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# A BATTLE OF MEANINGS: COMMEMORATING GODDESS DURGĀ'S VICTORY OVER DEMON MAHISĀ AS A POLITICAL ACT

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Any important cultural event can turn into a political symbol – in no time.<sup>1</sup> Political rituals are especially prone to contestations when members of political units start to perceive cleavages amidst themselves, where cohesion was propagated before. Established ritual orders can then become both, devices to “celebrate the perpetuation of social values and self-knowledge” (Baumann 1992:99) as well as symbols of oppression. In the consequence, rituals of power can eventually turn into battle-grounds where meanings are negotiated. Does a particular ritual order express the divine grace (that emanates through the ruler from the top to the bottom of the society)? Or: is it meant to cement and to substantiate the subordination of wide sections of a given society?

The political rituals are often centered around a text commemorating a mythical event, and they are embodied: during the subsequent ritual sequences people gather and segregate according to the ritual orders which, more often than not, correspond to the existing societal divisions. Both, the text and the ritual action, “are not just expressive of abstract ideas but do things, have effect on the world” (Parkin 1990:14). Both underly a constant process of re-interpretation which renders power rituals ambiguous.

While scholars usually concentrate either on the mythological texts (Lévi-Strauss) or on the ritual action (Parkin, Lewis), the social actors themselves tend to ascribe meaning to the ways how texts and action are being displayed in relation to one another. Since rituals are meant “to do things”, meanings can be instrumentalised, according to the agendas of the various actors who seek to affect directional change.<sup>2</sup> When ritual occasions comprise ‘competing constituencies’ (Baumann 1992), those who

1 Many thanks to David Gellner, Andras Höfer and Axel Michaels for their comments on the earlier versions of this article.

2 For important discussions on the ritual dynamics, see Turner 1992, Lewis 1980, Bloch 1982.

compete, do so usually in order to acquire supremacy within a certain given ritual context derived from a mythologic event, seeking to mobilize its central elements in one's own endeavors – creating in this way a forceful link between the myth and the ritual action. The opposite option, which will be discussed below, is to withdraw from the celebrations all together, seeking to deprive the others of a forceful political tool.

This article seeks to demonstrate how one of the major Hindu rituals, the Durgāpūja, has become subject to contestations in a minor historic site in Nepal, the last Hindu Kingdom. The political conflict carried out at the ritual ground relates directly to ethnic mobilization in this area: after over 200 years under the rule of high-caste Hindu Kings, Prime Ministers and their supporters members of the various Nepalese ethnic communities all over the country have started to fiercely oppose the existing societal order embraced by the Hindu ideology. Contesting a major Hindu ritual, as in our case, turns against the ritualisation of subordination.

While discussing the recent occurrences to abolish an important celebration as a political symbol, it is necessary to recall the processes through which the celebration has achieved such an importance. Our inquiry will then start as an ethno-history, by trying to establish how the mythical event of Goddess Durgā's killing the demon Mahisā has become the major ritual occasion in Belkot, an ancient Nepalese fortress. Viewed from the perspective of the South Asian studies, it is an intriguing example showing the ways how kings, petty princes and even local headmen have been striving to substantiate their worldly rule by connecting it to the divine power and grace.<sup>3</sup>

I argue that the local variations in Belkot's festivities result from the specific composition of the population, from local power struggles as well as from the specific strategic requirements of those in power. The ritual division of labour corresponds to the local caste division, comprising not only the Hindus but also members of ethnic groups to whom hierarchical ranks – below the so-called 'twice-born' castes and above the so-called 'untouchables' – have been accorded. The ritual celebrations of Durgāpūja in Belkot confirm to the South Asian pattern of connecting the various rulers' power to a narrative important in the entire Hindu Realm. Besides

3 For another, highly interesting account of instrumentalizing the ritual in the local power struggles in Nepal, see Ramirez (1996).

linking the various political sites to the mythic universe (a process I shall discuss in the course of this paper) elaborate arrangements have been established in order to make the divine power emanate onto and through the social orders. The celebrations gave scope for battles among aspirants to political power to present themselves as close to the divine grace as possible. Such political struggles, however, have been reinforcing the hierarchical ranking rather than contesting the very bases of the ritual order.

My argument runs as follows: power rituals in complex societies pertain to specific sociopolitical orders and to the authority of those in focal political positions within these orders. They not only express and dramatize social realities, but also, more specifically, organise social groups by relating them with one another. One important element in relating social groups is the establishment of symbolic means for expressing the supremacy of one group and the subordination of others. However, there always remains a large scope for ambiguity (Kertzer 1988:11) and for disagreement existing between various participants who may attach multiple meanings to a religious celebration at different ritual levels (Lukes 1977:206; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, *passim*).

This is the case with the Dasaī celebrations in Belkot (Dasaī being in Nepal the more common name for Durgāpūja). As will be shown below, various sections of the local population have attached different meanings to the “powerful” message of Dasaī, and have moulded the ritual form in accordance with their own version. In order to understand this process, we will have to examine the institutional setting within which Durgāpūja has provided a competitive arena for conflicting political needs expressed by various sections of the population who took part in the celebrations. Prominent among the needs of the participants was to convey ritual messages to various recipients. Gerd Baumann is right in rejecting Leach’s oversimplified idea that in ritual, in contrast to a music recital, the performers and the listeners are the same people so that ‘we engage in rituals in order to transmit collective messages to ourselves’ (quoted from Baumann 1992: 98). Rather, different sets of actors involved in a ritual aim to convey their messages to various recipients, some of them forming part of the ritual event, some of them being more or less distant on-lookers. Hence, drawing upon Baumann’s notion of ritual communities as competing constituencies (1992:99), it is possible to show that the various participants in the Durgāpūja celebrations were aiming to convey their messages to different “reci-



pipients", viz. their political superiors, *and/or* their political inferiors, *and/or* their political rivals. The described contestations did occur, however, within a common ritual framework as set by the myth of the ritual battle.

That hierarchical displays form an important element on the occasion of power rituals should have become clear from the above discussion. I stress this issue, once again, following de Coppet's (1992:9) insistence that the property of rituals to order hierarchically has all too often been neglected in the social anthropological writings. Hierarchical orders manifest themselves in a two-fold ways. They are embodied in the sense that the ritual action consists in spatial and temporal arrangements where distances are either being kept or contested (see Parkin 1992). Hierarchical orders are, secondly – if not firstly – elaborated in the myths as well as in their interpretations upheld and communicated by those in power. It is true that not all participants of a ritual must be aware of a currently valid version. It was certainly the case, however, in the example I am about to present.

### Durgāpūja as a Power Ritual

Coming now to the Durgāpūja festivities in Belkot it is necessary to locate them in the history of the Nepalese polity. Durgāpūja as it is celebrated in Nepal today goes back to the process of military conquests initiated by the King Prithvi Nārāyan Shah in the year 1744 that eventually resulted in the unification of Nepal in its present size (see e.g. Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993). As many other ambitious military endeavors, Nepal's unification started with a dream:

"And I asked the headmen of the fort if one might have darshan<sup>4</sup> of the devi<sup>5</sup>. 'To go into the temple for darshan is for the priests only', they said. 'So be it', I answered. 'But might one have darshan at the gate?' 'This is permitted,' they answered. So morning and evening I sat at the gate, reading, worshipping, and praying. One night I had a dream. A seven or eight-year-old maiden came to me, bearing a sword in either hand. She covered her head with a pale rose-coloured cloth and came close to me. I asked her who her father was. She

4 Form of religious worship.

5 Goddess.

answered that she was the daughter of the Rana (Magar) priest of the temple. Saying this, she placed the swords in my hands (...) she took steps and vanished. At this, I awoke. I called for Bhanu Jyotisi and Kulananda Jyotisi as well as the Rana priest, and I asked them to explain this to me. The astrologers and the priest said that this was the *devi* and that I had received *darshan*. At this moment I presented incense, lights, flags, and a feast" (Prthwi Nārāyan Shah in his *Dibya Upadesh*<sup>6</sup>).

Long before military unification various rulers within the present Nepalese territory worshipped the Goddess and counted upon her divine protection. In the middle of the 18th century the Goddess apparently answered the prayers of Prthwi Nārāyan Shah, at that time the ruler of the rather small and economically weak principality of Gorkha. He was able to establish the foundations of a polity which is known today as the Kingdom of Nepal.

In the course of their military conquests the Gorkhalis extended their rule over comparatively vast territories, declaring its soil as "the entire possessions of the King of Gorkha" (Burghart 1984:103), and establishing the King's ritual authority over the Realm (ibid.:104). With their newly acquired wealth the rulers were able to promote religious cults at various religious sites throughout the Kingdom. In this process they succeeded in linking their political power to the spiritual power of the Goddess formerly worshipped in her different manifestations by the ruling houses they had conquered. These included Bhairavi in Nuwakot, Jhalpā in Devighāt, and Guhyeswari in Deopatan – besides worshipping and patronising Kālikā in their own former capital in Gorkha. Among the less well-known places where the Goddess was worshipped under state's auspices after unification was the Niranjanā-shrine in Belkot (Nuwakot district), located ca. 10 km as the crow flies from the Nuwakot fortress, to the south of the Tadi river.

Durgāpūja emerged in Belkot as a ritual of power by virtue of two interrelated processes: the central rulers' cultural measures to consolidate their power, and the mediation of these by societal processes at the local level. The complex sociopolitical processes at the local level (village society) had a substantial impact upon the way the central rulers' message reached the local population both in general and on the specific occasion of Dasaī. In Belkot the communal Dasaī celebrations are reported to have

6 Translated by Stiller (1968: 40-1).

been a political battle ground among competing local élites (belonging mainly to high Hindu castes) during the period of Rana (1846-1951) rule.

Durgāpūja, as it has been celebrated in Belkot in the second half of the 20th century, consists of an elaborate ritual sequence, with ritual specialists acting as the protagonists in the majority of the rituals, and with local power-holders playing the major role on the last day of the festivities. By and large Belkot's festivities conform to the broader pan-Indian tradition of Durgāpūja celebrations.<sup>7</sup> They contain however some local peculiarities, along with specific "local meanings" added to this model.<sup>8</sup>

Today Dasāi has evolved into a test of strength between hostile village factions. Thus, in the last decade the Tamang community (forming in Belkot more than half of the population) has refused to participate in the festivities any longer, claiming that Dasāi commemorates Tamang subjugation to the central rulers and their local high caste representatives. The most influential group in this endeavor consists of Tamang politicians who managed to mobilize the entire local Tamang community to abstain from participating in the communal celebrations, and to stop performing animal sacrifices at the village's main Devī temple on this occasion. It is worth noting that in Belkot the Tamangs started to boycott the communal Dasāi celebrations on political and not on religious grounds (elsewhere in the country Buddhists increasingly oppose Dasāi because it involves animal sacrifices).

By promoting the Durgāpūja in various spots of the country, as was the case in Belkot after unification, the central rulers strived to legitimate their rule (Burghart 1984; Unbescheid 1986). However, their legitimacy endeavors have differed significantly from the ones required in other political systems. Instead of seeking popular consent as in the democratic model, the rulers strived to substantiate and demonstrate<sup>9</sup> their powerful position by linking their worldly power with divine power.<sup>10</sup> By promoting

7 See Kane (1958); Fuller (1992); Dirks (1987); Unbescheid (1986); Levy (1990).

8 The "ethnographic present" relates to the year 1986.

9 Geertz's (1980) model of the theatre state in 19th century Bali provides important insights for our case.

10 Power rituals relating to religious complexes are about power. This rather self-evident observation reacts in the first place to Maurice Bloch's conception of power rituals as disguising the actual power relations. In his most fascinating

the local cult in Belkot the rulers both expressed their religious feelings, and at the same time conveyed a message substantiating their worldly power.

As will be shown, the local population was expected to acknowledge this fact by demonstrating their deference. Confronted with a specific symbol of the emerging political culture shaped by central rulers, the local élites (holders of administrative offices, priests, influential families) took the opportunity to express their loyalty, but also sought to substantiate, in turn, *their* power or elevated status, by linking their prerogatives to symbols related to the central rulers. The local population, subject to the central rulers and to the local élites, was made to witness such endeavours. They were not only invited but also compelled to come, to bring tributes, to bow and to watch. By displaying obedience they formed part of the festive background. Their presence served to assert the importance of those able to establish themselves as the focus of the celebrations.

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article on the disconnection between power and rank in Madagascar Bloch (1982) has shown how a turbulent state based on unscrupulous exploitation by a small minority of rulers of a large majority of ruled, and how, at the same time, this order was misrepresented as an orderly harmonious system of fine gradation of rank which contains no sharp social breaks (1982: 321). Bloch argues that "this cultural mystification is (...) more than just a veil over the eyes of the actors; by hiding the reality of exploitation and transforming it into an ideology which stresses the beneficent effect of the presence of the ruler it serves to preserve the power of the rule, to facilitate its acceptance and thereby to maintain it. (...) The non-correspondence (between the system of the political-economic ranking and its ideological manifestation, JPC) (...) is one of the innermost mechanisms of the reproduction of the political system (ibid.)." In our example a very different situation obtained. Instead of disguising their dominant position, those in power strove to accentuate inequality by, among other things, taking recourse to ritual means. Local political leaders sought to present themselves as especially close to the Goddess whose divine protection emanated through and from the King. I am inclined to believe that, generally, in political systems drawing upon religious legitimacy disguising the actual power relations has *not* been a concern. Bloch's (1987) account of the ritual bath provides itself a fascinating illustration of this point.

### Belkot – A Minor Historical Site

Belkot probably entered the history of the emerging Kingdom of Gorkha when it was first spotted by Prthwi Nārāyan Shah. Subsequently it was taken by his troops in the year 1745, that is, at the very beginning of the unification process:

“When Prithwinarayana was thus reigning in Nuwakot, once he observed the fort of Belkot which overlooked the mountain. He enquired about its owner, but hearing that Jayant Rana (the conquered chief */omraon/*<sup>11</sup> of Nuwakot, JPC) had taken refuge there, he marched with an army towards it, and after a severe battle in which he lost several officers, took away Jayant Rana to Nuwakot where he was severely punished” (Hasrat 1970:136 cf. also Vajracarya 2032 B.S.:67).

According to local lore, Prthwi Nārāyan Shah’s troops punished the people of Belkot by destroying their temple, and then erected a new one, on the same site consecrated to the Goddess Niranjanā. It is widely agreed in Belkot that the destroyed temple had also been consecrated to a form of the Goddess. Some decades later several families living in Belkot were given lands (*guthi*) as a payment for performing rites to the Goddess (RRS 1987: 172), especially the Durgāpūja commemorating her victory over the demon Mahisā as narrated in the sacred text “Devī-Māhātmya”.

Belkot, situated less than two days walking distance from Kathmandu, has been constantly affected by various measures imposed on it by central élites. Its history reflects major trends of societal processes at the national level, such as: changing relations of production (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1991); centralisation of the administrative apparatus (e.g. Regmi 1978b); and significant migratory movements within the emerging polity. In the course of the 19th and the 20th century the ongoing processes at the local level have been reflecting broader processes at the “national” level in various ways. Belkot’s was a society in the making during the unification and consoli-

11 ‘Omraon’ (Umrao), according to Regmi (1978: 56), ‘petty chieftain’. “‘Umara’ was the plural form of this term from which the Nepali term, ‘Umra’, was probably derived. The term is Arabic in origin and was in use in Nepal even during the Malla period” (Regmi 1978: 476). See also Stiller (1975: 113-4), Kirkpatrick (1986: 54f.) et al..



dation process. None of the local families performing Dasaī ritual functions today was living there when Prthwi Nārāyan Shah's troops conquered the place.<sup>12</sup> Local informants from the various castes and ethnic groups living in Belkot today say that the majority of the peoples living here now (Brahmins, Chetris, Magars, Tamangs, Kamis) were represented by their forefathers already before the unification, but many families, including those who are nowadays the ritual specialists came only later. We do not know whether Belkot's Magars moved here much earlier than the Tamangs. It is intriguing that, though they did not rank far apart within the national hierarchy (see Höfer 1979), the Magars have managed to incorporate themselves much further into Belkot's social life than the Tamangs have. This reflects the fact that the Magars were closely allied with the Parbatiyā high-castes of Gorkha and other similar Kingdoms, whereas the Tamangs were not.

Only a few of the local landowning high-caste families who were clients of the central élites and political leaders lived there at that time. Some local families later appointed as office holders by central élites (see below) moved here only in the first decades of the 20th century. Several high-caste families (Upadhyaya and Jaisi Brahmins, Chetris) moved here from the West of Nepal during the 20s and 30s when what are now the most fertile lands in the valley bottom were cleared for cultivation – which became possible thanks to the eradication of malaria. Two of the new-comer families managed to acquire the post of headmen (*thari*) of small local administrative units (*tāluk*), when clearing up of new plots of land required additional administrative tasks.

In the administrative sense the local society was until the end of the Rana rule far from unified. It was divided not only by various forms of land ownership patterns and revenue collection but also by differing forms of subordination: while some local political leaders could claim durable links to central élites (especially to the royal family), an increasing number of office holders were appointed by the state on a yearly renewable basis. On the occasion of Durgāpūja celebrations, fierce battles were fought out since it was the only annual occasion when their respective ranking could

12 This holds for the Brahmin and Magar ritual specialists as well as for the Damai musicians. According to members of each family in question none of them has been living in Belkot for more than 8 generations.



be expressed. Among those competing were various office holders below the rank of the headman (*thari*), e.g. men in charge of collecting taxes and of employing “free labour”. The many political leaders and office-holders did not fail to display and to dispute their relative statuses. With these symbolic endeavors the local élites aimed, in the same way as the central rulers, at substantiating claims to power and status and at marking of socio-political distances, rather than at seeking approval from their subjects. In this sense their ritual message corresponded to local cultural forms and values (such as clear displays of the ritual hierarchy); even the Tamangs, the section of the local population which was least exposed to the Sanskritic tradition, were able to understand the message. As they admit nowadays, they used to “read” it as the expression of their political subjugation.

Belkot presently forms part of the Nuwakot district. It is located on the traderoute from Kathmandu towards the north, that is towards the Kyirong pass leading to Tibet. According to Kirkpatrick (1969 /1811/: 107f.), who travelled through the place at the end of the 18th century, Belkot was densely covered with forests, with few slopes being cultivated. The inhabitants of Belkot say that before the unification this place was ruled by a Magar prince (*rājā*). Documents from the unification period mention Belkot on several occasions (RRS 2:278). The main event occurred, as mentioned above, at the beginning of Gorkha’s expansion, when Nuwakot’s chief (*omraon*) fled to Belkot. Subsequently, Belkot appears in several documents (see RRS 1987:172) which indicate that Belkot was subjected to constant interference from the political centre: between 1790 and 1820 the villagers were repeatedly asked to perform forced-labour (*jhāra* – cutting forest, transporting timber to Kathmandu Valley, erecting a military camp in Devighāt). In the year 1805 a Tiwari family from the Chetri caste was given land of the *manācamal*<sup>13</sup> category – a fact which will be of

- 13 The *manācamal* category belongs to the life-time *birtā* grants; it was made “to reward government employees or others in consideration of their services and were primarily of the nature of pensions or allowances. (...) Manachamal Birta grants were theoretically intended to provide the recipients with one mana of rice for two meals during the day (...). Often such grants were of the nature of salaries, as when they were made to land surveyors. (...) Although in exceptional cases these

interest later. A document from 1812 confirms a former grant of 30 *muris* of rice land to a priest, whose name is not mentioned, who is asked in return to provide rice and other materials required in order to perform the Dasaī festival; in March 1815 rice-lands were allocated to people who transported goods in relays (*hulaki*).

During the course of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century a substantial share of Belkot's forests was cleared and turned into agricultural lands. The fertile soil attracted the attention of Kathmandu élites in addition to locally powerful families. During the period in question Belkot's land was distributed among various land holders under a variety of tenures. Several informants have estimated that at the beginning of the 20th century local land was held under different forms of land-tenure in the following proportions: ca. 70% was *birtā* (i.e. given to individual families on a hereditary basis); ca. 7% of the land was under *jāgir* (a sort of salary on a temporary basis) belonging to two army units as well as to the Eastern Commander-in-Chief<sup>14</sup>; ca. 5% of land was under *raikar* (directly taxable) tenure belonging mainly to those who were serving as *hulaki*, i.e. transporting goods in relays (gradually *birtā* and *jāgir* have been turned into *raikar*); finally ca. 15% of the land is reported to have been used as *guthi* (tax-free religious land held by various families in connection with ritual duties around the Niranjanā temple).<sup>15</sup>

Several families held *guthis* as a reward for performing ritual functions<sup>16</sup>:

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grants provided the right of inheritance, this did not imply the right of transfer" (Regmi 1978: 282-3).

- 14 The *jāgir* belonging to the army units was converted into *raikar* at the beginning of the 20th century.
- 15 Several Tamangs stated that the local Tamang chiefs held *kipat* lands that were granted to them with their offices. It is questionable whether *kipat* tenure really existed in Belkot – especially since this statement shows a clear misconception of the notion *kipat* (communally owned land, held as of right, not in return for services).
- 16 No written documents could be obtained in Belkot. Several members of wealthier families stated that they earned a lot of money by selling copper-plates relating to their land-holdings after these were registered by the local *māl addā* office.

- the Dasaī priest (the most learned Brahmin *pandit* of the area)
- the temple *pujāri* (a Brahmin)
- the *upāsye* (a Magar)<sup>17</sup>
- the *nāike*, village servant (a Newar from a local Shrestha family)
- five Damai musicians directed by the *kotwāl* (an official whose duty was to disseminate ‘official’ information) of the same caste.

All families performing these ritual functions, including the low-caste families, are held in high esteem locally. They are seen as representatives of their caste or ethnic group.

By far the most important form of land tenure in Belkot was *birtā*. Among owners of such lands were several local Brahmin families; but the largest local owner was the above mentioned Tiwari family which most of the time held the – in fact not hereditary – office of a *dwāre*, the focal political position, the importance of which manifested itself during the Dasaī celebrations. Most of the rest of the local rice land belonged to Kathmandu élites: to the king’s (own and classificatory) brothers (*cautāriya*), to the Queen mother, to one royal priest, and to several merchant families.<sup>18</sup> Even in 1986 not all the land that was previously under *birtā* tenure had been registered in the name of the tenants. Hence, villagers, among them many Tamangs, have often repeated that local relations of production did not change significantly with the fall of the Ranas. Since the largest landholders were absentee-landlords under the Ranas, many local families were in charge of management and tax-collection on their lands, and this continued after 1951.

In the first half of the 20th century the representative of the royal brothers, the *dwāre*, was at the same time the administrative head of the entire

17 The *upāsye*’s duties correspond to some of those performed by *bhitriyā susāre* described by Unbescheid (1986: 236) namely, to control the door to the *gupti kothā*, and to mediate between the outside and the inside. Additionally, in Belkot *upāsye* spends all ten days with the Dasaī priest and the *pujāri* fasting within the *gupti kothā*, and is supposed to perform all Dasaī sacrifices. The term *upāsye* is derived either from S. *upāsaka* = worshipper, or from N. *upāsnu* = “to fast” (Turner 1980/31/: 52). In Bal Candra Sarma’s Dictionary ‘upasya’ is translated as a person entitled and able to perform puja – I thank Prof. Höfer for this information.

18 Data presented here stem mainly from interviews with local informants well as from the *māl addā* office in Biddur.

Belkot territory which was divided into nine administrative units. At the head of the five administrative units (*tāluk*) in the upper area of Belkot, where the Tamangs lived, were Tamang leaders called *mukhiyā*. In the lower area inhabited by Brahmins, Chetris, Newars, Magars, Kamis, Sarkis, and Damais, the remaining units were headed by four high-caste headmen along with one headman from the Magar ethnic group called *thari* (see above). As the subordinates of the *dwāre*, both *mukhiyā* and *thari* were in charge of maintaining law and order within "their" units and of collecting revenue from the lands belonging to the royal brothers, besides collecting revenues from the non-irrigated *jāgir* and *raikar* lands. Here however lies a difference in the competences and duties of the *thari* and the *mukhiyā*: whereas the *thari* had to hand over the collected revenue to the *dwāre*, the *mukhiyā* had to carry it directly to the royal owners in Kathmandu 'themselves'. This point will be important in relation with the organisation of Dasaī. Several local families used to oversee *birtā* lands that belonged to other absentee landlords as well as other forms of land: several state appointed officials (*jimmāwāl*) collected revenue on irrigated *raikar* lands and a part of *jāgir* lands, a local client (*dhokre*) collected revenue at the *jāgir* belonging to the Eastern Commander-in-Chief, and an appointed official (*hulaki-mukhiyā*) was in charge of lands tilled by the *hulaki*.

Though ranking administratively below the *dwāre*, the *jimmāwāl* and the *hulaki-mukhiyā* were state officials with certain prerogatives. Their relative importance or status was additionally determined by wealth, and such other criteria as being related to more or less powerful patrons in Kathmandu, marital relations etc. Though legal arrangements varied with the differing forms of land tenure, to a large extent all tenants were not only forced to submit revenues to the actual land owners but were also compelled to perform specific tasks for their superiors. This applied particularly to tenants on *birtā* lands, who were compelled to perform forced labour and to provide the owners with gifts and bribes; these were needed since the owners of *birtā* could punish the tenants and act as judges in minor cases. In relation to the Dasaī celebrations, two aspects are especially important: first, the ritual expression of ownership and power relations; and second, status ambiguities, and therefore competition, between the office-holders in view of their numbers and the variety of criteria determining their rank.

## Dasaī in Belkot

In this account of Dasaī celebrations two sequences or “plots” will merge: one relates to Brahmanic rites conducted by ritual specialists mainly (but not entirely) in the seclusion of the Dasaī house (in Belkot called the *Dasaī ghar*, *gupti kothā*, or *Durgā bhawan*); the other relates to events of a military and political character. A third “plot” can also be discerned. It refers to rituals conducted within individual households culminating on the tenth day in *tikā* exchanges between kin-relatives according to their hierarchical order, as it seems, a Nepalese speciality.<sup>19</sup> This third “plot” will not be discussed here since it does not primarily pertain to communal issues.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas the Brahmanic plot may be assumed to have remained stable (though future research is required on this point), the plot pertaining to power has – not surprisingly – undergone a substantial modification in the course of the last decades. Whereas the tenth day was a great public display of status competitions between the local powerholders before the *pancāyat*-era started in the early 1960s, in recent years the Durgāpūja celebrations in Belkot have become a battlefield between local political factions (headed by high-caste Hindus and Tamangs respectively).

The celebrations start on the first day of the waxing lunar fortnight of the month *āswīn*. On this day two men, the Dasaī priest and the *upāsye*, a Magar, install themselves in the Dasaī house that is situated a few meters below the Devī temple. Besides fasting with the *pandit* inside the house the *upāsye* is supposed to perform several duties outside the Dasaī house. According to villagers the important position (*omraon*) of a Magar specialist

19 According to Kane (1958: 177) in India equality was stressed on *dasamī*: “...before the Devī the highest and the lowest were of equal status and every one must join in the frolics on the tenth tithi to show that all men were equal at least one day in the year”. See also Inden and Nicholas (1977: 23) for equality among kin being expressed on the occasion of Durgāpūja in Bengal. For information on Dasaī-*tikā* exchanges among kin-relatives in Central Nepal, see Bennett (1983).

20 However, at the household level, besides distributing the *tikā*, the household members are reminded of this special annual occasion when they have to visit their patrons if they are tenants, and have to offer special foods to low-caste specialists who work for them in return for an annual payment of grain (*bali*).



in the celebrations is to be traced to the political status of this ethnic group in earlier times. In particular he has to sacrifice animals and to carry a sword on the procession of the 7th day. The Magars call the sword *tarwār* while the high caste people usually call it *khadga*. The Magars call it the "weapon of the Devī"; however some of them said that, along with other weapons, it was used during the unification war. In 1986, the *upāsye*, being old, restricted his activities to fasting, while two younger relatives carried out his other duties. Their position has no name; they were simply adopting temporarily the function of *upāsye*.

The Dasaī house is small, not more than 4 meters square. Its entrance is well hidden from the outside. Only ritual specialists involved in Dasaī activities are allowed to enter. The Dasaī priest and the *upāsye* stay here together through the entire period, fasting, performing rituals assigned to them, reading and/or listening to the Devī-Māhātmya. They are assisted by the temple *pujāri* who has to perform rituals inside and outside the house. On the first day the Goddess is invoked by planting *jamaro* (barley) seeds – ten large and four small plates are necessary – and by establishing a water vessel (*kalas*). No image of the Goddess (*murti*) is used for worship. Only a few people gather at the temple on this day. Most of them come in the morning when the sacrificial post is worshipped and a he-goat is sacrificed. Throughout the day Brahmins arrive at the temple and read from Devī-Māhātmya. The Damai orchestra gathers in the morning and in the evening as it does throughout the year. In the course of the first day four stones are worshipped and covered with red powder in the vicinity of the Dasaī house. They are consecrated to the four representations of the Goddess located in the surrounding important temples: Bhairavi of Nuwakot, Jalpa of Devighāt, Kālikā of Gorkha, and Guhyeswari of Deopatan. These stones will be worshipped continuously throughout the festival by villagers who come to the temple and to the Dasaī house to worship the Goddess.

From the second to the sixth day Dasaī activities are confined to the inner area of the Dasaī house. Every day the ritual objects symbolising the Goddess are worshipped, the *pandit* and the *upāsye* continue with their fast (that is, they eat only once a day after sunset), and they listen to Brahmins who come occasionally to the house and read the Devī-Māhātmya. Towards the end of the sixth day several preparatory activities are carried out: the sacrificial ground next to the Dasaī house is repaired and ritually purified by the *pujāri* who is assisted by the *nāike*. Towards the sixth day



several eatables are collected which will be put on one of the plates on which *jamaro* is growing. It should contain nine elements (*navapatrikā*) of which some may vary while others are indispensable: unhusked rice, sugar cane, curd in a small leaf plate, banana, flowers, and turmeric. The Goddess's weapons (the *tarwār* or *khadka* and the *khukuri*) are cleaned and put into the Dasaī house. Interestingly, these battered utensils hang on the wall in the Magar *upāsye*'s house during the main part of the year. (Despite 'their' having been defeated during the unification, the lineage was able to hold onto an important position; one branch of the family lives in Kathmandu and its menfolk used to carry a royal flag [*nisān*] on ceremonial occasions in Rana period).

On the seventh day known as *phulpāti*, Dasaī activities are carried out in three places simultaneously. While the Goddess and the weapons are being worshipped in the Dasaī house, the *nāike* purifies with cowdung a spot ca. 200 m down the slope (a *deurāli*, 'place of worship') where also a *bel* (*Aegle marmelos*) twig is planted. A third party, consisting of two Magars, goes down to collect the *phulpāti* ('flowers offered in worship'). According to several informants, in earlier times the *phulpāti* was brought from Gorkha, for which Gorkha was sent a small tribute. The same men say that nowadays the *phulpāti* is brought from Nuwakot; most probably however the *phulpāti* was collected just in the lower part of the village (rice plants, banana, asok leaf) with some plants such as the *bel* twig, which does not grow in Belkot, previously having being brought from other areas. In the afternoon the *kalas* and the plate containing the *jamaro* and nine offerings to the Goddess are taken out of the Dasaī-house. A procession is formed with the Damai orchestra in front. It is followed by the village servant, then by the temple priest who carries the *jamaro* plate, his helper (no special name) who carries the *kalas*, the *pandit*, and two men (a relative of the Magar official and a political office-holder of lower rank) each carrying a sword. The procession reaches the sacred spot (*deurāli*) at the same time as the two men who carry the *phulpāti* from the valley. After everybody has arrived (a large crowd accompanies the ritual specialists), the *pandit* worships the *bel* twig, the sacrificial knife, and a pumpkin. A he-goat is sacrificed at the spot and its blood is directed on the twig which will remain there. Subsequently, the procession climbs back towards the Dasaī house where the ritual objects are put into place. Two more he-goats are

sacrificed, one in the Dasaī house, the other at the ground in front of it; the *phulpāti* is distributed as blessing among the people.

The eighth day (*astamī*) is relatively quiet. Rituals are performed inside the Dasaī house. Many private persons visit the temple and the premises of the Dasaī house on this day, sacrifice their own animals and listen to the Brahmins' recitations. Towards the evening the sacrificial ground is purified with cow-dung by the *nāike*. It is only in the evening that the sacrifices start. The night-time sacrifice starts with the worship and sacrifice of a pumpkin and is succeeded by the sacrifice, first of buffaloes, and afterwards of goats (a small procession goes to the *deurāli* where they meet the main sacrificial buffalo and accompany it to the sacrificial ground). The sacrifices continue on the ninth day (*navamī*). All in all the minimum number of sacrificed animals cannot fall below two buffaloes and nine goats, of which all but one goat must be sacrificed by the evening of the ninth day. After the sacrifices the meat of the animals (which until three decades ago were said to be provided by the royal brothers, i.e. by the tenants among the local population) is distributed as a religious blessing (*prasād*) to local people.

In fact, the last paragraph should be narrated in past tense. All goats that were sacrificed during Dasaī celebrations in 1986 were provided for the sacrifices by particular families, and were eaten later by them. Thus the priests and the people other than the owners received no meat at all. The donors of the sacrificial animals received 25 NRp. for every animal in order to recompense them for the sacrificial blood. The money was collected and distributed by a Dasaī committee that was formed in order to make communal sacrifices possible. This was necessary because the *guthi* lands belonging to the temple had by this time been illegally appropriated by a powerful local family, and because the then village head who belonged to the Tamang community refused to provide money from the village treasury (as long as twice-born Hindus were village heads [*pradhān panc*] they had drawn some expenses for Dasaī from the village treasury). In 1986 the Dasaī committee was just able to collect enough money in order to buy two small and weak buffaloes.

On the tenth day the last goat is sacrificed in the morning. Its head is put on a leaf-plate and placed in the Dasaī house. Outside Brahmins gather and they read from the *Devī-Māhātmya*. A crowd gradually assembles in and around the sacrificial ground. Inside the Dasaī house the *pandit* wor-

ships the objects which symbolize the Goddess. Shortly before he gives a sign for exchanging *tikā* outside, he distributes three *tikā* inside the house: the first *tikā* goes to the King of Nepal, the second one to the God Vishnu, and the third one goes to his own lineage deity. After the ritual objects, including the last goat's head, are brought and arranged outside the Dasai house, the *pandit* gives the first *tikā* (with some *jamaro*) to the political village head (i.e. to the *dwāre* under the Ranas and to the *pradhān panc* until 1983), the second to the *upāsyē*, and the third one to the *pujāri* who all receive it with a bow. The *upāsyē* and *pujāri* give a *tikā* to the priest in turn; however, he does not reciprocate the bow. Subsequently all ritual specialists distribute *tikā* and *jamaro* to the gathered crowd.

The observations in the year 1986 and the accounts of how the tenth day was celebrated until three decades ago vary significantly. In 1986 the communal celebrations ended with a general distribution of *tikā* by the *dwāre* and the ritual specialists which, after the main protagonists had exchanged the *tikā* with each other, did not follow any specific hierarchical pattern and nothing was given in exchange for a *tikā* (except the bows). Moreover in 1986 the political head of the *pancāyat* did not attend Dasai festivities at any stage because he, a Tamang, opposed their communal performance. The "political power" was represented by the village secretary, who was a Chetri). This was a departure from Dasai celebrations during the earlier *pancāyat* period when the *pradhān panc* was always a Brahmin. Though the villagers were not obliged to deliver any tokens (foodstuffs) to the village headman in the *Pancāyat* period, many *felt* compelled to appear on the *dasamī* and to bow in front of him. No status rivalries have been reported from this time.

A Tamang was only once elected a *pradhān panc* in Belkot (by spring 1987 he had to give back the political power to the Brahmin whom he had previously defeated). At all other times during the *Pancāyat* period this office was occupied by local Brahmins (from a single kin group). In brief, this Tamang leader was supported by some powerful high-caste families who opposed the faction which usually won the elections. The faction headed by the Tamang was supporting the then forbidden Congress party, while the other faction supported the *Pancāyat* system. It is noticeable that the Tamangs opposed Dasai immediately after they came to power. Originally this opposition came especially from young, dynamic leaders of the Tamang community who had a radical vision of change in Nepalese so-

ciety. Gradually they came to be supported in their opposition against the public displays of hierarchical relations on Dasaī by a very large proportion of the Tamang community. In the view of many Tamangs, nowadays actively expressed mainly by the younger generation, Dasaī is an expression of the dominance of the Nepalese political system under the rule of the King (it does not matter in this connection that during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century the King did not exercise *de facto* power), and the dominance of his clients who belonged to the twice-born castes. Otherwise, during the local Dasaī celebrations the Brahmin *pradhān panc* office holders liked to present themselves in the focus of the celebrations as if they were *dwāre*. It was also noticeable that the high-caste people who supported the Tamangs' faction did not appear at the *kot* on *dasamī*, either. In their view, their political adversaries had captured Dasaī in order to display their powerful position.

Before the Pancāyat reform the *dasamī* celebrations are reported as having been preceeded by fierce disputes which were carried into the ritual ground. To be more precise: the battles were occurring during the week-long preparations for the celebrations. The actual festivities were the outcome of the preceding negotiations among the powerful and the office-holders. According to several former political leaders of the village, the highest ranks (the *thari*) did not compete in this. It was mainly the various tax-collectors and the *hulaki-mukhiyā*, as well as the various clients to central élite families, who disputed through ritual (for further details see the following discussion – para 2 and 3). Unfortunately, informants could not agree on one issue (which again may indicate how much local perceptions of the celebrations differ). While the son of the last *dwāre* claims that on *dasamī* every household head had to appear in front of the *dwāre* and present him with a *mana* (ca. one pound) of husked rice and one banana, some other elderly men state that the obligation to appear in front of the *dwāre* fell only on those who tilled land which was rented from his family as *manacamal* land. Though a large proportion of local households are reported to have been under this obligation, it did not extend to all households.



## Discussion

*The power displays on the occasion of Durgāpūja*

Political and economic relations on one hand, and the religious components of Durgāpūja celebrations in Belkot on the other, refer to two different aspects of the emerging polity in the present Nepalese territory. These two aspects correspond to what Burghart described as different “indigenous” territorial concepts within the emerging state: “The Gorkha rulers (...) claimed their sovereignty by exercising proprietary authority upon their possessions (*muluk*), and ritual authority within their realm (*desa*)” (1984: 103). Both concepts are related but have to be kept apart: “The realm (*desa*) within which the king of Gorkha exercised his ritual authority was a quite different territorial unit from the possessions over which the king exercised proprietary authority. The realm was an auspicious icon of the universe” (1984:104). This locus of authority “was seen to encompass the *pradesa*, or provinces, ruled from the center. This locus was identified with the capital (...), or with the palace itself, in which was situated the temple of the king’s tutelary deity. Provincial ritual enactments of universal import could not be undertaken without the approval of the central authority” (1984:105f.).

In this model the King substantiates his political power by claiming the focal position within the ritual order. He has command over his “entire possessions” and has the central ritual authority. Hence, he has supremacy within two separate but related orders which both reinforce one another. Both concepts differ in their notion of territoriality and of power. While the territorial limits of the *muluk* were physical, and were established by the battles the Gorkhalis fought against the British as well as against Tibet/China, the Realm is demarcated by important temples in holy sites situated at auspicious spots within and even outside the kingdom (Burghart 1984: 104). The distribution of sacred spots follows a “sacred geography” that determines where the cosmos and the worldly abode meet – whereas the worldly geography connects places by ownership and administration patterns as well as by routes open to communication and transportation. The power related to sacred sites, somewhat reified, stems from divine grace. This power is placed in the king who can pass it down to his followers. Power in the worldly context refers to interpersonal relationships of

supremacy and subordination, and is negotiated within the institutional concept of a stratified polity with (in this time not yet precisely defined) clear-cut territorial allegiances.

The Durgāpūja in its entirety, as it developed in Nepal, brings both components together – as revealed in the Dasain celebrations in Belkot. It is, of course, a religious ceremony which expresses the King's entitlement to sacred power, and thus his elevation above his followers. Hence it renders his power legitimate, not in a modern sense of people expressing their approval, but in the sense of Gods expressing their approval and the people witnessing the act. Durgāpūja substantiates the power of the King by providing him with divine consent, by displaying the King's ritual protection by Brahmanic powers, by reinforcing the purity of the place, and last but not least, by elevating the ruler above his followers. These are the major, interrelated, messages conveyed to Belkot's population "from above".

Linking the Durgāpūja with worldly displays of power is by no means a Nepalese invention, nor is it recent.<sup>21</sup> Martial elements form an integral part of the Devī-Māhātmya, for instance when the Goddess is offered ritual weapons from various Gods in order to conquer the demon Mahisā and his supporters (Devī-Māhātmya 2.20-2.23, see Varenne's translation 1975). Various historical and ethnographic accounts from India reveal the political aspect of the celebrations as well. Fuller, who gives a good overview of Durgāpūja festivities in Mysore and Mewar, concludes: "The court assembly also gave shape to a hierarchical structure of relationships, focused on the deities and king, which was an ideal image of the complete order of human society within the kingdom, as well as of its solidary link to the universe over which the great deities are sovereign. ... Hence throughout royal Navaratri and Dasara ... there was a constant and central theme: the recreation and representation of a unitary sociocosmic order around the axis of sovereign authority, personified in the king who was inseparably bound to the deities of his realm. And at the same time, kingship was portrayed as a vital component of the relationship between the deities and humanity within an ordered, harmonious, and prosperous world" (Fuller 1992:127). Dirks (1987:40f.) is able to quote from 16th century documents

21 Interestingly, in Kane's account the tenth day of the celebrations, the Vijayadasamī is described separately from the Durgāpūja (the first nine days of the lunar fortnight).



which suggest that “while the king performed his puja, he underwent his yearly coronation” (ibid.:40). Here, the “sovereign derived authority through the significant displays of ritual kingship, which itself depended by then on arms and muskets to make the earth tremble. He then differentially distributed that authority among those chiefs who sought a place and (and often a piece of) the imperial umbrella” (ibid.:42). Dirks builds here upon Inden’s ideas that various ritual activities “symbolized the incorporation of the recipient into person as his subordinate, to act in future as an extension of himself” (1978:56), a situation replicated in the earlier Dasain celebrations in Belkot.

The Nepalese rulers who were consciously promoting Durgāpūja after the unification had a complex Indian model at their disposal in which the King’s rule was forcefully embedded in the ritual (additionally, they could build upon the ritual practice of the former Malla Kingdoms, itself also derived from Indian models). The royal power was presented in relation to divine grace, as a link between the cosmos and humanity (a link made possible by Brahmins), and as the personification of divine authority which the ruler could delegate to his immediate subordinates. Inden’s quotation in particular reveals the major features of this conception: the King’s political supremacy is ritually expressed as superiority, and he is presented as the one who passes down power that was granted to him by the Gods. Of course, none of the authors denies that this divine legitimacy is only one layer of the King’s power, the other being his command over his country, based upon a web of political allegiances and if necessary – force. The examples given indicate further that political elements could be, and were, fitted into the model, according to the requirements of legitimation, and hence according to the meanings which had to be promoted. What was happening on a larger scale in various political centres was replicated at the local level, for instance in Belkot.

### *The meanings*

The Durgāpūja celebrations in Belkot consist in manifold patterns that structure a variety of relationships, and express, besides common features, a variety of meanings which can be differently interpreted by various actors – conforming e.g. to Humphrey and Laidlaw’s (1994) observations (see also Kertzer 1988). The Brahmanic knowledge and values attached to

Durgāpūja celebrations are shared by the population to differing extents: the holiness of the text; the idea of restoration of the cosmic order and the concept of divine kingship; the symbolism of holiness and prosperity through specific Vedic notions (such as the one of full *kalas*) are surely less accessible to some sections of the society than to the Brahmins.

However, even those within Belkot's population who have been scarcely exposed to Brahmanic values are conscious of at least some of its most general elements such as force and bravery attached to divine power (with some sharing in it and others being subjected); ritual purity (with some ranking higher and others ranking lower within the hierarchy), the notion of plenty (with some partaking in it and others watching them doing so), and auspiciousness (again enjoyed to varying extents by different people).

There is all the more scope for various meanings to be attached given the fact that specific actors play more or less visible roles within different ritual sequences that vary in symbolic meaning:

- During the first six days – the purity and the secrecy of Brahminic rites.
- On *phulpāti* – the connection with power-centres (Gorkha, Nuwakot, and Kathmandu), the divine power, and the display of cooperation of all ritual specialists in public context (this, for instance, is the occasion when the Damai orchestra is very prominent).
- On the occasion of the sacrifices of the *astamī* and *navamī* ritual power is evoked and created, and the benevolence of the Goddess is stressed who accepts the sacrifices; and finally,
- *dasamī* focusses on the (worldly) display of the evoked (divine) power. Note that on this occasion ascribed and achieved status complement each other, and ... compete.

Many actors involved *share* in their common preoccupation to express the importance of the place on the occasion of Durgāpūja. Belkot as a locality bearing a sacred site is distinguished by the *guthi* donation (now lost), in this case an unambiguous indicator of royal assent. Members of the local society strive to additionally augment the local importance: the villagers mark the shrine's connection to other far more important holy places by worshipping stones which represent other manifestations of the Goddess (Jhalpā, Bhairawi, Guhyeswari, and Kālikā) – a practice that embarrasses the Brahmins in charge of the festival who think it – worshipping these

stones – superstitious. The importance of Belkot is further stressed by the ritual specialists who claim that the *phulpāti* is sent from Gorkha. By doing so Belkot is presented as inferior to Gorkha but as having a strong ritual link to this key origin place of the present Royal dynasty. The Brahmins in charge of the ceremony maintain that until few decades ago a *tikā* was sent to the royal palace in Kathmandu on the tenth day. The importance of Belkot is also seen in the story mentioned above that the local temple was destroyed and rebuilt by the Gorkhali army. The ritual weapons displayed on the occasion of Durgāpūja are meant to commemorate the battle. Also the spot where the *phulpāti* sacrifice takes place is considered to be a historical site. Durgāpūja is the only ritual occasion when Belkot's importance during the unification period can be communally displayed.

The ritual significance of the place, and hence of the local polity, once established, individuals and groups try to take advantage of its amassed importance. Among the most striking features here is the way in which the major Durgāpūja priest connects his lineage deity with the King of Nepal and God Vishnu by giving three *tikā* just before leaving the Dasaī house on *dasamī*. Though this measure is largely unknown to the villagers, it has great importance for the priest in question, who strives to embrace the village under his ritual auspices. Similarly the members of the Magar ethnic group attach great importance to their prominent role during the entire festivities. In their view their active role symbolises their bravery in the course of the unification (though they have in fact lost some of their former prerogatives – however, economic and political decline may make the Magars cling to ritual prerogatives and historical connections all the more), and their previously prominent role as local chiefs before their defeat. Carrying the sword is connected with the royal power. This is a privilege of the Magar that nobody would contest. The majority of the high-caste Hindus in the village hold the *upāsye* in high regard.

At the communal level there are differing notions of unity and division which become apparent during Durgāpūja. From the point of view of Belkot's being a sacred spot, a unity is symbolised by a hierarchical order that accords specific ritual tasks to hierarchical ranks. In this holistic perspective the majority of status groups living in Belkot is represented by some of their members. In this way the Brahmins, the Magars, the Newars and the Damais are represented and they all play indispensable roles in the festivities. Several Chetris performed within this complex the role of the

“powerful”, along with some Brahmin leaders. The local Kamis and Sarkis are not represented. This is surprising, especially in the case of the former, since the Kamis play an important role in producing or at least sharpening the weapons that are displayed.

The numerically most important group of the village, the Tamangs, are not represented as performing any ritual tasks at all, not even by their political leaders who under the Ranas had to travel to Kathmandu on this occasion. In the capital the Tamang *mukhiyā* had to bring tribute and bow in front of their immediate superiors. No data could be collected on this issue; probably the Tamang leaders were asked to come to Kathmandu in order to bring them under direct control of their superiors. Their presence in Belkot during the Durgāpūja festivities would have added to the *dwāre*’s importance. Where a common belonging of some local status groups was expressed in the holistic idiom of Hindu hierarchy (representatives of the local castes and ethnic groups cooperate ritually, having tasks assigned to them which correspond to their hierarchical caste ranks), the Tamangs, Kamis and Sarkis had to remain outside the order.

Whereas the publicly displayed ritual order was ambiguous, excluding some and binding others together, the political order expressed itself in a clear-cut way: on *dasamī*: ideally, all had to be present (or more precisely: members of every household had to appear at the *kot*, that is at the ‘fortress’ where the Devī temple was situated, with the Dasaī house slightly below). By appearing in front of the *dwāre* everybody was compelled to acknowledge his supremacy. In this sense all villagers were actors. At the same time, the majority of the villagers were also spectators: they were witnesses to the strategic games of the “powerful”. As discussed above, among various officials – some of them having had durable links with central élites, some of them having been appointed annually – political ranking used to be fiercely negotiated with every Dasaī approaching. Let us note that appointments to, and removals from, offices occurred before Dasaī. Therefore, the struggles in connection with *dasamī* referred rather to the relative importance of functions. Apart from this festival the various ranks and duties were not well defined in relation to one another.

Unlike other ritual occasions celebrated at the local level, the power display at *dasamī* was the only moment when the office-holders felt compelled to appear in a hierarchical order. The first man who received a *tikā* from the *dwāre* appeared to be more important than his successor. In front



of the villagers, the officers did not only strive to outdo their political rivals but also to create the greatest possible distance between the spectators and themselves by striving to be closer to “power” than the others.

The case of the Tamangs indicates that even if everybody seemed to be participating in a ritual and to be sharing its values, under the surface of the mere display conflicting values and interpretations were hidden, even though – despite the claims by the politicised Tamangs of Belkot – we cannot be sure that under the Ranas the Tamangs resented the Dasaī celebrations as much as they do today. All Tamangs with the exception of their local leaders were compelled to appear on *dasamī*, and to display their inferiority towards the *dwāre* as well as towards the other villagers since they were allowed to approach him towards the end of festivities only, just preceding the low-caste people.

Höfer, who had examined the Durgāpūja in the adjacent Dhading district inhabited by the Tamangs, interprets the fact that they were compelled to contribute sacrificial animals in psychological terms: since with the introduction of Dasaīn they had to see their animals being sacrificed, asks Höfer, should we not assume that subsequently they were eager to believe in some spiritual value of the sacrifice, as a compensation for the material loss (Höfer 1986:45)? The Tamang rejection of the Durgāpūja in Belkot does not confirm Höfer’s suggestion, even though it is fascinating in the context of Höfer’s material. The majority of Belkot’s Tamangs nowadays see the Durgāpūja as a ritual of power which symbolizes their subordination within the Hindu polity. The compulsion to participate in a ritual over many decades in which their low status and ritual impurity become apparent has nowadays come to be resented. Therefore, the local Tamangs now utilize the Durgāpūja as a tool in order to express this feeling. In other parts of Nepal it is known that other Buddhist ethnic groups (e.g. the Sherpas, see Paul 1989) oppose the Dasaī sacrifices as incompatible with their Buddhist faith. Even though the Tamang of Belkot consider themselves Buddhists, in 1986 no Tamang was heard arguing accordingly.

The Tamang rejection can be interpreted in the light of Scott’s argument on the “moral economy of the peasant”. In his influential book Scott argues that people display compliance because the external circumstances force them to do so. Much that passes as deference is in fact a strategy to please those in power. “There may be in fact a large disparity between this

constrained behavior and the behavior that would occur if constraints were lifted" (1976:232). The present case fits well with this argument – all the more so as the Tamang leaders and their followers ceased attending and supporting the Dasaī celebrations as soon as their faction won the local elections.

However, by supporting Scott's argument I do not wish to suggest that ritual behavior and connected values are *merely displayed* by *all* actors. This would be missing the point entirely. In the case of Belkot some sections of the local population certainly share the central meanings, but we cannot conclude that all who partake in a ritual of power share the same values. There is scope for everybody to attach more importance to some elements than to others; and some participants are likely to attach unexpected meanings to the Dasaī celebrations, viz. resentment. An important feature of power rituals is that some of the participants gladly appear in the focus of the rites *and* are able to exercise power over some others by compelling them to participate and to witness the display of their importance.

### *The actors*

Durgāpūja being a ritual of power has embraced the entire population of Belkot. This embrace manifested itself in various forms at different stages of the ritual sequence. All through the festival the great majority of the population was prevented from witnessing secret rites performed within the confines of the Dasaī house; different ritual and political roles were becoming apparent on particular ritual events; everybody was invited to listen to Brahminic recitations, to partake in animal sacrifices as well as in the ritual offerings, and hence everybody was able to share in divine power and grace. On the other hand wide sections of the population were compelled to bear some costs of the festivities and were made subservient spectators witnessing power struggles. While a majority had to contribute to the celebrations, apparently some very reluctantly and others gladly, the ritual specialists were rewarded by religious endowments. Depending upon status and power the various forms of participation can be identified variously as matters of devotion, awe, exclusion, status-assertion and compulsion.



Two sources of power (divine and worldly), two notions of territory (realm and possessions) and two representations of social order (hierarchical order and ranks defined by relations of political economy) coincide and reinforce each other during the Durgāpūja celebrations. Whereas in the first nine days of the festival the rituals concentrate on divine power, taking place in the auspicious parts of the realm with the caste system representing the auspicious order (Burghart 1984:104), the celebrations of the tenth day build upon the acquired divine power but center basically upon worldly issues, that is the relations of political economy within the centralising state. Though probably not as accentuated in reality as we distinguish them here in our model, two social orders present themselves at different stages of the festival. Besides relating to two completely different notions of power and universe, they vary significantly in the way they order society. The criteria differ (ritual rank versus position within relations of political economy) and so does the actual ranking. The festival however allows for yet another ambiguity, in Lukes (1977) terminology, by not forcing the major protagonists within both systems (the ritual specialists vs. the political leaders) to define their status in relation to one another.<sup>22</sup> The ritual specialists play the leading role within the festivities until they cede their leading role to the *dwāre* when they bless him with a *tikā* on the tenth day. By means of the *guthi* land grant, the King, advised by Brahmins, caused the local ritual specialists to worship the Goddess and himself. By passing the leading role over to the *dwāre*, the local ritual specialists allow him to base his worldly status as the representative of the royal family in the divine protection of the place.

Within the local social hierarchy the Tamangs have been outside (but not at the bottom) of both systems. No representative of theirs plays any specialist role during the celebrations, and since their political leaders do not participate in the *tikā*-distribution on *dasamī* (where they would rank high – but nobody could tell how high), the only role they can play is being mute subjects who have to come, deliver tributes and bow. Ironically, in the course of the recent political development the Tamangs of Belkot have

22 We are confronted here with the “classic” Hindu opposition between the religious power of the Brahmin and the worldly power of the Kshatriya (Dumont 1966: 103f.). However, kingship entails much more than its worldly component – as discussed by Dumont (1966/1962/) and by Heesterman (1985).

acquired an active role in the celebrations by publicly contesting it. By contesting Durgāpūja's importance at the communal level, they compel political activists who are eager to retain the political character of the celebrations to mobilize their fellow villagers – while the ritual specialists continue to perform the religious rites as ever.

### Conclusion

By promoting the local religious cult with land grants the Nepalese rulers have conveyed a specific message to the local population – a message that could be differently understood and interpreted by the various sections within the local society. The local society in question continued to be a society in the making in the course of the 20th century. The local population, though forming part of a Hindu realm as claimed by the King, was separated through cultural divisions; the local population was divided by different forms of land tenure and administration, though united in its subordination within the emerging polity.

Durgāpūja, shaped over many decades as a power ritual, became an institutionalized means to convey particular messages between rulers and ruled. In view of the substantial societal changes at the local level it is not surprising that the political components of ritual had been readjusted according to specific needs. Given the quick pace of societal changes in this area, and given the fact that the major political elements of the Durgāpūja emerged in Belkot only after the unification, one could argue that the case presented here refers to very special conditions which cannot be generalized as broader conclusions on power rituals in complex societies. Above all, it is hardly surprising that this ritual cannot express “collective sentiments” of the village community if the local “village community”, consisting of various caste and ethnic groups, was – if at all – only in the process of emerging.

However, Belkot's case presented here does not significantly differ from other known examples. The collection *The Invention of Tradition* edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) contains insights sensitizing us to the temporary nature of ritual contexts within complex societies, with significant ritual elements being added or exchanged over very short time periods. The “Dominant Ideology Thesis” (1980) by Abercrombie et al. is

an argument on the divisive nature of pre-industrial societies where ritual messages are prevented from spreading by forceful barriers. In this context the authors claim that the subordination of peasants had “very little to do with the ‘political/ideological’ instance” (1980:72), rejecting the thesis that basically common ideas bind societies together. Ernest Gellner carries this argument further: “the state (in agrarian societies – JPC) is interested in extracting taxes, maintaining the peace, and not much else, and has no interest in promoting lateral communication between its subject communities. (...) Among the higher strata of agro-literate society it is clearly advantageous to stress, sharpen and accentuate the diacritical, differential, and monopolizable traits of the privileged groups” (1983:10-11). Finally, since Scott’s *Moral Economy of the Peasants* (1976) we are careful not to take appearances for granted, because within specific power arrangements the subjugated sections of a society have to display compliance with specific symbols of those in power. Hence, experiences gained by discussing the Durgāpūja celebrations in Belkot allow for a rather general conclusion.

The political context within which the rulers have conveyed their message was that of a monarchy based, on the one hand, upon a hierarchical social order conceptualised as a realm under the King’s ritual authority, and upon a large network of tributary, civil and military administration with well-defined rules of inferiority and superiority on the other (see also Michaels 1997). Within this system the task of legitimating the basis of political power differs significantly from measures known from other political systems where popular consent is considered to be indispensable. While it cannot be denied that a righteous ruler was appreciated more highly than a greedy monarch (indeed, in the course of the last two centuries of Nepalese history it is difficult to find a righteous ruler who had *de facto* power), royal rituals aimed at substantiating the kings’ powerful position, expressing their supremacy and creating social distance from those below (especially from those immediately below) rather than disguising it.

Richard Burghart has maintained that immediately after the unification the rulers strived to legitimate their power in a way that made sense to their subjects (1984:121), in a language that was intelligible to everybody. A language intelligible to everybody was one which displayed popular compliance (rather than consent) with the rulers. In this system of accentuated inequalities the subjects expressed their inferiority and reverence

towards their political and/or ritual superiors by means of tribute and bows. Within the framework of an emerging political culture promoted by the central rulers and their advisers the members of Belkot have found enough space to attach their private meanings to a ritual complex they were confronted with. In this sense they have significantly contributed to Durgāpūja's gaining importance outside of the power centre. Hence, the spread of Durgāpūja within Nepal can be seen not only as the result of central rulers' measures, but as the outcome of local power struggles and rank contestations as well.

Coming back to the dynamic properties of power rituals discussed in the introduction, I believe to have demonstrated how the Durgāpūja has been continuously adapted according to the various participants' objectives. Those at the apex of the local hierarchy and those striving to reach there could take advantage from the existing ambiguities in the ritual celebrations and to contribute to what Lewis (1980) and Parkin (1990) have described as 'ruling'<sup>23</sup>. There probably was a consensus among those in power that enlarging the ritual complex would enhance the means to stress one's own significance. In the consequence, the local élites have continuously recreated a 'mesocosm' (Levy 1990) in which a link has been established and ever since perpetuated between the ritual message as conveyed in the myth of the ritual battle and the social order manifesting itself in the ritual arrangements.

While the high-caste members of the local community have been striving to make the festivities a resource substantiating their importance, the members of a hitherto low-ranking (by Hindu standards) ethnic community, the Tamangs, have undertaken action in order to stop the Durgāpūja celebrations all together after they acquired political power. The Tamangs in Belkot made a conscious choice not to endorse the central values of the ritual even though, having attained political power, they could have celebrated themselves in the focus of the ritual order. Claiming, however, that the Durgāpūja ritual not only commemorates their political subjugation but also symbolises their ritual inferiority within the Hindu hierarchy, the Tamang leaders have chosen to boycott the entire complex. One could claim that Tamangs, being – by the local standards, partly out-

23 'Ruling' is a term introduced by Lewis (1980), pertaining to situations where there are no precise rules governing rituals

siders in the Hindu order, did not grasp the meaning of the festivities. I suggest that they did, using the powerful symbolic means in order to make a forceful political statement: the Tamangs have chosen to "read" Durgāpūja as a symbol of their oppression within the Hindu realm. It is remarkable that after a period of over 200 years of a seeming accommodation within a ritual complex, they decided to effect a break with the past. Instead of using the ritual ground in order to display their newly acquired power by embodying it in the ritual space, and hence to endorse the existing order, the Tamang leaders decided to contest the Durgāpūja's meaning. Apparently, Durgāpūja's powerful symbolism has rendered 'ruling' a play with fire. The new political alternative is to shake at the ritual's very rules.

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