

Jāko: A Newar Family Ceremony

by Gérard Toffin

In Hindu tradition, each stage in the life of an individual is marked by a religious ceremony which is called samskāra, a term that is generally translated by "sacrament"¹. Of these there are twelve main ones; among them, we may mention: "impregnation" (the time at which conception is supposed to have taken place), birth, shaving of the head, initiation, marriage, and funerary rites. These sacraments punctuate the main dates in an individual's life, drive off the dangerous powers which seek to stop him passing on to a new stage and wipe away the pollution contracted at such times². For Hinduism, samskāra have at the same time moral and religious significance: man is born imperfect and each sacrament is a step towards his accession to a moral world. In the texts, it is said that if samskāra are carried out correctly, they lead to liberation (mokṣa), which is the final aim of the Hindu (Pandey, 1943: 27).

Among the samskāra which are celebrated after the birth of a child two are particularly important: the giving of a name, and the solemn absorption of the first solid food. In classical India, the former ceremony (nāmakaraṇa) usually took place ten days after birth, and the second (annaprāsana) six months later (Pandey, 1943: 134 and following). Among the Bāhun (Brahmanes) and Chetri (Kshatriya) of contemporary Nepal, the name-giving (Nep: nvaran) takes place on the eleventh day after birth; and the taking of solid food (pasni) occurs five or six months after the nvaran (Bista, 1971: 14).

At Pyangaon, a Newar village to the south of Kathmandu³, these two samskāra are celebrated during one and the same ceremony which is called in Newari jāko (or jāku)⁴. Traditionally the jāko takes place six months after birth in the case of a girl, seven months after birth in the case of a boy⁵. Saturdays and Mondays are avoided; Wednesdays and Thursdays are the best days for this. These rules are very strictly observed; the religious members of the community (ācāju) are consulted in the matter.

The ceremony at which I was present took place in the house of Nuchelal, situated at the north-west entrance of the village. Before going on to describe the rites, I shall introduce rapidly the actors: Nuchelal, master of the house, is 24 years of age. The house in which he lives today and where the ritual took place was built during the winter of 1970. Previously, he had lived with his second wife Ratna in the house of his father, Nucheman. It was at the birth of his first child, for whom the jāko was to be celebrated today that the couple decided to move house and to set themselves up independently. Nucheman, the father of Nuchelal, belongs to the

patrilineage called wōsi. The thakali⁶ of this patrilineage is Yeleca, the elder brother of Nucheman⁷. We must point out that the wōsi hold a particular position in the village. First of all, their geographical background is different from that of the other four lineages in Pyangaon. The original myth of the community states clearly that all the ancestors of the wōsi came from Malla Kutsa, whereas the four other founding groups of this village came from Pulam Sankhu⁸. These two villages are situated respectively to the south-east and to the south-west of the valley of Kathmandu. Moreover, the wōsi summon a Newar buddhist priest (gubhaju) in order to celebrate their funerary rituals whereas the other patrilineages use, for the same purpose, the service of a Hindu priest (New: barmu). However, the particular position of the wōsi does not correspond to a difference in status: all the lineages intermarry freely and form a group of total commensality.

Another person whose role will be essential throughout the ceremony should also be introduced: this is Dharmeī, the younger daughter of Yeleca (fig. No. 1), who lives in the north-east of the village in a little two-storeyed house. She is aged about 42. Since she divorced eight years ago, Dharmeī is the nāyani⁹ of the group of Yeleca, that is to say, the feminine equivalent of the thakali.

The jāko lasts two days. On Wednesday the 15th of December 1971 (the 13th day of the dark fortnight of the month of Paus) around 8:30 in the evening, Dharmeī goes to the house of Nuchelal. Ratna, the latter's wife, is seated near the fire-place; she holds in her arms her little daughter who is going to be the centre of interest throughout the next two days. Dharmeī makes a rapid offering in front of the child, gives her a ṭikā (New: ṣinā) on the middle of the forehead, and presents to her a brass plate (bvu), in which are deposited five different varieties of vegetables. These varieties are as follows: muśiā (soja; Nep: bhatmās), māi (Phaseolus radiatus; Nep: mās), musu (Lens esculenta; Nep: musuro), ṣimi (phaseolus vulgaris; Nep: simi) and mwośia (Vigna unguiculata; Nep: bodī ?). In addition, the plate contains two other ingredients: small pieces of dried radish (lāisu) and of turmeric (New: halu). Dharmeī symbolically lifts a small amount of each of these foods to the child's mouth; then Ratna makes her absorb a few grains of rice. During the ceremony two other people are present in the room, but do not play any active part: Harimaya, Nucheman's wife, and Nuchelal, the child's father. They are seated in a corner and are smoking a water-pipe. In agreement with Yeleca, the thakali of the lineage, it was decided on the morning of this very day to give the little girl the name of Nuchemaya¹⁰. No ceremony marked the giving of this name.

The next morning, Thursday, 16th of September at 8:30, several people are assembled on the first storey (cheli) (II) of the house of Nuchelal. Ratna, kneeling before the fire-place is cooking food. Her mother, Laxmi, is present in the cheli and helps her

daughter with her household work. In one corner of the room Harimaya, Nucheman's wife, holds in her arms Nuchemaya. Dharmeī is there too; she is busy cutting, folding and sewing leaves, so as to make the ceremonial plates which are called lapte (New). In these lapte, she puts a few grains of rice (New: jā), some salt and a few drops of maize beer (New: thon). She next puts them into a brass plate, goes towards Ratna who is giving the breast to her daughter facing north, and sits down on her heels in front of her daughter. The nāyani, when she has put the plate down at Ratna's feet, touches six times the head, then the chest of the baby with the ring finger of her right hand. After this Ratna presses six times each of her breasts so as to asperge with milk the offering dish (New: bvu). The nāyani then touches six times the breast of Ratna, picks up the bvu and goes and throws out the contents in front of the house. This act is called in Newari chwasā wane¹²; it symbolises the expulsion from the house and from the body of the mother of the evil spirits which can torment the child¹³. Before going back to Nuchelal, Dharmeī washes the plate with water.

Back again in the cheli, Dharmeī prepares a second plate with husked rice, (New: jāki), vermilion (New: śinā), flowers (New: tapho suā) and a few coins. She squats down once more in front of Ratna, puts a ṭikā (Nep.) on the child's forehead, then on her mother's forehead and offers to both a few coins as a pledge of prosperity. She next puts at the feet of Ratna a lapte which she fills with grains of husked rice, vermilion and flowers. Ratna's mother who until now had remained stationary near the fire-place at this moment takes up a dish and repeats exactly the same form of offering in front of her daughter and her grand daughter.

After the pūjā, comes the offerings of presents: this is a critical moment in the ceremony. It takes place in an atmosphere which people try to render solemn. Each in turn comes to offer to the little Nuchemaya, two pieces of clothing: a vest of very light cotton which is called puākalā (New) and a coloured blouse which is called lā (New). The former was ordered from a tailor (Kusle) of Chapagaon by Nuchelal, the child's father; the latter was made in the village itself by Laxmi, the maternal grandmother (ajimā). It is Dharmeī who gives the first present in the name of the patrilineage of the wōsi: she puts the puākalā in the brass plate which served previously for doing the pujā and offers it to the child. Ratna helps her daughter to take the blouse and deposits the present beside her. The grandmother, Laxmi, in the same way gives her a lā; once again, the child must take the piece of clothing. To end this ritual Dharmeī and Ratna put a ṭikā on the forehead of the little girl; then on each other's foreheads; and then on those of all the others present.

The ceremony ends with a meal which is called in Newari samey. It is Ratna, the lady of the house, who is responsible for preparing anything and for serving the guests. Five people are present at the meal and take their places according to strict rules: the ajimā, Laxmi, is to the left of Ratna; the nāyani, Dharmeī, is on her right. All three are seated facing the north and with their back turned to the village street. Facing west, along the railing which marks the top of the staircase are seated two grandsons of Yeleca, the thakali of the patrilineage. This too is the place where I was told to sit. While Laxmi puts in front of each guest a lapte as a plate and a white iron bowl (New: barca), Dharmeī and Laxmi dress the child with the two presents which she has received. First, they put on the puākalā, then the lā. The meal is made up of rice (New: bāji; Nep: ciura), grains of black soja (New haku muśiā) and of maize beer. In theory, as was the case on the previous evening, the nāyani should lift symbolically towards the mouth of the little Nuchemaya a few pieces of flattened rice, of soja and of cooked rice. But the little girl has gone to sleep in her mother's arms and nobody can wake her up. The meal lasts fifteen minutes; at 10 O'clock, the jāko is over and everybody has gone home.

What importance does this ceremony have in the life of an individual? What does it correspond to for a child? Up until now, the new-born baby was an indistinct being without moral responsibility and without obligations. He could be put in contact with untouchables (butchers, for instance) without having to be purified. The baby in theory, could even share food with such people. When they spoke to him, his parents used two terms of address, some vague, some affectionate, such as māca (child) or hirā (diamond). The child had, of course, already a name which he had been given by astrologists (jośi) at the time of his birth in function of the position of the planets and of the sun in the sky, but this name was a jealously guarded secret¹⁴. In many cases, it gets forgotten; the parents themselves do not know it.

The newly-born child has, by and large, no social status. It is the jāko which gives him one or, at least, the first links of one. The giving of the name in the first place consecrates the child's integration into his family and into his lineage. The name, as we have seen, is derived from that of the father or of the grand-father; and the thakali of the patrilineage is consulted on this choice. After the marginal being which he was previously, the child is now recognised as a member of the social group. Henceforth, he will have to observe caste-rules even if they are not yet as strict for him as for a grown-up person.

On the second day of this ceremony, the child is solemnly fed with solid food: rice grains, beans, flattened rice. This meal is basically symbolic; long before this day, the child is given solid food: boiled flour (New: satu) or a sweet cake (New: kwa). However, an effort is made to give full symbolic meaning to this act; for it

is on this occasion that the child passes from a childish food (the food it receives from its mother) to the food of a grown-up person which is prepared and which is socialised. The jāko marks the passage from one state to another; the new clothes that the child receives on this day consecrate and materialise this passage. Before the ceremony took place, the child's death would not have polluted, or almost not, his kinsmen. His funeral would have taken place almost in hiding; only two or three of his close relatives would have been present. His parents would only have been considered impure during a period of four days. If the child had died before its fourth day, his death would not have caused any pollution. After the jāko, things are different: the child will be burnt. The funerary rituals will be celebrated by the whole of his lineage and the presence of a priest will be necessary; his parents will remain impure for five or seven or thirteen days, according to the situation¹⁵.

Several people play an important role in the course of the ceremony. Others, on the other hand, do not play any role. In every case, each person's role is fixed by very strict rules. The jāko throws clear light on the social groups involved; it expresses certain ideas concerning kinship. First, the father is absent throughout the ceremony. I was assured that the same would have been the case if the child had been a male child. The jāko above all, is the business of the women. The only males whose presence is authorised are children. In the second place: no priest or any other religious specialist is called on for this ceremony. All the ritual activity is in the hands of the nāyani. This is not only true of the lineage which we have described in this article; the other village groups behave in a like manner. At Pyangaon, the family ceremonies which constitute rites de passage in the life of an individual (birth, jāko, initiation, marriage) are regulated and celebrated by the two most important people of the lineage: the thakali and the nāyani. Only the funeral ceremonies comport the obligation to call on the services of a priest. In all other cases, the ritual is the exclusive responsibility of the kinsmen.

At Pyangaon the jāko takes the form of a family or a lineage ceremony, which is reduced to its most simple expression. Two groups of kin are represented: on the one side, the thapi, the patrilineal relatives; on the other hand, the sasapi, the wives and their relatives. The members of these two groups are in relationship of "giver" to "taker"; they speak to each other mutually as sasapi and jicāpi (fig. 2). For the child whose jāko is celebrated, these two relations are complementary: from the thapi, he receives his name and his lineage affiliation; from the sasapi, he receives presents, homage, offerings and ritual services. Throughout the different stages of his life cycle, one finds a continuity in the respective roles of these kin. Thus the role played by the maternal grandmother at the time of the jāko is the role which the maternal uncle (pāju) will play later on at the time of initiation¹⁶.

From the point of view of the future of the child, these two kin belong to the same category; they have the same duties and obligations towards Ego.

If the blood relatives and "givers" have complementary functions, these do not have the same hierarchical value. With the first group is associated the vest, puākalā, which is worn next to the skin; with the second, the blouse lā, which is worn over the vest. The former group sit to the right of the child, the second, to the left. It is the nāyani who initiates all the rituals, the sasama only repeats them. For each side of the family, a fixed place is allotted. The system of offerings, the rules of good behaviour, underline the positions of the different groups of kin with regard to the child.

This article is only a first step towards a better understanding of the Newar domestic ceremonies. The remarks and hypotheses which we have put forward here will be examined again in a later work concerning the complete rituals of the life cycle.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. on this subject, RENOUE (L), L'Hindouisme, Paris, 1966, p. 82. For the meaning of the word samskāra, one can also consult PANDEY (R.B.), Hindu samskāra, Benares, 1949. This author puts forward a definition of this word which seems to us to be important: "religious purificatory rites and ceremonies for sanctifying the body, mind and intellect of an individual, so that he may become a full-fledged member of the community" (p. 27).
2. Cf. GONDA (J), Les Religions de l'Inde, Paris, 1962, vol. I, p. 142.
3. My field-work at Pyangaon was divided into two periods: from August, 1971, to April, 1972, and again in August 1973. These two periods of field-work were financed by the RCP 253 (CNRS), the responsible for which, Mr. Corneille Jest, I wish to thank here.

In the text, Newari words are followed by the abbreviation (new), Nepali words by the abbreviation (Nep), and to transliterate, we have used for both languages, the system laid down in TURNER (R.L.), A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language, London, 1931. The spelling of Newari words has been verified in JØRGENSEN (H.), A Dictionary of the classical Newari, Copenhagen, 1936; JOSHI (B.P.), Saṅksipti Nepāl bhāsā śābda-kos, Kathmandu, 2000; and SHARMA (G.P.), Śābda-saṅgraha, Kathmandu, 2022. Place-names and personal names have been anglicised.

4. The word jāko, which seems to derive from jā ("cooked rice"), is more frequently employed at Kathmandu, Patan, and Chapa-gaon than at Pyangaon. In this community, the two expressions most usually employed are: jā nakegu ("cooked rice, to feed") and nā kaygu ("name, to take") which refer to two successive moments of the ceremony.

We should note that the word jāko prefixed by buḍha ("old"), refers to three other samskāra which are celebrated at the time of old age: the first at the age of 77 years, 7 months, 7 days, 7 ghari and 7 palā; the second at the age of 83 years, 4 months, 4 days, 4 ghari and 4 palā; the last at the age of 99 years, 9 months, 9 days, 9 ghari and 9 palā. These three ceremonies mark so many stages towards paradise (swarga); (Nep. and New.) and total bliss. Within the family, a person who receives this type of consecration tends to be considered as a living divinity. On this subject, see NEPALI (G.S.), The Newars, Bombay, 1965, pp. 120-121. Such ceremonies are not celebrated at Pyangaon.

5. This also seems to be true for the Newar of Kathmandu; cf. NEPALI (G.S.), The Newars, p. 99. On the other hand, in classical India: "the even months for boys and odd ones for girls were prescribed" (PANDEY, 1949: 153).
6. Thakali: "adj. eldest" (JØRGENSEN, 1936: 83). Thakali also designates the head of a guthi, of an association or of a lineage.
7. The jyāpu of Pyangaon did not have a particular word to designate what we translate here by patrilineage. Three words or expressions are employed in respect to this: sometimes the word khala (or khalak) which means "family, household" (JØRGENSEN, 1936: 44); sometimes the word phuki which, properly speaking, does not signify a group but rather a relation among the agnatic kin; and lastly, the word guthi, the very wide meaning of which can also be applied to a religious organisation, to the status of a piece of land, as well as to a voluntary association.
8. On the myth of origin of this village and in a general manner, concerning the daily life of this community, see TOFFIN (G.), Pyangaon, une communauté Néwar de la vallée de Kathmandu: La vie matérielle, Paris, 1973.
9. Nāyani comes from nāyo or nāyak which means "chief". It brings to mind the Nepali nāike which is used with the same meaning. NEPALI (G.S.) gives "thakali naki" (1965: 451).

10. Nucheman, Nuchelal, Nuchemaya ... this example shows that, at Pyangaon, names are transmitted from father to son or from father to daughter (another example Yeleca:, Yelemi, Yelcini). The choice of a name is a complex question which over-steps the limits of this article; we do not have enough statistical information to study with precision all the items which are taken into consideration in the choice; however this may be, the case which we are describing here shows clearly that the choice of a name is a family affair.
11. Normally, the cheli is situated on the second floor of the house. In exceptional cases, as in the house of the Nuchelal, it is on the first floor. Another special aspect of Nuchelal's house is that the kitchen is not situated under the roof, as is usually the case, but in the cheli itself.
12. Chwasa wane, literally: "chwasa to go". The chwasa is a particularly impure place in a Newar community; it is here that are thrown away all impure substances or objects: the umbilical cord, the clothing and the bedding of a dead person, etc. Here also are deposited the offerings which are made to evil spirits: bhut and pret (Newari and Nepāli).
13. Before giving the breast to her child, a woman usually presses her breast to make the first drops of milk come out. These drops are often offered to evil spirits. We will return to this question in another article.
14. This astrological name is called in Newari: jośi yagu nā (from jośi: astrologer) or rāsi yagu nā (from rāsi: a sign of the zodiac). Mr. Hikmat Bista tells me that in Nepali this name is called nwaran ko nām.
15. Informants were not at all in agreement with regard to the duration of mourning to be respected. It certainly seems that considerable latitude is left to families in this manner. A few people told me that if the child died after the age of three months it could be incinerated whether or not the parents had celebrated the jāko. We were not able to verify whether this was so or not.
16. Gopāl Singh Nepāli gives a good description of initiation (keita pūjā) among the high Newar castes (1965: 116-119).

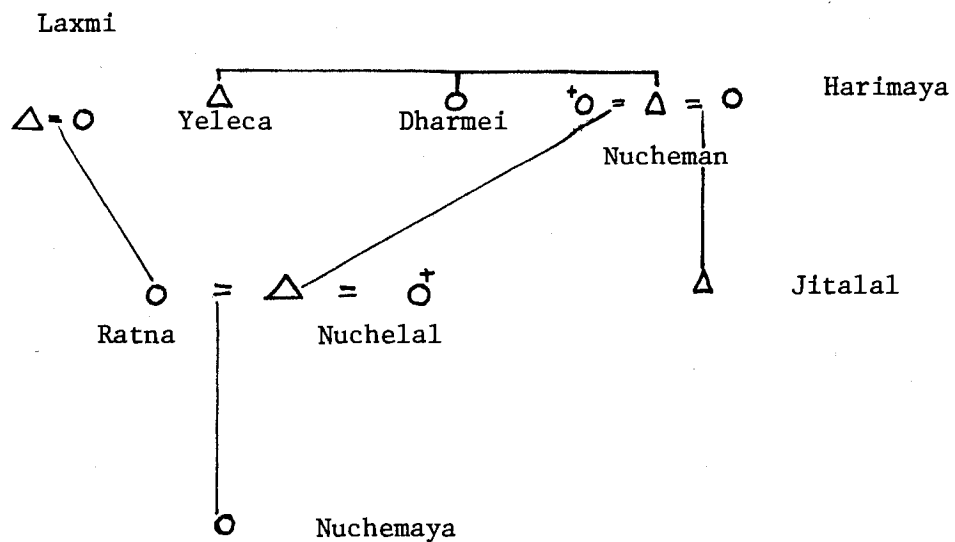


Fig. 1: Nuchelal's relatives.

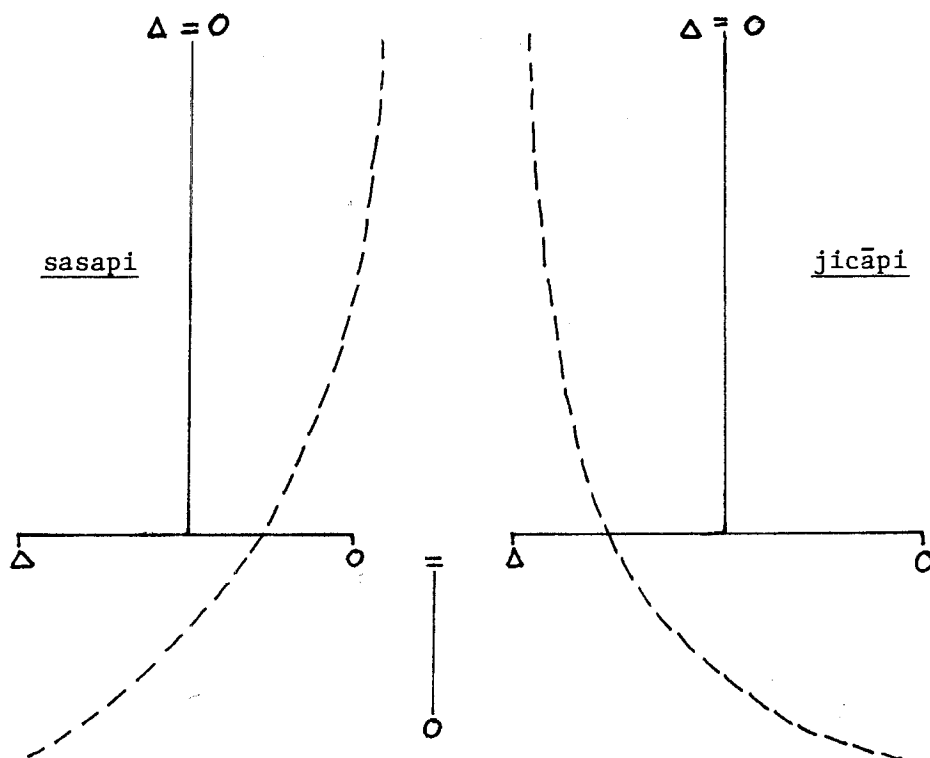


Fig 2: sasapi (givers) and jicāpi (takers).

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