

THE MOIETY SYSTEM OF THE NEWARS

Gérard Toffin

Since thirty years ago, collaboration between anthropology and history has been urgently needed for the advancement of Nepalese studies. Anthropologists working in Nepal have started to pay more attention to documents from the past. They are not only interested in viewing their data in a diachronic perspective and in revisiting some of their basic concepts—such as caste, ethnic group, tribe, tradition— but also in reinterpreting ancient institutions or cultural processes in the light of anthropological thought and method (as I did in a recent book on the ideology of Malla kingship, Toffin 1993). Historians, meanwhile, although more committed by profession to the pressing problems of sources and chronology, are increasingly aware of the utility of studying contemporary traditional cultures and societies. This is not to say that the past reaches us unchanged; but in many fields (oral literature, mythology, toponymy, hydronymy, and even social institutions) the memory of ancient periods has undoubtedly been preserved up to the present day

Dhanavajra Vajracharya, the learned scholar we are commemorating in this volume and who contributed a great deal to the history of Nepal, would have, I am sure, agreed with this statement. However, attempts to blend anthropology and ancient history present inherent difficulties which cannot be overestimated. Each of the two disciplines favours its own explanations. Historians are usually attached to particular issues within a specific context or culture, whereas anthropologists are, in principle, concerned with a comparative approach and more general rules. This paper, devoted to models of structuring space and society in the traditional Kathmandu Valley, has been prepared with these questions in mind. Even if the data presented here are mainly ethnographic and deal mostly with the present situation, in my opinion they are of some relevance to the specialist of the past and to the philologist. How so and to what degree remain to be discussed.

Concentric and Diametrical Models in Newar Settlements

Recent works have stressed the existence of a concentric structure in the spatial design of the former Malla royal capitals of Kathmandu Valley, the

Newar heartland with a total Newar population of about half a million. This structure, based on a *mandala*, lit. "circle", or sacred diagram used in rituals, is linked with the caste system and with religious sites. Three points must be stressed in connection with this. Firstly, each Newar city has a set of eight protective goddesses around it, theoretically located in the eight cardinal directions and associated with cremation grounds. Together with the now-vanished city walls, this ritual boundary separates the inside from the outside. Secondly, the center of the ideal kingly city is occupied by a sacred site, a royal palace with a protective deity. As in the *mandala*, it is from this central point that everything (power, fertility, etc.) originates. Thirdly, as demonstrated by Kölver (1976), Gutschow (1982), and Pradhan (1986), a series of inner concentric circles marks degrees of closeness from the center. This design has direct implications on the repartition of castes, sets of gods and temples. Brahmans and high Hindu Shrestha castes, for instance, tend to be found around the royal palace, at a short distance from the temples of high-status deities represented by icons and only occasionally or indirectly blood-drinking. By contrast, the untouchables live mostly on the periphery of the town and are linked with *pith* shrines –immovable seats of power of blood-thirsty Matrika and Bhairava deities symbolized only by natural stones and served by low-ranking religious specialists. In some cases, the social status of the inhabitants is even expressed outside the settlement by the greater or lesser proximity (from the walls of the city) of cremation grounds. Though the present layout of the locality may not display so clear-cut a pattern of concentric zones for various historical reasons, the *mandala* concept is explicitly present everywhere. In this geographical configuration, spatial categories are given an explicit social and religious content. They mirror the hierarchy of caste and offer an ideal representation of ordered human society. Furthermore, they clearly illustrate the pattern of the pantheon, particularly the opposition between the vegetarian and the nonvegetarian deities.

But Newar settlements are also organised in accordance with a diametrical model. This second pattern, too neglected to my mind, divides the locality into two halves, expressed as "upper" and "lower", *thahne* (or *cvay*), and *kvahne* (or *kvay*) respectively in Newari. As I showed nearly two decades ago (Toffin 1979), this dichotomy applies not only to royal cities but to every Newar locality within the Kathmandu Valley. R. Levy (1990:169) reported local explanations for these two words. Thus, some people of Bhaktapur pretend that the upper part is "upper" because it is northerly. Other speculations are that it is upper because it is in the direction of the high Himalayas, in contrast to the progressively lower, that is, less elevated southern regions. According to still other persons, the upper half, *cvay*, was

the earliest part of the city settled, followed by a latter settlement, *kvay*, —a usage corresponding to the temporal terminology for ancestors (*cvay*, up), and descendants (*kvay*, down). But in reality, the upper and the lower sides of the locality are neither designated in relation to the elevation (though there is in most cases a slight difference in topography), nor to any cardinal point, nor to the settlement's history. They are related primarily to the flow of the adjoining river: everywhere, *cvay* means upstream, *kvay* downstream (Toffin 1979:69). This is why a totally flat settlement (such as the village of Pyangaon) can be divided into an "upper" and a "lower" part. This is also why the two halves can correspond to different directions depending on the site. In Kathmandu, for instance, where the nearby Visnumati river flows from the north to the south, the upper part corresponds to the north, the lower part to the south, whereas in most of the villages located in the south of Kathmandu Valley, where rivers flow from south to north, the opposite is true. Similarly, in Panauti, the upper part lies to the west, the lower part to the east, according to the two rivers merging at this locality. In Bhaktapur, it is the reverse.

The two models stand out in marked contrast. The first one (concentric), which presupposes a strong parallel between heaven and earth, macrocosm and microcosm, is a paradigm of the spatial organization of states, capitals and temples in much of South and South-East Asia. It has been symbolized in architectural and religious texts and has served as the plan of whole cities in India. The holy city of Benares, for instance, is explicitly laid out in this fashion. The diametrical model, conversely, has not been the subject of idealization in Indian tradition. "Nowhere in the manuals is it prescribed that cities should be composed of ritually opposed halves and nowhere do we find a standard for drawing the boundary," in the words of Hoek (1993:365). It seems quite specific to the Newar settlements and has no clear parallel among the other peoples of Nepal, except perhaps some speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages living in the hills. Besides, these two models imply two different social universes. In short, the concentric spatial design is consistent with a highly stratified structure, here a caste hierarchy, whereas the diametrical model suggests an egalitarian society based on a spirit of reciprocity.

It is my contention in this paper that the binary division of Newar settlements is of crucial importance for the understanding of the old civilization of the Kathmandu Valley and has not yet been studied with sufficient attention. To put it briefly, this salient feature is not restricted to the religious sphere as has been affirmed on the basis of fragmentary material; it also concerns, at least in some cases, the social structure. The diametrical model is thus a moiety system in the full anthropological sense

of the term, that is : a dual pattern of deep socio-religious significance, recurring all over the world, especially in traditional and archaic cultures. As such, it requires a detailed analysis and a specific elucidation. The ethnographic data presented here were collected over a long period of time, between 1970 and 1994, principally in Theco village and in Kathmandu city, my two main examples, but also within many other Newar settlements of Kathmandu Valley.

Newar moieties and ceremonial activities

Let us begin with the religious aspects. As noted by various authors, the principal functions of these territorial moieties are ceremonial and pertain to the sacred realm. In most cases, especially in the urban areas, each side has its own tutelary gods, its separate festivals and its particular cremation grounds for its dead bodies. In Kathmandu for instance, Pacali Bhairava and Lumari Ajima (= Bhadrakali), two local deities of crucial importance, are clearly associated with the lower part of the city, whereas Luti Ajima (= Indrayani) and Neta Ajima (= Nardevi) are linked with the upper town. Similarly, the Jyapu farmers from *kvahne* burn their corpses in Teku, on the banks of the Bagmati, near Pacali Bhairava temple, whereas the ones from *thahne*, or the high town, carry out their cremations mainly near the temple of Luti Ajima, in some cases at the Kanga Ajima (= Kankeshvari) place. Such ritual performances provide the inhabitants of the respective moieties with a sense of identity and separateness.

The division into two halves is emphasized during the numerous processions of deities at the time of festivals. For example, during the Indra jatra of Kathmandu, the festival of Lord Indra, the living goddess Kumari is taken in her huge chariot along an established procession route. The first day, she moves into the southern half of the town; the next day she makes a round in the northern half. In all quarters, large crowds, especially of women, wait to greet the goddess. Through these processions, the royal Kumari, embodiment of Taleju, the deity of the Malla kings and chief protectress of the State, extends her power over the two components of the capital and reaffirms the unity of the kingdom.

During the same spectacular festival, another procession, headed by a Jyapu man impersonating Dagi (or Dakini), a demoness identified as the mother of Indra, starts from Kasthamandap in the center of the capital and follows the Kumari route, first in the lower part of the city, then in the upper part. The procession is made up of recently bereaved Buddhist families. The story behind this custom comes from the Nepalese legend of Indra jatra (Toffin 1992). In return for the release of her son, captured by the inhabitants of Kathmandu, the mother of the king of the gods promises to

take the souls of those who died in that year straight to heaven to be reunited with their families. The souls of the dead had to cling together in a row behind Indra's mother. However, the line broke up some miles west of Kathmandu at the site of the lake and the souls fell to earth. It is in memory of these lost souls, and to assure a better fate for the dead persons of the past year, that families follow the path of Dagi (Toffin 1992 : 85). As usual in important Kathmandu festivals, the procession is headed by a *dhimay* drum band and a young man carrying a swinging pole decorated with yak-tails from Jyapu peasant caste.

The moiety system manifests itself with special strength during the royal rituals performed within or around the ancient Malla palaces. For reasons which still remain to be explained, this is especially the case in Kathmandu city (1). The palace compound of Hanuman Dhoka, located approximately in the center of this locality, lies on the border line between the two moieties. The local people contend that the lion defending the left side of Taleju temple (within the palace) falls in the high town, the one guarding the right side in the low town. During Dasain (New Mvahn), the most important religious event of the Nepalese yearly cycle, the Kshatriya festival exalting the power of the king, a peculiar dance is staged in Hanuman Dhoka. Two dancers, impersonating Daitya and Kumar, participate in it, accompanied by their respective music bands. They are boys between 8 and 15 years old, with unmasked faces. It is said that these two living gods protect the goddess Taleju Bhavani, the central *shakti* of the realm, from dangers that may threaten her. As a matter of fact, the dance occurs when four processional images of the royal goddess are taken down from Taleju temple to a room where she is worshipped in secret and again when she is brought back to her sanctum three days latter. The Kumar has to protect Taleju from dancers originating in heaven, and is equipped for this with a bow and arrow. The Daitya has to protect the goddess from dangers on earth and from the nether regions, and is equipped with a dagger. Now, interestingly enough, Daitya has to belong to the Shakya (goldsmith) community of the lower town, Kumar to the Tuladhar merchant community of the upper town. These divine guardians protecting the state deity obviously recall the two deified children, Bhairava and Ganesh, who precede Kumari in her chariot procession during Indra jatra. In this case likewise the protective function is explicit. B. van den Hoek and B. Shrestha who have described at length and analysed this ritual and dance in a recent article (1992b), put emphasis on the opposition between Daitya, a demon, and Kumar, the god of war. They see in this dance the persistence of old Vedic ideas preserved through the ages and interpret it as a "sacrifice of war", following the theory of J.-C. Heesterman, the eminent Indologist, specialist

of Vedic rituals. It seems to me simpler and more accurate to interpret the occurrence of the two halves in this ceremonial context as a way of insisting on the central position of the king and his personal goddess Taleju in the city. What is stressed here is the king as the sustainer of the realm, the power that upholds the universe, the key figure transcending all oppositions around him. It should be noted in passing that this dance is said to have existed during the medieval period in the other Malla capitals as well. But they were abolished by Prithivi Narayan Shah after the conquest, and restored in Kathmandu by his son, Pratap Singh (van den Hoek & Shrestha 1992b: 217) (2). If there is some truth in these statements, the Daitya/Kumar dance would have been an important religious element of the Malla kingship overall.

Still in Kathmandu, the ritual dichotomy of the city appears not only when gods and goddesses are celebrated, but also at the time when demons and malignant forces are expelled. Thus, once a year, on the second and third day of the bright fortnight of Baisakh (April-May), the Jyapu farmers of Kathmandu offer cooked rice to the evil spirits, *but-pret*. The rice is taken in a procession all round the city and is thrown (New. : *bau biye*) on the crossroads. The purpose of this ritual is to feed the demons, to invite them to a feast, so that they will not be tempted to steal children and grain from the houses. Now, it is worth noticing that the Jyapu from the upper town have to gather in Lagan on the first day of the ritual. On the second day, it is the turn of the quarters from the lower part to meet up at this same place. As in the Kumari/Daitya dance of Dasain festival, both the fundamental dualism and the internal integration of the spatial components of the city are expressed in this ritual. By and large, these public ceremonies periodically recall the divide and actualize it through ceremonial devices.

Ritual battles

The dichotomy of the settlement is frequently enacted in a conflicting fashion during festivals. As has been reported in many ethnographic sources, the upper and the lower town of Bhaktapur oppose each other in competition during the main festival of the locality, the Bisket jatra, which occurs at the beginning of the solar New year. The struggle is focused on the huge chariot of Bhairava positioned near Taumadhi square. Each group tries to pull the chariot with ropes into their sides of the city. "The inhabitants of the upper part of the town vie with those from the lower in a hair-raising tug-of-war, each side straining with all their might at ropes tied fore and aft, while swarming mobs of celebrators cheer and shout in their midst. Swaying and bouncing precariously, the towering chariot is yanked this way and that until one team finally succeeds in moving it in their

direction" (M. Anderson 1974 : 44). To pull Bhairava into their part ensures that the townsmen will have good fortune during the coming year, as the presence of the chariot is considered to represent a *darshana*, a manifestation or "showing himself" of the deity Bhairava to that half of the city (R. Levy 1990 : 472). Similarly, in the small town of Panauti, eastward from Bhaktapur, a ritual contest happens every year on the last day of Dasain, the autumnal festival dedicated to the Goddess. On that day, considered in classical India as auspicious for new military expeditions, people from the two halves of the city fight each other near an old fort, on the eastern part of the locality, by throwing pumpkins (Toffin 1984 : 537). This tug of war is locally called *larain mhitegu*, literally : "play of war".

Other ritualized battles, much more violent, formerly took place in Kathmandu city during the yearly Sithi Nakha festival, in May-June. At that time, severe struggles occurred between the northern (upper) part and the southern (lower) part of the capital, in the bed of the Visnumati river, east of the city. In his account of the kingdom of Nepal, at the turn of the nineteenth century, Hamilton, though not being an eye-witness himself, reports this battle in the following manner : "About the end of May, and beginning of June, for fifteen days, a skirmish takes place between the young men and boys, of the north and south ends of the city. During the first fourteen days, it is chiefly confined to the boys or the lads; but on the evening of the fifteenth day it becomes more serious. The opposing parties are drawn up in the broad, level, sandy bed of the river, which runs between the city and Svayambhunath. In the rear of each is a rising ground, which prevents either party from being hard pushed (...). The fight begins about an hour before sunset, and continues until darkness separate the combatants. In the one which we saw, four people were carried off much wounded, and almost every other year one or two men are killed : yet the combat is not instigated by hatred, nor do the accidents that happen occasion any rancour. Formerly, however, a most cruel practice existed. If any unfortunate fellow was taken prisoner, he was immediately dragged to the top of a particular eminence in the rear of his conquerors, who put him to death with buffalo bones. In remembrance of this custom, the bones are still brought to the field, but the barbarous use of them has for many years been abolished. The prisoners are now kept until the end of the combat, are carried home in triumph by the victors, and confined until morning, when they are liberated" (Hamilton 1819 : 43-44).

This macabre custom obviously has a connotation of human sacrifice. As a matter of fact, when the fight still existed, it was the tradition to sacrifice any prisoners that either side succeeded in capturing. The people from the upper part used to sacrifice their prisoners to Luti Ajima (= Indrayani)

goddess, the one from the lower part to Kanga Ajima (= Kankeshwari), two of the eight female deities of the *mandala* (Toffin 1993 : 201). Hamilton's description suggests that the very act of making a victim was central to the battle -which should not surprise us if we consider that Kathmandu Valley hosts numerous wild goddesses who can be appeased only with human sacrifice. As correctly noted by Bert van den Hoek (1993 : 371), a ritual battle such as the one of the Sithi Nakha might have been an appropriate way to select a suitable victim and nourish the two local goddesses with human blood.

Yet, the location of these two deities in the city raises a problem. Luti Ajima clearly belongs to the upper town, but Kanga Ajima has no direct connection with the lower part of the city. It is true that the festival of the latter goddess is linked with Lumari Ajima (= Bhadrakali), an emblem of the south of Kathmandu, but her temple is built in the central part of the city (see below) and is more related to the inhabitants of this part than to those of the lower town. One has the feeling that Kanga Ajima has been chosen as a sacrificial place during Sithi Nakha festival just because of its proximity to the battlefield. It should be admitted on the other hand that a great deal of rivalry opposed the two halves of the capital in the ritual sphere. For instance, Luti Ajima (upper town) and Lumari Ajima (lower town) are conceived as fundamentally antagonist. A legend relates that Luti Ajima was invited to a feast by her elder sister (= Lumari Ajima), but one day late, so that only left-overs were available for her and her hungry children. The anger of Luti Ajima at the insult from her sister could be placated only with a serpent sacrifice, *serpabali*. This ritual is still offered to Luti Ajima every year during the *Bal cahray* festival, on the new moon of Mansir (November-December).

Hamilton (1819 : 45) mentioned two explanations for the Sithi Nakha battle of stones : "Some allege, that at one time Kathmandu was subject to two Rajas, and that the skirmishings first arose among their respective followers, and have ever since been continued. Others, with more probability, think that the combat is meant to commemorate a battle between a son of Maha Deva, and a Rakshas, or a evil spirit. Colonel Crawford justly gives a preference to this opinion, for, if one of the parties obtain a victory, everything favourable, seasonable rains, plentiful crops, and fine weather, is augured for the remainder of the year; the reverse is expected should the opposite party gain an advantage".

According to R. Levy (1990 : 473), the ritually organized fights between the upper and lower city served "to deflect antagonisms from within small areas, particularly between the groups of economically and socially interrelated *thars* in such areas, antagonisms whose overt manifestations

would have been considerably more serious in their consequences". In other words, ritual battles would have been organized to transform pure violence into a religious act and to resolve potential conflicts between the two parts of the settlement. This functionalist perspective, however, is not wholly satisfactory. The Newars contests described above cannot be reduced to a domestication of wild impulses. More profoundly, they create a strong relationships between the moieties. Take the sacrifices of Sithi Nakha for instance. They can be considered as an exchange of dead persons between the two parties, as important as exchange of wives through marriage. As such, they generate a positive social bond; a bond renewed every year on a stated day.

An other point should be made. As in many parts of the world where ritual battles take place between two well delimited moieties, Newar fights occur at some critical moments of transition of the year. This is obviously the case of the Bisket jatra, performed at the end of the yearly cycle. But the Sithi Nakha, held on the sixth of Jeth (May-June), bright fortnight, is also a crucial date of the calendar. On the one hand, this festival marks the completion of house construction and the concluding day of the cult of lineage deities (Digudyah). On the other hand, it inaugurates the period of rice cultivation. Newar peasants name it : "the festival of the married daughters", *mhyay maca*", because Sithi Nakha ushers in a season where the house will be empty of all its members, busy in the fields, as it is when daughters leave their paternal house at the time of marriage. It is probably one of the reason why, from Sithi Nakha onwards, no musical instruments may be played for two months. Nowhere it is said that each Newar moiety represents a season of the year as is the case in some parts of the world. But these battles are conspicuous for their attempt to restore a primordial chaos, the confusion of origins, followed by a recreation and a return to a reanimated cosmic order flooding across structural boundaries. Every opposition is then overcome or transcended in a recovered unity. Such periodic oscillation between chaos and order, death and life is a salient feature of the Newar cycle of festivals.

Moreover, it seems that the reactivation of the moieties goes together with a stimulation of fecundity. The very act of giving blood to goddesses at the time of Sithi Nakha appears as a way to fertilize the soil, to fecundate the fields before sowing rice. May it not also be a device to invoke rain at a time when the waters are at their lowest level all over the kingdom? It is surely not by mere chance that the battle of stones takes place in the bed of a dry river (the river which in fact serves as the basis of the Kathmandu moieties in terms of orientation). Similarly, it should be recalled that Sithi Nakha is said to have been instituted by Gunakamadeva, the legendary

founder of Kathmandu, "in response to a command of the war god Kartikeya" (Slusser 1982 : 329). Interestingly, the festival, which possesses many simultaneous meanings, commemorates the birth of this god. What is stressed here is a correlation with kingship and, more particularly, with war. As a matter of fact, it is a hypothesis worth considering that the ritual confrontation of Sithi Nakha formerly had something to do with military activities. It is consistent, in any case, with the warfare prevailing during the medieval period in the Kathmandu Valley, that is : local skirmishes between contiguous small kingdoms, consanguineously and affinally related, small fights taking place within a close space, with few actions outside the Valley.

Dualism or trialism?

Before proceeding further in this analysis, one specific problem should be dealt with. In a few cases, Newar settlements are not divided into two but into three parts : the upper, the lower, and the middle part, *dathu* in Newari, mediating between the two. In the old Kathmandu city for instance, the middle town covers a large portion of the locality, from the Asan tol cross-roads in the north-east, to the royal palace in the south. Towards the east and the west, this central territory extends to the former walls of the locality. The border between the high and low city is said to be fixed by a small image of a fish set into the pavement of the square in Asan tol. This tripartite structure of Kathmandu is well established in the spatial fabric of the city. Each segment thus has its distinctive fountain (*hiti*) : Kohiti in the southern town, Thahiti in the northern town, and Maruhiti in the middle. To this day, the first two names refer to quarters (New. : *tvah*) belonging respectively to the southern and the northern side of the capital. It is also worth mentioning that on the fourth day of Asvin (September-October), black fortnight, towards the end of the Indra jatra festival, the living goddess Kumari has to be taken in her chariot around this central part of Kathmandu, after the two first processions in *kvahne* and *thahne* (see above). It is popularly believed that this is an extra day, *nanica jatra*, added by king Jaya Prakash Malla to enable one of his concubines living in this quarter (Kilagal) to see the goddess. Other reasons unknown to us perhaps came into play. Besides this, the thirty-two quarters of Kathmandu farmers were traditionally distributed between the three parts of Kathmandu : they were respectively classified in *Kva tvah*, *Thah tvah* and *Dathu tvah* (Toffin 1994 : 450-451). Yet, over the years, this triadic structure has been forgotten in favour of the present bipartition. *Dathu* is presently restricted to the Hanuman Dhoka royal palace and to the attached quarter of Maru which to this day belongs neither to the upper nor to the lower half of Kathmandu.

We may speculate that this structure originated from the historical development of Kathmandu city. But with our present information, it is difficult to explain why this trivalent configuration is so conspicuously absent in the two other Malla capitals, Bhaktapur and Patan, which are laid out according to a strictly dual division. We will come back to this point in the concluding part of this paper.

I know two other cases of tripartition in Kathmandu Valley and its surrounds. The first one is the Jyapu peasant village of Manmaiju, 5 km north from Kathmandu, a village influenced in many ways by the social and religious institutions of farmers living in the present capital of Nepal. In Manmaiju, the upper, the lower, and the middle part of the settlement correspond to three different quarters (*tvah*) and seem to play an important role in the social structure of the village. The second case is Sikharpa, a Pahari settlement located on a small ridge over Lele, in Lalitpur district. Although Pahari basket-makers are somewhat distinct from Newars and speak a separate language, their culture and society are mainly borrowed from the autochthonous population of the Kathmandu Valley. Now, in a similar manner, this locality is split into three parts : low, middle and high (in Pahari respectively : *kva*, *daria*, *tha*), each related to a separate death society (New. *si guthi*, Pah. : *pule gu*). Membership in these funeral associations is usually inherited patrilineally and normally remain unchanged even if the family moves from one part of the village to an other (Toffin, in press). Further research, especially in the historical field, is needed to account for these forms of village trialism.

Moieties as social groupings : the case of Theco

So much for the ceremonial aspects of the moieties. Now, I want to show that besides this religious background, the Newar binary opposition under discussion also concerns social institutions. It must be admitted that moieties are never exogamous nor endogamous in Newar society, and that they do not correspond to any significant repartition of caste. Yet they are of considerable importance in many other fields. I shall focus first on the village of Theco, located 7 km south of Patan, in Lalitpur district. In this settlement, the moiety system pervades the whole social organization (3).

Theco (about 4000 inhabitants in 1991) is a dense village inhabited mainly by Jyapu farmers (more than 500 households) and a small minority of Gathu gardeners (120 households). Its two parts : "up", *cvay*, and "low", *kvay*, correspond to the nearby Nakhu river which flows from south to north, in a parallel direction in the village. In daily life, the two parts of the community are referred by the word *bade*, "half-settlement". The border is marked by a small *caitya* in the center of the village. Interestingly, each side

is related to a peculiar goddess : "up" with Balkumari, "low" with Brahmayani. These local goddesses, two of the eight Matrikas, each have a separate temple in their respective territory. Their rule over their half and are responsible for its fertility and the welfare of its inhabitants, just as the royal goddess, in conjunction with the state deity (Pasupatinath), protects her kingdom. Although Balkumari is thought to be the elder sister of Brahmayani, there is no status precedence of one part of the locality over the other one. These two Matrikas are the spiritual protectresses and the main deities of the village. In addition, each half has its own Ganesha and Nasahdyah, two fundamental territorial deities usually attached to spatial subdivisions of some importance. Furthermore, the lower part of the village has a Navadurga house-god served by Gathu people and the upper part possesses a Bhairava temple.

To understand the moiety system of Theco, the main elements of the locality's internal organization should be briefly described. As in most Jyapu villages of Kathmandu Valley, death societies, locally called *sanah gu* (or *murda guthi*), are at the basis of Theco social life. The population is divided into seven cohesive *gu* (for *guthi*), six for the Jyapus and a separate one for the Gathus. Four of them fall into the upper part of Theco, three in the lower part. As usual in Newar society, these death *guthi* profess religious and charitable goals, aiding families who are in financial difficulties, attending the funerals of their members and ensuring cremation. In all these respects, they closely parallel the French fraternities (*confréries*), now on the wane. Each association has its own common house, *guthi che*, where collective feasts are held during the full-moon of Mansir (November-December), Thila *punhi*. Affiliation is compulsory and is an ascriptive component of an individual : every adult man from the village must belong to one of these seven groups. What is more, unlike in most of the funeral associations operating in urban settlements, membership is strictly hereditary from father to son : a Jyapu will remain affiliated to his death group until he passes away, without any possibility of moving to another one. To belong simultaneously to two *sanah gu* is prohibited.

The elders of the association, *thakali*, are the key figures of the village and the conservators of traditional usage. They have ceremonial privileges such as to be served first at feasts and to wear white turbans on ritual occasions. These elders are also in a position to expel any person who had sexual relations with women from impure castes or married a non-Jyapu girl. To be excluded from one's *sanah gu* is to be excluded from one's lineage and one's caste. The social and religious status of the excommunicated person will be deeply affected. No other associations will accept him in the village. Death societies are thus essential for the proper integration of individuals

into the community and are a way to enforce caste regulations. Notably enough, they are not exogamous and do not function as unity of marriage.

Nowadays, *sanah gu* groupings do not own any land to cover the cost of their annual feast and other small expenses. They rely on contributions from their members, partly in cash, partly in grain. It should be noted that in 1975, one among the seven associations was running an oil-press and used its profit to pay the expenses. The yearly feast, which is the great affair of the group, is organized by a "turn-holder", *pahlah mha*, which changes every year. The responsibilities are handed over at a special meeting on the last day of the feast, after checking the accounts and valuables in the presence of the seniors. In the lower part of the village, dead persons are burnt by the members of the grouping whose turn it is. In the upper part, cremation is ensured by a fixed number of Jyapu specialists named *gvan* in Newari. These persons belong to two distinct sub-groups called respectively the "Yellow Face" and the "Red Face". In some cases, each *gu* is divided among four sections, grounded on an age-set structure : *jetha puin*, *mahila puin*, *sahila puin*, *kancha puin*. This system of division helps to rotate charges and duties such as bringing wood and carrying the bier, among group members. At the time of funerals, all the membership mourn for a short period of time to express their sympathy towards the bereaved family.

The annual feast of the death society involves many ritual activities and is imbued with religious significance. It is focused on a deity called Sidyah, represented by a small pot vested with strong magical power or a mysterious piece of wood. In normal times, this icon is kept by members of the grouping in turn. But during the feast, it is carried in procession by the second most senior member, *nvaku*, of the association, and exhibited for three days in a hut made of bamboo stripes and straw temporarily constructed inside the *guthi*-house. Sidyah presides over the ceremonial meals taken together in that place and is worshipped with blood-sacrifices. He is associated with another deity, always carried along with him, called Agnidyah. This god is symbolized by a pot filled with burning incense and is carried by the second most senior member of the grouping. A third emblem of tremendous importance for the death *guthi* is honoured during the festive event : it consists of an orange shroud (*devan*) used to cover the corpse at funerals. In most of the cases, this is thought to be an embodiment of Bhairava and is held in great awe. Each *gu* has its own gods and set of sacred symbols.

Outsiders cannot attend these feasts and are not permitted to watch the proceedings. *Sanah gu* meetings and ritual procedures are the business only of those who are members; others are physically debarred by erecting a screen or defending the entrance of the *guthi*-house. The death group is

hence much more than a way of earning religious merit or an association formed simply for charitable purposes. It is a secret society, impregnated with sacramental values, which contributes to defining a sense of mystical community (4). For instance, one of the most important moments of the Thila *punhi* feast is the *si ka bhvay* ritual during which the head of a sacrificed buffalo or goat is divided up, the different parts going in order to the eight most senior members. Given the spiritual values attached to the head of the body (honour, spirit, sacredness) in Newar and Nepalese society, such a sharing has a crucial significance beyond mundane issues. As a matter of fact, the affinity felt for those one can actually see performing the same rituals as oneself during Thila *punhi* full-moon, and with whom one periodically joins in the execution of other rites, is extremely strong.

Women are excluded from these ceremonial gatherings and are not allowed to come into contact with the gods identifying the association. The only exception concerns the wife of the "turn-holder" who is in charge of preparing items for worship, cooking and serving food, as well as worshipping the elders with flowers and rice during Thila *punhi*. Indeed, women are not formally affiliated to death societies. Nonetheless, such grouping organize the funerals and the cremation of the wives and the unmarried daughters of their members. Young men, *kvakali*, are also kept off from *sanah gu*. As a rule, to be a full member, one has to establish a separate household, that means separate from the father's estate. For women and junior men, the *sanah gu* is a virtually secret order within the village society.

Funeral societies are not only concerned with death and social control. There are also dedicated to the worship of the two main goddesses of the settlement : Balkumari and Brahmayani. As such, they back the binary division of Theco and play a dominant part in the religious life of the whole community. In what manner? Let us take the upper half of the village. Each death group attached to this moiety has separate duties towards Balkumari. The *carhay gu* offers cooked rice to the goddess every month on the eve of the new-moon (*carhay*). The *punhi gu* offers rice-beer on every full-moon day. The *pare gu* presents rice, vermilion paste, incense and flowers on the first day of the lunar month (*pare*). As for the *ta gu*, it has the responsibility of the cult of the Bhairava situated in the upper part of the village. The charges of watching over the temple, guarding the statues, cleaning the roofs, rotate among the membership according to the age-set *puin* sections described above. It is estimated that within each moiety of Theco every inhabitant will bear this charge (*puin pahlah*) at least once in his life.

But this is not the whole story. The *sanah gu* composing each moiety of Theco merge within an enlarged association to ensure the various ritual

performances of the goddesses they are attached to. The three death societies of the lower part form the Brahmayani *guthi*, the four groupings of the upper part constitute the Balkumari *guthi*. These two expanded associations are funded by rice-fields, held as *raj guthi* and registered in the Guthi Corporation. In 1975, these lands were cultivated by tenants from Theco and neighbouring villages. Each *guthi* was getting about 50 *muri* of paddy (about 2450 kg) from it, of which part was sold in Patan, and part was used to prepare beer and beaten rice for feasts. Furthermore, each *guthi* owns a common house (*guthi che*) near the temple of its goddess. This house belongs collectively to the corresponding half of the community. To run such estates, the two concerned associations have generated a complex hierarchical structure. The Brahmayani *guthi* for instance is headed by a body of twenty-one notables called *thakali*, which include : the five seniormost members of the association, six cooks (*bhali*), six accountants (*majho* or *kalindar*), and six watchmen (*pahlah*). Some of these functions rotate among the membership, others are permanent. These twenty-one persons are fed more than twelve times a year with great abundance of food and beer.

The point to be noted is the following : Brahmayani and Balkumari *guthi*, that is the two moieties of the village, have to do not only with individual piety. They are primarily the expression of compulsory territorial and social bonds encompassing the whole village structure. They bring together the main components of the community and provide a formal arena for social and religious activities. Among Jyapu farmers as among many other Newar castes, religion is individualistic to a minimum : it is deeply embedded in the overall social framework.

The festivals of Balkumari and Brahmayani are both held at the same time as the feast of the death societies : between the end of the (lunar) month of Mansir and the beginning of Pus. This is the main calendrical event (*de-jatra* or *mu-jatra*) of the year. On the first day of the festival, the statues of the two goddesses are carried to their common *pitha* (New. : *pigan*), a sacred place outside the village proper, towards the south. A Hindu Tantric priest comes at night from the neighbouring townlet of Chapagaon to perform a fire-sacrifice in front of the two assembled deities. Next morning, Balkumari and Brahmayani are taken back to the village and carried through the streets of their respective moieties in separate palanquins. From that day onward, the Navadurga dance is also enacted by Gathu people.

To sum up, funeral associations have multifarious functions embracing many fields of the religious life. More particularly, they establish a connection between death and the cult of local divinities. Each male inhabitant of Theco is thus simultaneously bound to a *sanah gu* and to a

territorial goddess. In my opinion, this link is a marked characteristic of Newar social structure. To explain it sociologically in terms of social functions is not enough. The system itself is sustained by sacred values, a whole set of symbolic representations, which are to be interpreted from an indigenous point of view and need more research in the future.

What then of the kinship groups? The *sanah gu* association does not coincide with a clan or a maximal lineage, but is made up of small patrilineages called *kavan* or *bhu*. These descent groups comprise from four to eight families, the members of which consider themselves as *phuki*, i.e. agnatically related, and often live in close proximity. All of them are ritually polluted if a death occurs within each other's families. The lineage represents the basic exogamous group and worships a common deity, Digudyah, whose site is located at the periphery of the settlement, once a year. In Theco, this ceremony is the major occasion for demonstrating the solidarity of the group overtly. It is performed on the twelfth day of Magh (January-February), bright fortnight. Furthermore, kinsmen belonging to one lineage unite for the performance of major rites of passage for *phuki*-members.

Although the affiliation to a death society is hereditary, its members cannot trace their descent to a common ancestor. Consequently, lineages composing a funeral group do not feel any kinship ties, with the exception of a few cases. It must be recalled in this respect that descent units in Newar society are characterized by their shallowness. Beyond the fourth or the fifth generation, kinship disappears and the ban on marriage becomes obsolete, even in agnatical line. The death societies of Theco probably grew from a small number of related lineages, but nowadays these ties have been forgotten. Only *guthi* groups and the territorial dichotomy of the settlement remain. Evidently, the present internal organization of Theco rests more on territorial ties than on consanguinity.

Conclusions

The illustrative case of Theco should not be considered as totally exceptional. As I showed elsewhere (Toffin 1994), the Jyapu peasants of old Kathmandu city are also divided according to the dualistic structure of the city. Within this local caste group, the basic social units are not death societies, but musical associations called *dhimay guthi* focusing on a special drum, *dhimay*, thought by the Jyapus to be one of their oldest musical instrument and considered as the embodiment of the god of music. These groupings, which coincide with an old division of Kathmandu into 32 quarters, *tvah*, are exogamous and hereditary. No change of affiliation is possible, even after a move to another part of the city. Here again the

territorial moieties correspond to social units, vesting rights and imposing duties on individuals. From the structural point of view, the principles that serve to organize the village of Theco are to a large extent the same as those which are applied in the urban system of Kathmandu city. The only difference is that in one case it is death that is prevalent, and in the other it is divine music. Doubtless, these meaningful variants can be seen as transformations within a common structure. In both systems, it is thus the territorial ties that determine social relationships, rather than kinship.

It is now clear that the moiety system of the Newars does not pertain only to religion and cannot be explained entirely in term of a sacrificial "concourse" (5). It is a sociological divide, an essential part of the fabric of Newar society. How can it be explained? One could first set forth historical reasons. It could reasonably be assumed that the territorial moieties of Newar settlements are at bottom a historical construct and have to do with the genesis of these localities. Very little can be learned from the past of Theco, but documents from Kathmandu are more abundant. In fact the present capital of Nepal seems to have been formed from the coalescence of several separate settlements. As Dhanavajra Vajracharya stated from the testimony of inscriptional data (1987 : 360), this city was divided in early mediaeval times into two parts : Koligrama (the area north of Hanuman Dhoka palace) and Dakshinakoligrama (the area south of Hanuman Dhoka), corresponding more or less to the two present-day halves of the city. With the waning of the Licchavis and their high Sanskrit culture the local names for these two settlements came into prominence. Koligrama and Dakshinakoligrama would have then merged progressively in the course of history. Similarly, the tripartite pattern of Kathmandu could have originated from an old structure. According to J.K. Locke (1986 : 254), the three original parts of the city were : Survarnapranali/Yambu (upper city), Kantipur (middle city) and Kastamandap/Yangal (low city). Still now, the lower part of Kathmandu -the former Yangal- forms a socially and religiously separate entity (Toffin 1994).

It is worth mentioning in this respect that each side of Kathmandu has been associated up to now with a particular group of Thakujuju (Malla), descendants of the former twelve Vaishya Thakuri *rāja* who ruled the capital until Ratna Malla (XIV century). The high city is connected with the Thakujuju of Thahiti, the low city with the Thakujuju of Kohiti. These two groups do not possess any political power and have no connection with the present king of Nepal. But as convincingly shown by Bert van den Hoek (1993 : 360-361), they still fulfil a ritual role, as lords of sacrifice, in some festivals of the locality. For instance, the Thakujuju of the upper part are the main patrons of Indrayani festival, during Bala *cahray* (November-

December), one of the main calendrical events on that side of the capital. Similarly, the Thakujuju of the lower part preside over the yearly festival of Pacali Bhairava and the fire-sacrifice which precedes the procession of this deity, one of the most crucial divine figures of south Kathmandu. It is even said that the two doors of the temple of Taleju, in the center of the locality, are respectively under the protection of these two groups : the left door being associated with the low city, the right with the high city. However, it should be remarked that there are many other rituals and temples in the town in which the Thakujuju have no special functions.

The dichotomy of Newar settlements can also be ascribed to the *dvairajya* (lit. : sovereignty of two) double kingdom which was favoured in the Kathmandu Valley during much of its ancient and mediaeval history (Toffin 1984 : 201-204). Let us recall that in this system, two brothers, or a son and his father, or a nephew and his maternal uncle, were ruling over one half of the kingdom, which was still formally considered as a whole (6). In general, a precedence of seniority existed between the half-kingdoms. The point to be noted is that this co-rulership operated not only on the level of the Kathmandu Valley, each king ruling in one separate capital, but also within a single city, divided into two parts. The Padmagiri chronicle for instance holds that Svarna Malla, son of Raya Malla (1482-1505) divided the villages of Thimi, Nakdesh, Bode, Sankhu and Changu, into two parts, giving one half of each to his brother, and himself ruling the other half (Hasrat 1970 : 58). S.B. Gnyawali (1972 : 114-120) mentions on his side that under the reign of Prana Malla, more precisely between 1524 and 1534, the city of Bhaktapur was split into two moieties headed by a king on each side. Besides, it should be kept in mind that, according to a tradition, Kathmandu was once ruled by two different kings and that such a divide accounts for the stone festivals of Sithi Nakha (Hamilton 1819 : 45). Similar statements are sometimes made for other villages, e.g. Satungal (Ishii 1978 : 513). Though there are great gaps in our knowledge of this ancient political institution, it seems reasonable at first sight to link it with the present moieties of Newar settlements. Admittedly, these moieties no longer have any political function, but this may formerly have been the case. Without falling into the old cliché about the timelessness of traditional societies, anthropologists have correctly demonstrated that rituals are much more conservative than other spheres of social life and may retain ancient elements for a very long time.

However, this historical explanation does not resolve the whole problem. Firstly, such a hypothesis would imply that almost every Newar town came into being as a result of two separate entities fusing together -which is unlikely. Secondly, it leaves answered the question of the survival of the

ritual and the social divide long after the collapse of its supposed corresponding political structure. Are the moieties really vestiges of the past? One cannot eliminate the possibility of a later construct, perhaps originating during the period of political fragmentation of the Malla age, and mandating a historical method of study. Thirdly, Newar moieties belong to a type of institution found all over the world. Ritual battles in particular are frequent phenomena in such systems. This wider perspective is deserving a comparative research of its own. Consequently, the history of ancient Nepal can take us only part of the way towards determining the exact nature of the Newar moiety system. A sociological and anthropological perspective is required for a full account of this subject.

To return to a point raised at the beginning of this article, the moieties of the Newars obviously fall outside Indian realities. Although the *dvairajya* system is described in the Arthashastra, it has never been implemented on a large scale throughout the subcontinent. Furthermore, the diametrical model on which Newar dualism is based is alien to the caste system and to hierarchy. It postulates a basic egalitarianism and could, theoretically, even subsist without any king at its center. The moieties of the Kathmandu Valley could more appropriately be compared with those hill populations of Nepal who speak Tibeto-Burman languages, such as Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, etc. Indeed, the vertical dimension is a crucial feature of the society and the culture of these groups and is a vital element of their symbolism. Nick Allen (1972 : 81-82) has aptly shown that the opposition of up and down is deeply rooted in Thulung Rai language, to the extent of being part of its grammatical inflections. Similarly, the upstream/downstream dichotomy is one of the most important spatial opposition of Tibet-Burman groups, whose houses are often built and their rituals performed in accordance with it. Doubtless, the moieties of the Kathmandu Valley -among the most original traits of Newar society- are much more akin with other Nepalese tribes than with classical India.

A connection with the Tibeto-Burman heritage would explain the very puzzling presence of so central an up/down opposition in a plain region such as the Kathmandu Valley. Such a connection is tempting not only because Newari belongs to this group of languages. The Newar social organization itself, at the level of its internal structures, displays some segmentary features resembling those of the vernacular hill tribes, and Newar kinship terminology is, at least partly, consistent with cross-cousin marriage, a prescriptive alliance frequently associated with moieties in other societies (Toffin 1984). Unfortunately, this is still a matter of conjecture, for lack of reliable data. The anthropologist can just propose it as an informed speculation to be discussed. On the other hand, it should be

recognized that the vertical dimension among Newars is not combined with other complementary oppositions, as is the case in some other societies where moieties or dual organization prevail. Michael Witzel (1992 : 796-801) has reported a positive correlation between the high/low couple and the gender opposition of male and female in the city of Patan, but this is a Tantric exegesis, of limited occurrence, held by a learned priest and not shared by the laity.

Albeit indirectly, one central finding of this study concerns the unity of Newar civilization. As noted, the polar division of up and down is not confined to certain districts or to a specific type of locality : it embraces the whole Newar land, whether urban or rural. This observation has powerful implications. At the risk of oversimplifying, it can be asserted that the opposition between cities and villages is not a prominent one within the traditional Kathmandu Valley. For instance, house construction and the general lay-out of the habitat are almost the same in both cities and villages. Moreover, my comparative study of urban and rural Jyapu peasants clearly shows that both groups are made up from similar sociological elements. Although elements may be assembled in a different way, the basic structure is identical. Hence, despite considerable local variation and great disparity in social and cultural forms, Newar civilization rests on common principles throughout. Like *guthi* associations, and some typical rituals such as the old age consecration *bura jvanku*, the moiety system belongs to this all-pervasive background, encompassing a whole population well-known for its cultural complexity. This fundamental unity must never be forgotten when studying Newars from an ethnographical, locally-circumscribed point of view.

By way of conclusion, a few words must be said about moieties in the present modern context of Kathmandu Valley. How is the traditional system affected by the tremendous transformations that Newar settlements have been undergoing for the past three or four decades? Such a topic would deserve a more elaborate treatment than our space allows. Just few remarks will have to suffice. The most revealing changes pertain to the political sphere. Since long ago, the faction support within villages and townlets has *tended* to follow the territorial divide of the community between "up" and "down". Such a pattern was present in Pyangaon, where I carried out my first field-work in 1970-1973. Now, interestingly enough, the new political struggles between parties *tend* also to be modelled on territorial moieties. In Panauti for instance, where an old rivalry exists between the two halves of the locality, the upper part was almost entirely communist in the seventies whereas the lower part supported the then prohibited Congress party. Local elections occasioned tension between the two antagonistic sides and the

competing leaders of the settlement (Toffin 1984 : ch.12). On the other hand, it should be noted that in the present period of rapid and unprecedented change, the traditional ritual battles opposing the two halves of a locality sometimes turn into uncontrolled conflicts between political groups (7). Police intervention is often necessary to quell these riots. In other words, old mechanisms are slowly being transformed into new patterns influenced by contemporary issues. But on the whole, the settlements of Kathmandu Valley are still saturated with symbols which are generally taken for granted. And Newar moieties still remain, in most cases, the structural vertebra of the town rituals and the inner life of the villages. To be sure, this is a feature that help the Newars in maintaining their cultural identity in the midst of accelerating pluralism.

Notes

1. - Apparently, the moiety system applies less to Patan. See D. Gellner (1993 : 223).
2. - Interestingly, two Jyapu farmers carry sticks to guard the royal sword during the *khadga* procession which takes place every year during the night of the Vijayadasmi, around the Hanuman Dhoka palace, in Kathmandu : one of them represents the upper town and the other the lower town (B. van den Hoek and B. Shrestha 1992b : 211-213).
3. - Cf. G. Toffin (1984 : ch. VII). Since this book has been published, I undertook new field-work in Theco (1992-1994). Some of the results are presented here.
4. - As correctly stressed by B. van den Hoek and B. Shrestha (1992a : 64-65).
5. - In his interesting article, "Kathmandu as a Sacrificial Arena", B. van den Hoek mentions rapidly (p. 369) some links between the North-South division of the city and the funeral associations *si-* and *sanah guthi* of the Newars of Kathmandu. This question deserves further research.
6. - On this subject, see for instance L. Petch (1984).
7. - Cf. R. Levy (1990 : 473).

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