

# Frog Worship : A Unique Culture

—Nirish Nepal

Nepal, an ancient land situated on the southern lap of the mighty central Himalayas, is known the world over not only for its fauna and flora, lores and legends but also for its fairs and festivals, traditions and customs. Her natural settings comprised of diverse biotic zones stretching from the steaming lowland belt of the Terai to the freezing alpine region of the Himalayas offer varied ethno-cultural mosaics intertwined with unique religious practices that have ever attracted the anthropologists and naturalists, historians and archaeologists. This tiny Himalayan country is, as a matter of fact, a living museum of different ethnic groups and their peculiar religious beliefs that highlight their conception of nature and of human life.

As a symbol of pantheism, Nepalese people propitiate a host of divinities emanating from natural objects like stones and trees, rivers and reptiles and earth and sky. Nature and man are so closely interwoven in their religious rites that on special occasions of their annual calendar they venerate with great fervour animals like dogs, cows and oxen, birds like crows and black stones like the fossilized ammonites. Similarly, there is a

strange practice of worshipping even a frog in Nepal by a section of the Newar community in the Bagmati River Valley and this cultural tradition has played a significant role in their life. It is, therefore, proposed here to discuss, analyse and unravel the mystery surrounding the divinization of this aruphibian fauna that has been adored in Nepal since ancient times.

The Jyapu farmers form the majority group in the Newar population inhabiting the Bagmati River Valley from time immemorial. They are the cultivators who are connected with the frog worship that takes place annually on the full-moon day of Shrawan (July) during the rainy season. On that particular day they worship frogs in their lush green rice fields with flowers, sandanwood paste, dry rice and also make an offering of boiled rice plus the soup of nine varieties of legume seeds for their consumption. This religious rite is called Byan Janakegu (feeding rice to the frog) in the local dialect.

Many scholars have written a lot about frog worship in Nepal. Perhaps the first among them is Colonel Waddel. He states that frog worship is performed in the Kathmandu Valley in the month of Kartik (October). He

also informs that a priest is employed on that occasion who utters : "Hail parameswara (Lord of the Earth), I pray to thee to receive these offerings to send timely rain and bless our crops" (Waddel 1893 : 292). But this scribe has not found any evidence of frog worship being performed in the month of Kartik (October) and the employment of a priest on such occasion. Frog worship is actually carried out in the month of Shrawan (July) as mentioned earlier. So Col. Waddel's observations seem to have been based merely on a hearsay. His information in this regard is quite wrong. But it is true that a frog to the Jyapu peasants becomes a godling of rain and grain at least once every year during the rainy season.

Interestingly enough, we find a panegyric of the frogs even in the Rig-Veda, the oldest existing work in Sanskrit in which they are compared with the Brahman priests. Some stanzas of the hymn addressed to the frog reads :

"As Brahmans, who a vow fulfil,  
The frogs had now a year been still.  
Like dried and shrivelled skins they lay,  
Faint, parched with heat for many a day  
Expecting, long in vain, the showers  
Withheld by Air's malignant powers.  
But autumn comes; parjanya\* rains.  
In copious streams, then floods the plains,  
Clouds veil the sun, the air is cool,  
The ponds, long empty, now are full.  
There float the frogs, their bodies soak;  
Afar is heard their merry croak."

Also

"The frogs that bleat, and those that low,  
Brown, green, on men all wealth bestow.  
The kine that on our pastures graze,  
The rain-god

we owe to them, with length of days."

(A free rendering of the original text in Sanskrit by John Muir as quoted by Charlotte Manning.)

This hymn is a satire to the Brahmans but an encomium to the frogs. The Rig-Vedic people thought that frogs emitted their voice being roused by the showers of heaven. They even believed that frogs were the givers of hundreds of cows to them and they also lengthened their life in the rich autumn. All this evidently shows that frogs were enlogised in the ancient oriental world during the Vedic period (Circa 1500-1000 B. C.) as well. But has the Rig-Vedic hymn to the frogs anything to do with the practice of frog worship prevalent in the Bagmati River Valley ? Here we should note that the Jyapu agriculturists used to consume frog meat. It was a delicacy to them. They still offer in worship dried frog meat to Harati Azima, a female goddess, located at the Swayambhu Stupa Complex in Kathmandu, although they have now given up eating frogs. Moreover, unlike the Rig-Vedic Aryans, the Jyapu ethnic group belongs to a separate racial stock. The practice of worshipping frogs exclusively belongs to their own indigenous culture, a product of their long time observation about their useful role in agriculture. Nor can it be a product of cultural assimilation, transmission or implantation from outside as no other ethnic groups in Nepal worship the frogs.

There is a legend connected with the deification of frogs that is in vogue in the Bagmati River Valley as narrated in the Rudrayamala Tantra, a Saivite Tantric treatise. It is said that the frog has been worshipped and fed with a sumptuous dish for its role in killing in days of yore a demon called Gatha Muga or Ghantakarna who was

laid by it into the rice field and made him stuck in the mud. The demon, who had invaded the valley, was, it is said, finished off in this way. The frog has, therefore, obtained his worth of worship as an expression of sincere gratefulness for his meritorious deed to the people. But we should bear in mind that the accounts of a legend cannot be accepted ipso facto without analysing the verity of it. This is because truth must be extracted from myths as far as possible.

A scientific analysis of the above legend will lead us to the conclusion that it is only a figment of imagination concocted by the author of the afore-mentioned Tantric work. A man with a scientific bent of mind cannot believe such a ridiculous and unfounded version of an event. It is true that we hear about a legendary figure called Gatha Muga or Ghantakarna who was a popular leader and preached materialistic ideology among the toiling masses in the Bagmati River Valley for which he had to pay with his life. He might have been assassinated not, of course, with the aid of the frogs of the rice field but by the agents of the then ruling class. In other words, he might have been killed not by field frogs but by human frogs. So the legend connected with frog worship as delineated in the Rudrayamala Tantra is only a distortion of an actual event. Frogs are not supernatural beings and cannot perform such a miracle.

In order to unravel the mystery surrounding the worship of frogs by the Jyapu cultivators, let us, first of all, get acquainted with the frogs in general. They are amphibian creatures and are generally defined as cold-blooded, air-breathing vertebrates with a smooth or rough granular skin. The amphibian fauna includes frogs, toads, newts,

salmanders and caelians. Biologists put frogs in the order *Anura* and the family *Ranidae*. They are believed to have evolved from fishes about 400 million years ago in the late Devonian times. These creatures overcome the hazards of severe heat and cold by hibernation and aestivation. In this way they adapt themselves to their natural surroundings. They lay unshelled eggs in or near water where their gilled larvae pass through an aquatic phase before attaining maturity. The Skipper Frog, the Cricket Frog, the Green Frog and the Burrowing Frog are some of the common frogs found in Nepal.

Frogs are the friends of farmers. They are scavengers in nature and play a very useful role in the eradication of crop pests. We know that many species of harmful insects cause severe damage to the rice plants in the field. Swarming Caterpillars (*Spodeptera mauritia*), Rice Hispas (*Hispanmiger*), Paddy Grasshoppers (*Hieroglyphus banian*; *H. oriziovra*; *H. nigroreplates*) and Rice Caseworms (*Nymphula depuntatis*) are some of the most destructive rice pests. But frogs act as biological agents in controlling these pests that damage paddy crop. Moreover, the tadpoles consume many kinds of organic material that might pollute our rice fields, ponds and streams. Thus their feeding habits are to the advantage of the rice growers. The tadpoles of the large sized frogs even feed upon mosquito uriggles that are found in the water of the rice field. The adult frogs feed on insects, molluses and crabs which are nuisance to the standing paddy crop. Herein, therefore, lies the reason why the Jyapu farmers have been worshipping the frogs since the hoary past. Rice was the principal food crop and the Jyapu peasants were the main rice growers in the Kathmandu Valley even in the distant

past. Life was sustained by a good harvest of it; if the harvest failed, the tribe starved. So the frogs that protected the rice crop began to be venerated as godlings for their beneficial role, for their contribution to reaping a bumper harvest of the rice crop. Moreover, the croaking of a frog is indicative of the advent as well as onset of the monsoon rains.\* Hence Lila Bhakta Munankarmi, a Nepalese scholar, rightly says that frogs alert the farmers about the rains and also destroy the insects that damage the crops of the field (Munankarmi 1975 : 18). The principle of frog worship is, in its essence, frog conservation.

Now it becomes crystal clear from the fore-going discussion and analysis that the underlying reason behind the tradition of frog worship is not the frog's divine characteristics or supernatural powers but the sublime principle of nature conservation in the garb of a religious ritual. Nor did this practice originate as a result of expressing thankfulness to the frogs for miraculously helping in killing Gatha Muga. As mentioned elsewhere, frogs in the Bagmati River Valley get deified at least once a year during summer for their biological role in controlling rice pests. The precursors of frog worship were quite aware of its helpful part in rice cultivation and so introduced this unique custom in Nepal. Such a queer religious tradition concerning nature conservation is nowhere to be found in the world.

Finally, in Nepal frogs are not yet being dissected on the trays in laboratories in a large-scale and here they are not a delicacy

as in the U. S. A., France and West Germany. Frozen frog-legs are not exported out overseas from here as in some SAARC countries. So frogs need not be included in the list of threatened or endangered fannal species in Nepal. But the large-scale destruction of their habitats, particularly clearing forests for agricultural purposes and the drying up of wetlands, combined with other developmental activities carried out without giving due consideration to nature conservation, may one day threaten or even endanger these creatures that are also valued as foods for animals useful to man. In view of the ensuing conflict between subsistence living and nature conservation and the physical and cultural pollution wrought by human activities, the tradition of worshipping frogs should be viewed from a new angle. This is because conservation of frogs does not so much depend upon worshipping them with flowers, sandal-wood paste and dry rice in the green rice fields as in the Byan Janakegu ritual but in understanding the spirit lying behind this worship and not to destroy or dirturb them for us and our posterity. It will not, therefore, be an exaggeration to quote here the following lines from 'Ishopanishad', a mystical or secret doctrine of the Vedas, that throw an illuminating light on the importance and interdependence between all living and non-living things in the ecosystems of our planet of which we human beings are the most important part :

ईशा वास्यभिदम् सर्वम्  
यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत्  
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथाः  
मा गृध्रः कस्यस्विद् धनम् ॥

\* It is to be noted here that the peasants in the Bihar state of India also believe that the croaking of frogs is heard by Indra, the rain-god, who sends timely rain. But they do not worship the frogs.

**Bibliography**

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