worship of Lakṣmī is also not understandable.

Yama is invoked throughout the festival but his absence at the time of Lakṣmī's worship is a puzzle. The reason may be that people prefer forgetting death when they are engaged in worshipping wealth or are otherwise busy with material life.

Since people are busy honouring Yama from the first to the final day of the festival this festival can more appropriately be called the celebration of Yama. In this regard the name 'Yamapañcaka' is a most suitable name for

this festival. Yama as the god of death is considered to be a less compassionate divinity. People know that death is inevitable but they like to avoid it as far as possible. It is clear that the real motive behind the invocation of Yama at the time of the New Year's celebration or during the worship of the self is to plead for the continuation of life for another year. Similarly, the worship of Yama together with the worship of brothers is also thought to obtain his blessings for the good health and life of brothers. These two events can be considered the celebration of life, albeit with the mercy of Yama, the god of death. By worshipping him, people try to subjugate the power of death. It is significant that Mhapūjā is performed as the first ritual of the New Year and that people pray for health, long life, happiness and prosperity in the year to come. Yama's worship on such an occasion is meaningful, because he is the god who possesses the power of determining people's life span in the world and their fate after death. Yama's acceptance of being worshipped as a protective god during this festival can be taken as his willingness for showing his compassion towards human beings. Compassion towards human beings shown by the god of death may be called the defeat of death. In this regard, the worship of the self and the worship of brothers can both be considered as the overcoming of death. Hence we can consider the festival of Svanti as the celebration of the victory of life over death.

As we discussed above, during this festival the Amāntaka-based lunar Year is changed symbolising the change of ritual cycle. Therefore we can say that the festival of Svanti is also the renewal of the ritual cycle in Nepal.

Notes

1. I carried out my research as a PhD candidate at the Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies (CNWS), University of Leiden, the Netherlands. I am grateful to Prof. Dr. D.H.A. Kolff and Dr. Sjoerd Zanen of University of Leiden, the Netherlands for their helpful comments to earlier drafts of this paper. I express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Triratna Manandhar of Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu Nepal for reviewing and providing useful suggestions to an earlier version of this paper. For more on Nepalese festivals, see (Anderson 1971; Calise 1982; Gellner 1992: 213-220; Lewis 1984: 337-441; Nepali 1965: 343-413; R. Pradhan 1986: 286-416; Shrestha 2002: 211-268; Toffin 1984: 501-554; A. Vajracarya 1988 and P. Vajracarya 1979).
2. See (P. Sharma 1997: 153-4 and Vajracarya and Malla: 1985 folio 21, 23, 29, 56, 61 and 63).
3. See Ishii (1993) for a comparison of annual festivals celebrated among Parvate Hindus, Newars and Mithili, the three major ethnic groups of Nepal.
4. Many inscriptions from the Licchavi period (4th to 9th century) provide ample examples of the tradition of religious festivals in Nepal (Vajracarya and Malla 1985: 82-87).
5. Pundit Ashakaji (Ganeshraj) Vajracarya (1988) copied and translated this book into the Newar language from the original text. The translator states that Pandit

- Kaṅthānānda Brāhman had originally compiled this book in Sanskrit. See also Levy (1992: 411-417) and Anderson (1977: 164-174) for Svanti festival.
6. Lewis (1984: 395-403) called it a six-day festival but he has recorded only five days of activities. See Toffin (1984: 538-542) for his interpretation of this festival in Panauti. C. Vajracarya (2000: 133-55) presents the festival as celebrated among the Newar Buddhist Vajracaryas in Kathmandu. See Nepali (1965 381-383) for his observation of Mhapūjā and a comparison of Newar Kijāpūjā with the Parvates' Bhāitika. More on Bhāitika among the Parvates see Bennett (1983: 246-252). See Ishi (1993: 74-77) for a comparison of celebrating this festival between the Mithila, the Parvate Hindus and the Newars.
 7. Janaipūniāmā is celebrated on the full-moon day of the Guṇḍā month in August. On this day, the Brahmins change their sacred threads (*janai*) and distribute threads to general people.
 8. A. Sharma (1987: 11) deals with the general worship of Lakṣmī. Naghabhani (1991: 48-71) critically examines the tradition of worshipping Lakṣmī in Nepal, but he does not provide clear references to his sources.
 9. According to the famous Nepalese traditional painter Premman Citrakar she is Suvamā Lakṣmī. See also (Naghabhani 1991: 65).
 10. See more on the Nepal Era (B. Pradhan 1979: 1-6 and 1998: 29, Slusser 1982: 389 and Vajracarya & Malla 1985: 236).
 11. However, the Vikram era began to be used in minting only since 1911 AD (B. Pradhan 1998: 30).
 12. In 1928 AD, for the first time Dharmaditya Dharmacarya (Jagatman Vaidya) proposed in his magazine *Buddhadharma va Nepālbhāsā* to celebrate the New Year's day of Nepal Saṃvat as a national event. See Nepālbhāsā Maṃkāḥ Khalah (NMK 1993: 65).
 13. According to "Sthirobhava-Vakya" these household items represent one or other deities too (Slusser 1982: 421).
 14. In Newar households, worshipping of Gaṇeśa is essential before beginning any ritual activity.
 15. For his interpretations of *kheluitā* see Gvamga (1999: 1-5).
 16. He views that many Tāntrik deities that are worshipped today were once human beings (Juju and Shrestha 1985: 1-9), for his views on Svanti see (Juju and Shrestha 1985: 60-68).
 17. Many also consider them only the messengers of Yama and Śiva (Yamadut and Śivadut). In his study, Nepali (1965: 383) found elder brothers were regarded as Yamrāj and younger one as Citragupta among the Newars, but I did not encounter with any such interpretations.
 18. This position may vary from one family to another, and does not seem to be meaningful.
 19. During the period of each two *nakṣatra* or 'Lunar Mansion' one 'Pañcaka' is counted. *Nakṣatra* are constellations of fixed stars. There are twenty-seven main *nakṣatra* but some astrologers also consider them as twenty-eight (Behari 2003: 169-251).
 20. These two festivals are celebrated according to solar-based Vikram calendar.

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