

## REVIEW ARTICLE

## Journeys to the Holy Center. The Study of Pilgrimage in Recent Himalayan Research

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In the last two decades the 'topos' of pilgrimage has been established as a distinct field of scientific inquiry within the humanities and the social sciences. Given both their specific geography and history, the Himalayas constitute a cultural belt that is strongly influenced by the Indian subcontinent in the south and by China and Tibet in the north. In the realm of Himalayan pilgrimage, research in the last two decades has provided a deeper insight into the complexity of this important social phenomenon.

In the following review, the results of selected works will be presented which may serve to highlight from a variety of perspectives some significant

characteristics of Himalayan pilgrimages. First, an overview drawing on several articles and outlining the salient features of Himalayan pilgrimage will establish a preliminary frame of reference. Thereafter, three case studies dealing with urban ritual enactments, with *jhākri*, and with gender politics in the context of a particular pilgrimage will be discussed. It is hoped that these insights may enhance our understanding of the complexity and essential heterogeneity which seem to be characteristic not only of Old and New World Christian<sup>1</sup>, but also of the realm of the Himalayan pilgrimage.

#### **Pilgrimage in the Hindu-Buddhist Interface: an Overview**

In the vast area of culturally and socially heterogeneous South Asia the social phenomenon of pilgrimage has for ages fulfilled a crucial role in the integration of numerous social strata, different ethnic cultures, various cults, several religious traditions, etc. Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage may thus be seen as an ancient institution that extends over an enormous geographical space and sustains a system of mutually-linked sacred places. Accordingly, this system helps not only to bind together diverse peoples but also to connect the multitude of sacred places to be visited which are scattered all over South Asia.<sup>2</sup>

Geographically, Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage networks overlap. The geographical space delimited by the Hindu pilgrimage system extends from the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent to as far north as the Himalayan shrines of Badrinath and Kedarnath and to Mount Kailash, the abode of Lord Shiva. On the other hand, the Tibetan Newar Buddhist pilgrimage system extends as far south as the Nepalese Tarai, the Banaras area, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. This crucial difference is due to the fact that most of the important Buddhist centers of pilgrimage represent sites which are traditionally associated with important episodes in the life of the historical Buddha, at the same time symbolizing the birth of Buddhism.

The fact that a holy site constitutes a distinct segment in the overall pilgrimage system, and is thus culturally as well as spatially linked to holy centers in distant areas, is demonstrated at the temple of Pashupati, situated about 3 km northeast of Kathmandu. For several centuries the priests of Pashupati have come from southern India. Due to this tradition a firm spatial as well as spiritual link between this important place of pilgrimage in Nepal and the south of the Indian subcontinent has been established.<sup>3</sup>

In this case the establishment of a specific link between holy centers clearly seems to be politically motivated. Axel Michaels mentions a document issued by Jagajjaya Malla dated 1734 A.D. According to this, the priests 'must' come from the south of the Vindhya mountains, they 'must' be Dravidian Telingana Brahmans, and they 'must' be married householders. The exact historical date when these Brahmans were invited for the first time to worship at the temple has not been determined yet. There seems to be no doubt, however, concerning the specific reason for the royal prescription.

The case of the sacred complex of Pashupati represents an interesting complementarity between priestly Brahmans who held powers of religious legitimization, and the king who held political powers.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly,

Michaels interprets this prescription as a deliberate royal effort to avoid the establishment of hereditary rites regarding the priesthood of the temple (pp. 42-6). On the other hand, he recalls that, despite its high degree of recognition among Hindu pilgrims the Pashupatinath Temple is not mentioned by most traditional Indian works on pilgrimage. This seems to be due to the 'peculiar and distinctive ritual isolation' of the sacred complex of Pashupati within its immediate surroundings caused by the royal prescription that the temple priests have to come from South India.<sup>5</sup>

As many instances prove, the ancient system of pilgrimage that integrates a wide network of holy places is by no means petrified tradition. On the contrary, it has evolved and it can change in the course of history. The same is true of the diverse ritual enactments performed at a particular sacred center. Both were and still are subject to historical change; in other words they can 'disappear' and 'reappear'.<sup>6</sup> This implies that the development of particular sacred sites as places of pilgrimage and the ritual enactments performed cannot be seen as static.

An illuminating example of the establishment and subsequent change of a regional circumambulation is represented by Burghart's investigation of the circumambulation of Janakpur, a Vaishnavite pilgrimage center in the eastern Tarai of Nepal. The circumambulation was actually 'set in motion' at the end of the eighteenth century by Ramavat ascetics. And at the beginning of this century the ascetics profoundly transformed the established regional circumambulation: a five-day event enacted by celibate ascetics was changed into a fifteen-day event celebrated by ascetics and laypeople alike.

It needs to be especially emphasized that these ascetics assumed the role of innovators who not only introduced the circumambulation of Janakpur but also transformed it again. They, however, believed the circumambulation to have always been there, but that it had disappeared in the Kali Yuga. Thus, they viewed the formation of the pilgrimage festival as an act of restoration rather than a 'new' creation.

The immense spatial networks of pilgrimage routes binding together a multitude of different holy sites constitute sacred geographies. Each sacred locale is imbued with particular sanctity, due to specific natural features. A web of symbolic meanings is composed around these features, which are most often closely related by myths and legends to particular deities. The most comprehensive account of an important center of pilgrimage in Nepal sacred both to Hindus and Buddhists has been published by D.A. Messerschmidt.<sup>7</sup>

The dramatic setting of a high Himalayan shrine, difficult of access and surrounded by certain 'miraculous' supernatural attributes - particularly the natural gas fires, ammonite fossils, and other natural features - constitute the very distinctive character of the famous pilgrimage locale of Muktinath. Of particular importance here is a specific combination of natural characteristics and selected myths that is projected onto this outstanding site. The myths are interpreted by the informed pilgrim according to traditions that legitimate, encourage and necessitate pilgrimage to a sacred locale like Muktinath. Hindus and Buddhists hold true different versions of the mythological origin of the holy center of Muktinath. For Hindus, Muktinath is both a shrine of Vishnu,

Lord of Salvation, and of Lord Brahma, the creator. For Buddhists, Muktinath is a holy site for devotees of Guru Padmasambhava, who is considered the founder of Tibetan Buddhism. Hence, as is often the case within the Himalayan realm, Muktinath's ritual space has to accommodate a diversity of discourses, meanings, and religious practices.

Regarding the pilgrimage route that leads through a sacred geography linking various holy sites, necessary information for the pilgrim is provided orally or by written guides.<sup>8</sup> The pilgrim's movement to various holy places, leading through, across or around sacred landscapes, serves to articulate the very existence of the pilgrimage network. The practice of pilgrimage certainly moves people to experience themselves in relation to others and their deities. Hence, pilgrimage may enhance the ordinary person's awareness of Hindu or Buddhist religious and cultural unity.

What exactly happens to the pilgrim en route to a sacred locale? B. N. Aziz has published a vivid account of Hindu pilgrimage to remote Amarnath cave, focusing on the pilgrims' movement and viewing it as a social process. The pilgrims start their long and arduous journey on foot to Amarnath cave as part of a huge undifferentiated crowd. But already on the first day the participant observer notes that each pilgrim spends the day walking alone through the rugged mountain scenery. A common bond which might unite the diverse pilgrims does not emerge in the course of these four days. On the contrary, the approach to the sacred center is paralleled by a growing dissociation from other pilgrims.

As this case study illustrates, striving for the same goal while making the same way up through the uninhabitable, barren mountain area, and thus suffering from the same hardships, does not necessarily lead to increased feelings of oneness. Each pilgrim seems to be exclusively preoccupied with him or herself in order to approach the divine manifestation in the best mental state possible. Reflecting on this rather unexpected behaviour, Aziz suggests that to the individual pilgrim a pilgrimage represents a deeply 'personal and private experience' (p. 123).

### Special case studies

#### 1. N. Gutschow on local forms of pilgrimage in the context of Bhaktapur's ritual processions.

The urbanologist Niels Gutschow has provided an interesting insight into various forms of local pilgrimage that take place annually within the urban realm of the Kathmandu valley. By directing his central analytical focus on ritual movements in and through the city's spatial realm which follow various processional routes, he explores a specific relationship between ritual and space. Gutschow's work illuminates the complex ordering of urban space through the performance of a multitude of symbolic enactments on the occasion of various festive events in the course of the annual cycle.

Although Hindu and Buddhist religious practices have different sets of sacred identifications in the Kathmandu Valley, the valley as a whole is regarded by both as a sacred space of unique importance. In both cases, rituals

as well as inscriptions testify that the valley is conceptualized as a mandala.<sup>9</sup>

According to this mandala scheme, the sacred space represented either by the whole Valley or by a particular urban space is structured and given its sacred order. The various festivals of the annual cycle play an important role in legitimizing the conception of the Kathmandu Valley as a sacred space. These festivals are held in the form of local pilgrimages. In many cases, local pilgrimages follow in a clockwise passage a circumambulatory route around a sacred center.<sup>10</sup>

Bhaktapur's various ritual processions may serve to illustrate Gutschow's main thesis concerning the ordering of urban space by ritual enactments. Compared to Kathmandu and Patan, Bhaktapur is still related to the larger economic and political networks on a modest scale. Due to these circumstances, Bhaktapur has retained many of the traditional features which have characterized the city for many centuries. The dense, but still stable population consists almost entirely of Hindu Newars. As their processions reveal, the Bhaktapur Newars, notwithstanding their caste and status differences, share a tradition, an identity and a culture.

The city of Bhaktapur is constructed of successive interlocking social units such as household, lineage, neighbourhood, section, and beyond this level, the binary division of upper against lower town. Each of these units is characterized by its own history which governs the enactment of its specific ritual processions. Due to these crucial features, Bhaktapur represents a highly integrated sociocultural system.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the city's geography reveals a number of spatial divisions (cremation procession routes, the circumambulation route, the city's sections and its halves). Many spatial elements of importance are represented by particular stones, shrines, temples, places, areas, roads. It is at those significant sites that ritual enactments are performed thus marking these significant spatial characteristics.

There are different forms of processions and processional routes in Bhaktapur. In the course of the Navadurga celebrations, for instance, performed within the temporal framework of the Dasain Festival, the circumambulation of the whole town is achieved within only two days. All units of the urban community engage in the Navadurga processions and participate in their presence.

In the context of Indra-Jatra, marking the end of the rainy season, similar spatial divisions become manifest. Starting on the day before the full moon, four deities and an elephant representing Indra are carried around the city, following the circumambulation route on seven successive days. Thus, through the Navadurga celebrations as well as through the procession of Indra-Jatra, the heterogenous character of Bhaktapur is made manifest and its sociocultural unity is reaffirmed.

On the first day of Gai-Jatra, the whole population circumambulates the town following the circumambulatory course; thereafter the images of three deities are carried along the same route on the same day (p.57). In contrast to these deities, Bhairava, symbolized by a very small image, circumambulates the city's lower half on the evening of the third day and its upper half on the fourth and last day (pp.57-62). Thus, through the performance of this ritual

procession within the course of four days, thereby publicly marking the division of the procession into two parts, the city's most important units are articulated, and are made apparent to the performers as well as to the audience. At the same time these units are integrated into the sociopolitical whole.

A multitude of significant features are involved in the symbolic enactments of Navadurga processions within the ritual and temporal context of the Dasain festival. For present purposes a brief outline may be useful. In the autumn, the great festival of Dasain or Durga Puja marks the beginning of the harvest. A prominent role in the Navadurga celebrations is ascribed to Taleju. By providing the *mantra* necessary to empower the partial forms of the group of Nine Durgas to resume their manifestations of the Goddess throughout the city, it is Taleju who, by ritually starting the process of symbolic enactments, exerts control over the Navadurga celebrations. Mention must be made here of the fact that Taleju, once the Malla dynasty's lineage goddess, but nowadays still the city's dominant deity, is closely connected with a group of powerful high ranking Brahman Tantric priests.

In the Navadurga processions the bulk of the ceremonial actors are Gatha, a low caste of landless gardeners and day labourers. It is their duty to represent the gods, i.e. to carry their masks as well as to care for them. Moreover, they have to act as musicians and to perform the dances. It is worth mentioning that all male members of the 45 Gatha households have to participate in the ritual enactments according to a rotational principle; even the female head of the Gatha community has to perform some ritual duties in this context in public.<sup>12</sup> Apart from these functions fulfilled by Gatha members, many other castes are tied into the complex whole of the Navadurga celebrations. To name but a few other outstanding roles performed in the framework of this religious celebration: a Jyapu (farmer) priest acts as the Gatha group's adviser concerning mainly the musical aspects of the performances; a Joshi (astrologer) sets the dates of performance according to the lunar calendar; a Purn (painter) makes the masks; the head of the Kumahnaya (potter) provides the clay for making the new masks.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the ritual performances centering on the Navadurga appearances in the context of Dasain necessitate the cooperation of representatives of high, middle, and lower caste groups in order to perform distinct activities. In the course of these highly orchestrated ritual enactments, obviously involving society as a whole, various modes of dramatic interplay - between religious practices, social status, and power relations - are articulated.

The Navadurga, i.e. the powerful Mother-Goddesses, ensure fertility and reproduction for the people of Bhaktapur.<sup>14</sup> In other words, they symbolize the life and well-being of the community as a whole. In the framework of the processions the Mother-Goddesses are represented by masks which are created anew for each festival. When the festival has come to its end, an event signalling the end of the rainy season as well, these masks are cremated. In the following year their ashes are used in the creation of the next generation of masks. Accordingly, the stages of their birth and death seem to reflect the critical phases of the agricultural cycle.

In the city of Bhaktapur, the Navadurga processions constitute the main ritual enactments of the Dasain festival. Over a sequence of eight days the sacred sites of the Mother Goddesses are visited for worship, thereafter the Navadurga take a rest. Then, two months after Dasain, they resume their symbolic enactments for the following six months. In sum, about 19 villages outside the city's territorial realm, though within the confines of the old Malla kingdom of Bhaktapur, and 21 public squares within the urban sphere, have to be visited. These processions through the streets and lanes of almost all of the city's quarters are commonly understood as a massive demonstration of the actual presence of the gods within the community.<sup>15</sup> By taking the chance to welcome them as their guests in their own quarter, or even in their own houses, people have the chance to participate in the power of the divine.

Based upon a detailed and thoroughly grounded description of the diverse rituals held within the realm of Bhaktapur's urban space, Gutschow establishes a useful distinction between two categories of local pilgrimage. Ritual movements through urban space such as those mentioned above are directed to the shrines of the Mother-Goddesses. They evolve in a linear mode by using the most direct way from the starting point to the sacred site which is to be visited (p.63;186). In sum, however, these collective movements within the temporal context of the Navadurga processions, for example, can be considered as 'ambulations' - as opposed to 'circumambulation' - through urban space. Essential to this mode of ritual procession as 'ambulation' is that it contextualizes spatially as well as temporally a fixed set of deities which happen to be localized at diverse sites throughout the city's spatial realm (p.67).

On the other hand, the city's route of circumambulation combines 20 out of the 24 main city squares as well as 7 out of 8 the 'dyochems', i.e. the goddess's house. Thus, it places all important sociopolitical sites as well as all ritual centres in one context. Bhaktapur's route of circumambulation does not lead around the whole of its urban space. More than one third of the whole length of the 4 km long circumambulation route follows the main road of the town, thus remaining within the realm of the urban settlement. Owing to this phenomenon, Bhaktapur's *pradakṣiṇā* does not define its own boundary.

## 2. C. J. Miller on faith-healers in the pilgrimage context

Interesting light has been shed on a still unexplored field within the realm of Himalayan pilgrimage research by C.J. Miller's pioneering 'Investigation of Traditional Healers and their Festivals in Dolakha District'.<sup>16</sup> The central focus of Miller's inquiry deliberately explores the *jhākri*'s role within pilgrimage festivals of regional importance. Not only does the author aim to investigate those roles and functions which set the traditional faith-healer apart from other specialists working in related fields, such as priests and modern doctors; he also seeks to discern what kind of 'professional' organization they may have developed, and to learn about how the ordinary people, their potential clients, view them.

According to the author, the chosen framework of a particular pilgrimage festival can be illuminating "...because these festivals provide *jhākri* and lay

people (both clients and spectators) with opportunities and interaction..."(p.184). For the limited purpose of this review, Miller's observations concerning the symbolic enactments performed by *jhākri* in the pilgrimage context, their relationship with the pilgrims, as well as the specific modes of their interaction, are of special interest. The following will mainly refer to the case study dealing with the pilgrimage to Kalingchok mountain, situated in the north-eastern part of Nepal, on the occasion of Saun Purnima, i.e. the fullmoon of Saun (July-August).

On this auspicious date, about a thousand pilgrims flock together on the remote mountain top of Kalingchok (12,513 ft.). It is a holy site which is regarded by the population of the region as the divine abode of the Mother Goddess Kali. Within an existing regional set of at least seven sacred sites which are associated with diverse forms of the Mother Goddess all being closely related by kinship ties, Kalingchok Mai represents the eldest sister.

Holy sites such as this are regarded as the abode of the local protective deity. The religious performances held there by pilgrims as well as by *jhākri* and priests represent rituals that are meant to pay respect to the local gods (and demons - see G.Toffin) by paying worship to them in order to assure the revered deity's protection of individuals and their family, of kin groups, and of the local as well as of the wider community.<sup>17</sup> In the Himalayas the cult of local gods is practised among adherents of Buddhism as well as of Hinduism. Religious people associate a holy mountain with a double meaning. On the one hand it is considered as the home of a god and/or goddess to be worshiped, usually the tutelary deity of the locality or region. On the other hand, it represents a deity whose power reaches as far as the mountain can be perceived from afar. Very often a holy site in the remote Himalayas combines a mountain with a lake, the latter being regarded as both the representation of a goddess and also of her abode. At such a place god and goddess are imagined to spend their existence in eternal harmony.

The devotees come from the whole region - in the main from Sindhu Palchok and Dolakha District. This pilgrimage is no easy task. Moved by the desire to pay a ceremonial visit to the Mother Goddess, to bring offerings and worship her at her shrine, the pilgrims are willing to undertake a fairly difficult journey on foot in the rainy season.

For the devout pilgrims, on Kalingchok Mountain there are three sites of special veneration and worship. Two different, but distinctively shaped stones situated at the far eastern end of the summit are used for blood sacrifices (one for fowls, the other for young female goats). The third site is a small pond called Bhagawati Kunda. At this pond the majority of devotees usually crowd together during the pilgrimage festival.

The worship of the powerful Mother Goddess is effected by the performance of a set of pious acts. These include the circumambulating of the mountain top clockwise, thereby praising the Goddess aloud; hymns are chanted by men and women in separate singing groups; offerings are made by individuals scattering grains of husked rice (*achetā*), as well as by incense, lights, flowers, and coins.

This multitude of ritual acts, which are meant to assure the worshiper of the goodwill of the revered deity, are performed by individual pilgrims. Among them there is no doubt as to what gifts are suitable to be presented in this context. The offerings made are identical, but the meanings attributed to them may vary individually. Given the varying ideas as to the content of the various gifts and procedures, these pious acts, according to Miller, serve at least the common function of giving a name to the invisible power of the divine contacted at the place of pilgrimage, thereby trying to exert some control over it.<sup>18</sup> The author attributes the laypeople's observed vagueness and variety of ideas to the absence of religious specialists representing an 'institutionalized' religion, whether they be Hindu priests or Buddhist lamas. It is implied that, if these were present on the occasion of this pilgrimage festival, authority would be ascribed to them to impose an official interpretation on the congregation. The latter would include the sacred site, its history and meaning, and the ritual procedures appropriate to the worship of the Mother Goddess to be performed at this site.<sup>19</sup>

Here on the mountaintop of Kalingchok, contact is being made with the venerated deity, with the pilgrims thus participating by their presence in the invisible powers of the divine. On the part of the pilgrims, worship is offered to the visible images of the unseen divine powers, hoping for the Mother Goddess' blessings in return. But although the common illiterate farmer's experience of the flow of his everyday life demonstrates the blessings of health, wealth, progeny, and harmony usually expected in this context, these are constantly threatened by the interference of powers which are beyond his control. A salient feature of this holy site, however, consists of the complete absence of any representative of a formally legitimized and institutionalized religious authority to teach the individual pilgrim the meaning and history of the sacred site and to instruct her or him what to do there. Instead, there is to be encountered only a 'living tradition'. This tradition concerns the observation of the polarity characteristic of the sacred locale in the context of ritual performance: the two stones as the site of blood sacrifice each performed by a 'priest'<sup>20</sup>, and the Bhagawati Kunda as the locus for the other modes of worship described. The *jhākri* present on the occasion of the pilgrimage festival on the mountaintop of Kalingchok act as officiating representatives of this living tradition.

In this particular context, one way of coping with a world which is governed by the invisible powers of mighty gods and goddesses consists of turning 'to a man who claims to see and have power' (p.7). As Miller points out, these popular expectations seem to constitute the precondition for not only accepting, but fully appreciating the *jhākri*'s specific abilities on the part of the congregation. Owing to these circumstances, the remote holy center seems to be an appropriate setting for the *jhākri* to stage his ritual enactments effectively.<sup>21</sup>

On the auspicious day of the festival, the participant observer counts about forty *jhākri* who have gathered at the holy mountain site. Usually the *jhākri*, fully dressed in his characteristic costume and equipped with his paraphernalia, appears accompanied by a considerable following. On the way

up to the sacred site, on the ritual journeys around the mountain top, as well as on his way back home, he is preceded by some male attendants bearing the sacred vessel (*bumba*) and occasionally, when the *jhākri* is busy with other activities, also beating his drum. These drumbeats herald the *jhākri*'s presence and his ritual activity. He is followed by a group of young singers the size of which can vary according to the *jhākri*'s reputation. All members of the *jhākri*'s group seem to be members of one village community (whose social status in everyday life is not mentioned).

At times, the ritual movement of a *jhākri*'s group, backed by his drumbeat and incantations and the singing and praying of his followers, comes to a standstill. Having announced that he is about to beg Kalingchok Mai for power, a controlled up-and-down shaking of his shoulders renders visible his short contact with the invisible forces of the divine. This controlled state of bodily trembling is considered to be the proof of his brief immediate contact with the invisible world and its powers.

It requires the full concentration of his spiritual strength to repeatedly establish this short contact in the course of the pilgrimage festival. Due to these communications he is able to recoup the strength he needs to perform a successful job as a local healer in the year to come. Not unimportantly, though, his strength as a *jhākri* is highly dependent on what the local laypeople think of him. Accordingly, his image as a successful *jhākri* has to be renewed constantly.<sup>22</sup> He tries to establish this positive image by publicly demonstrating his capabilities on festive events of particular importance at a remote sacred locale (as well as at his home).

In this particular context, the relationship between *jhākri* seems to be of little importance. Only a few instances are described, and these clearly demonstrate that there is hardly any interaction between them.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless their relationship seems to be delicate. Miller summarizes it as follows: "...no open hostility, simply an ignoring of one another even when coming face to face or rubbing shoulders in the packed crowd." (p.31)

In the course of the *jhākri*'s symbolic enactments within the framework of the Kalingchok Jatra, the field researcher observes the emergence of a special kind of 'unity in action' among all the pilgrims present (p.21). It is this particular social state, resulting from the pilgrimage process itself, which seems to constitute the salient feature of the whole festival or, at least, of its climax. According to the ethnographer, the great diversity of the congregation assembled - Tamang, Sherpa, Thami, Brahman, Chetri, Newar, Jirel, Damai, Kami, Sarki, and Magar listed in numerical order - is 'united' on the same holy ground. Thus, the pilgrims of diverse castes and ethnic origin, sharing the same spiritual purpose for the short duration of this festival, constitute a 'community'.<sup>24</sup> And it is at the sacred place on top of that remote mountain on this occasion that an interesting reversal of socio-religious roles happens to take place. In normal everyday life the high castes rank on top of the Hindu socio-religious structure, and the mere existence of *jhākri* seems to be a delicate problem. For the short duration of the festival, however, it is the *jhākri* who assumes the 'highest rank' among the pilgrims (p.22).

It is noteworthy, however, that the *jhākri* does not seem to actively

'appropriate' this leading rank within the congregation. On the contrary, it is the heterogenous community of pilgrims who ascribe this prominent role to him. For it is he who can obviously fulfill the mediating role between the realm of the mundane and that of the divine, i.e. between the different pilgrims present and the Mother Goddess who is believed to reside on this mountaintop.

The fact that in this particular framework the heterogenous community of pilgrims assigns the lead role to the *jhākri* is not due solely to his particular spiritual powers. As outlined above, the salient characteristic of this holy site consists in the complete lack of any representative of each of the two institutionalized religions who could be credited with giving authoritative interpretations to the laypeople concerning the history and meaning of the sacred locale. Moreover, to this absence is added the above-mentioned expectations of the pilgrims, associated with their visit to the shrine of the Mother Goddess. In this particular framework, for the pilgrims it seems but a logical outcome to entrust the *jhākri* with the function of communicating with the invisible world of the divine. These religious specialists are not only present; they are also endowed with particular capabilities which may serve to fulfill this special task, as the public display of their strength in this setting clearly seems to prove.

### 3. W. Sax: Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage

In his comprehensive study of a set of local and regional pilgrimages in Garhwal for the worship of the regional protective deity, W. Sax draws attention to several competing religious and secular discourses which are at play within this context. In the case of these regional pilgrimages the conflicting discourses are not the result of a variety of perceptions and understandings 'imported' by pilgrims to a sacred locale; on the contrary they are 'home-grown' and are staged by the regional population concerned.

Viewing the pilgrimage complex as a dynamic social and cultural context, the ethnographer seeks to explore why and how these conflicting discourses are played out in this particular setting. His focus mainly aims at investigating the conflict and articulation of two different, but mutually-linked discourses. One occurs in the course of a pilgrimage procession predominantly between two rival priestly factions and involves several political as well as territorial aspects of regional importance. Quite contrary to Turner's ideal of 'communitas', in the case studies presented factionalism and conflict are inherent characteristics of all the ritual processions observed. Notwithstanding the various instances of more or less serious conflict which arise in this context, ultimately all these pilgrimage processions serve to generate social unity on their respective levels (village, locality, region).

The other type of discourse, one between females and males concerning gender politics, emerges in all the different types of pilgrimage and reflects a structural feature of the society. As Sax sees a complex link between the pilgrimage processions and the politics of gender he presents an explicit and detailed treatment of this crucial aspect of Uttarakhand society. In the present context the analysis of this discourse adds an important, but so far little known

aspect to the realm of pilgrimage research. Hence, in the following a short outline shall be presented concerning the gender problem as mirrored in the context of Nandadevi's pilgrimages.

"The Royal Pilgrimage of the Goddess Shri Nanda is among the longest and most difficult pilgrimages in the world: a three-week, barefoot journey of 164 miles led by a four-horned ram during the foul weather at the end of the rainy season. After traversing rain-swollen rivers, dangerous windswept passes, and terrifying ice fields, pilgrims reach the lake of Rupkund, located at fifteen thousand feet and surrounded by hundreds of human skeletons. Then they cross a narrow vertical spot called 'the Path of Death' and proceed to Homkund, 'the lake of the fire sacrifice' where, according to the faithful, the four-horned ram leaves the procession and finds its way, unaided to the summit of Mount Trishul, which is called 'Kailash' by the local people." (p.161-2) This impressive pilgrimage represents an outstanding mode of worship to the most popular deity of the entire region. For reasons not given, though, the Royal Pilgrimage occurs very rarely.<sup>25</sup>

Nandadevi's periodic processions comprise two other distinct forms of pilgrimage. The annual Small Pilgrimage leads the devotees through an area which is regarded as the home of the deity. And several annual village pilgrimages constitute the third category of processions in honour of the divine regional protectress.

Notwithstanding the marked differences between them, there is a central feature common to all three categories of pilgrimage procession. None of them leads to a sacred site associated with a deity that is to be worshiped in the course of Nandadevi's processions. People regard all three forms as pilgrimages of the goddess, not of the pilgrims (p.57). When the goddess leaves for her ritual journey, she travels as a divine bride in a wedding palanquin to the abode of her husband, Lord Shiva. On these festive occasions the devout pilgrims travel with the deity, in other words they accompany her on her journey.

Nandadevi is regarded as a village daughter married outside the village according to the rules of residence. At the same time she is the popular regional goddess who, being married to Lord Shiva, has to leave her natal home in order to reside at her husband's place. Hence, the ritual journey of the goddess can be seen as the epitome of the married woman's usual lot in that society. Nandadevi is feasted and worshipped during all three forms of ritual procession and then sent back to her husband's place. All ritual journeys are conceived of as 'departures' and 'escortings' of the divine daughter Nanda from her natal place back to that of her husband (p.37). Accordingly, these journeys achieve their significance in relation to the actual movement of human women between their natal homes and their husbands.

As in most of Hindu North India, in Uttarakhand a newly married couple is expected to live in the husband's home. Sons of the family thus remain members of the consanguineal group, whereas daughters become identified with the affinal group and its lineage. Hence, Sax maintains that, due to the strict rule of virilocality, married women have to suffer considerably from various problems.

The male part of the population claims that marriage works as an important social mechanism which brings about a complete substantial and moral transformation of the bride. According to Sax, however, this male conception ignores the reality of social life. It consciously denies any notion of a woman's enduring links to the place and family of her birth. Moreover, the male conception ignores the resulting worries and emotional tensions and the quarrels with her husband on the part of the married woman. Quite contrary to the male's ideologically-charged claim, Lynn Bennett has observed among high-caste women in Nepal that in real life the married woman visits her natal home frequently, thereby maintaining strong emotional and ritual ties.<sup>26</sup> Inspired in this context by Bennet's findings, Sax sees the male conception as a crucial element of a male ideology aiming at keeping control by containing women; virilocal residence is but a logical and powerful means of realizing this goal. In opposition to the male's claim, the author suggests that the woman remains part of her natal place even after marriage (p.98).

In order to lend proof to his hypothesis, Sax focuses upon a detailed study of diverse versions of the religious songs sung in praise of Nandadevi, interpreting them from a woman's point of view.<sup>27</sup> He observes that tensions, quarrels, and open conflicts due to the woman's desire to return to her natal home and the husband's refusal, which in everyday life erupt occasionally, constitute a prominent theme of Nandadevi's songs. Men, however, refuse to accept the validity of these songs. They legitimize their discourse by referring to the fact that Nandadevi's songs are less fixed and more variable than the classical scriptures of Hinduism. Hence, the author concludes that whereas written texts have come to be associated with male, Brahman priests, oral texts seem to be associated with 'lower ranked ritual specialists and women' (p.23).

Moreover, the deity's reluctance to leave her natal place after marriage is not only vividly reflected in her songs. This same theme is dramatically enacted around the climax of the pilgrimage procession when the goddess is about to climb the summit of 'Kailash', her divine husband's abode. The ethnographer describes how her palanquin stops several times and races back down the mountain at great speed. Whenever this happens, all the men gathered drag her palanquin back up the mountainside. The male palanquin bearers have their own interpretation. They insist that they are 'pulled' by the power of the goddess. However, the author comments on this dramatic procedure differently: "Though Nandadevi is reluctant to return to her 'sauryas' [i.e. husband's home], village men force her to do so, while married women look on and weep." (p.59) The author suggests that the pilgrimages help to reproduce social relations of male domination and female subordination. So why do women in Uttarakhand continue to take part in them? As Sax sees it, these pilgrimages offer them a 'partial remedy' for their frustration at being forcibly separated from their natal home. (p.206)

#### **'Plurality of discourses', 'status and communitas'**

Combining the various segments of the Himalayan pilgrimage complex presented, which are drawn from a variety of research perspectives, the unfolding picture reveals an interesting complexity. It is this complexity

which can be regarded as a salient characteristic of the pilgrimage phenomenon. To become meaningful for future research, however, the results of empirical research on Himalayan pilgrimage have to be confronted with recent theoretical discourse on pilgrimage. The evidence collected from the Himalayan field suggests that there can be no doubt as to the validity of Durkheim's claim that ritual events such as pilgrimage festivals serve to maintain the given social order; in many instances, they even reinforce social boundaries and distinctions.

Moreover, the very complexity discovered in the field obviously contradicts Turner's influential, but overly deterministic theoretical model. It now seems appropriate in this context to rethink Turner's purportedly universal categories such as 'communitas', 'structure' and 'anti-structure' by taking into account the very particularity of historically and culturally specific meanings and practices encountered in the field.

The significant heterogeneity of the pilgrimage process within the geographical realm of the Hindu-Buddhist interface can be attributed to the high degree of historical and cultural diversity played out in this particular ritual context. The picture outlined illustrates that the practice of pilgrimage as well as the sacred powers attributed to a particular shrine give shape to varied competing, or often even conflicting discourses among the different sectors of the cultic constituency. Hence, as the late M. Sallnow suggested, one has to expand Turner's work on pilgrimage by showing that pilgrimage is both 'functionally integrative' and 'structurally disintegrative'.<sup>28</sup> In real life the pilgrimage process can constitute an arena for the staging and playing out of conflicts, and also a context in which those conflicts - at least temporarily - can be dissolved. Moreover, Sallnow (p.4) points out that pilgrimage festivals represent one of the means by which the great and little traditions keep in touch with each other, thereby maintaining the unity of the religious system as a whole.

Further research on Himalayan pilgrimage, as I see it, has to take into account the fact that the Himalayas constitute a vast Hindu-Buddhist contact zone. The multitude of diverse caste and ethnic groups inhabiting this area represent the 'cultural pluralism' which is regarded as characteristic not only of Nepal.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the castes and ethnic groups demonstrate a considerable capacity to adapt themselves to changes brought about by influences from the southern as well as the northern civilizations. As B.N. Aziz suggests, this interface between the two great religions constitutes a suitable framework of reference for fruitful research within the realm of Himalayan pilgrimage. It is here that the two great traditions meet, thereby steadily transforming the little traditions. Not surprisingly, this vitality at the interface currently also gives rise to new pilgrimage patterns.<sup>30</sup>

An appropriate understanding of the effects of the rapid process of change on the phenomenon of Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage will be fundamental for further research on this subject. In a global context of the powerful resurgence of a variety of 'revitalization' movements and the emergence of state-centered and ethnic nationalisms, future scientific investigation of Himalayan pilgrimage patterns may open up some new perspectives.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>On this realm see J. Eade/M. J. Sallnow (eds.): *Contesting the Sacred. The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*. London: Routledge 1991. A 'new agenda in pilgrimage studies' is advocated and some new theoretical approaches presented by Eade & Sallnow in their comprehensive introduction. (pp. 1-29). The most recent contribution on pilgrimage, but only comprising papers delivered at a conference at the University of Pittsburgh in May 1981, is the anthology *Sacred Journeys. The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. by A. Morinis. Westport, Ct./London: Greenwood Press 1992.

<sup>2</sup>On the pilgrimage network see A. Bharati: 'Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition.' In: *History of Religions* 3 (1963), pp. 135-167; S.M. Bhardwaj: *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage. A Study in Cultural Geography*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1973; J. J. Preston: 'Sacred Centers and Symbolic Networks in South Asia.' In: *The Mankind Quarterly* 20 (1980), pp. 259-293.

<sup>3</sup>Another interesting example in this context is the case of the chief priest of Badrinath who comes from a Namboodri Brahman family in Kerala. A candidate for this post has to be recommended by the Kerala government to that of Uttar Pradesh to forward his name to the king of Tehri-Garhwal. The latter is the tutelary head of the sacred complex of Badrinath. See D. Kumar: 'The Sacred Complex of Badrinath.' In: M. Jha (ed.): *Social Anthropology of Pilgrimage*. New Delhi: Inter-India 1991, p. 205-216. See p. 210.

<sup>4</sup>On the close connection of political power and religious authority in the context of religious festivals see e. g. R. Burghart: 'Gifts to the Gods: Power, Property & Ceremonial in Nepal.' In: D. Cannadine/S. Price (eds.): *Rituals of Royalty: Power & Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge: C. U. P. 1987, pp. 237-270; P. Ramirez: 'Drama, Devotion and Politics: The Dasain Festival in Argha Kingdom.' In: G. Toffin (ed.): *Nepal. Past and Present*. New Delhi: Sterling 1993, pp. 47-59.

<sup>5</sup>A. Michaels: 'Pilgrimage and Priesthood at the Pasupatinatha Temple of Deopatan (Nepal).' In: H. Bakker (ed.): *The History of Sacred Places in India as Reflected in Traditional Literature. Papers on Pilgrimage in South Asia*. Leiden: E. J. Brill 1990, pp. 131-159; see p. 138.

<sup>6</sup>This process has been analyzed by R. Burghart in: 'The Disappearance and Reappearance of Janakpur.' In: *Kailash* VI (1978), pp. 257-84.

<sup>7</sup>F.-K. Ehrhard also provides valuable information on the Tibetan view of Muktinath in Tibetan Sources of Muktinath: Individual Reports and Normative Guides (in press).

<sup>8</sup>Both traditions have given birth to a distinct genre of literary descriptions of pilgrimage routes and sacred sites. Many scholars have devoted considerable effort in translating and analyzing such texts; see e. g. the *Nepālamāhātmya*, ed. and transl. H. Uebach. München: Fink 1970; K. Dowman: 'A Buddhist Guide to the Power Places of the Kathmandu Valley.' In: *Kailash* 7 (1981), pp. 183-291; A. W. MacDonald: 'A Little Read Guide to the Holy Places in Nepal.' Part 2 (in collaboration with Dvags-po-rin-po-che). In: A. W. Macdonald: *Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar 1987, Vol. I, pp. 100-134.



<sup>9</sup>On the whole valley see M. Slusser: *Nepal Mandala. A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*. Princeton: Princeton U. P. 1982. 2 Vols.; on Bhaktapur, Vol. I, p. 346.

<sup>10</sup>According to D. Gellner, in some cases learned interpretation sees this movement around a sacred center as 'marking out the framework of a mandala'. *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest. Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge U. P. 1992, p. 190.

<sup>11</sup>R. I. Lévy mentions that "...every mature individual is involved in a great number of different culturally defined and validated realities and experiences calling upon and evoking different aspects or even kinds of 'self' as he or she moves from one to another" In: *Mesocosm. Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal*. Delhi: Motilal 1992 (orig. 1990), p. 31.

<sup>12</sup>Gutschow and G. M. Basukala give a closer description in 'The Navadurga of Bhaktapur - Spatial Implications of an Urban Ritual.' In: Gutschow/ A. Michaels (eds.): *Heritage of the Kathmandu Valley*. St. Augustin: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag 1987, pp. 135-66, see p. 139.

<sup>13</sup>The complex process of creating these masks is discussed by J. H. Tailhet: *The Tradition of the Nava Durga in Bhaktapur, Nepal*. In: *Kailash* 6 (1978), pp. 81-98.

<sup>14</sup>On the Navadurga processions and the mother goddesses in Bhaktapur see M. Slusser Vol. I, pp. 344-48; and M. M. Anderson: *The Festivals of Nepal*. Calcutta: Rupa 1988, p. 145.

<sup>15</sup>The existence of 24 funeral routes, however, seems to suggest that the city of Bhaktapur does not consist of 21, but is actually made up of 24 quarters. Gutschow/ Basukala admit that the reason for this disparity remains unsolved (1987: 155).

<sup>16</sup>In his introduction (p. XIII), A. W. Macdonald reminds us that Miller's field research was done at a time when the phenomenon of spirit possession in Nepal was, unlike nowadays, still not widely recognized. Thus, Miller's vivid account based upon participant observation served to demonstrate that, despite the ongoing Hinduization and the rapid expansion of 'modern', i. e. Western medical services throughout the kingdom, this ancient tradition is still very much alive.

<sup>17</sup>On Hindu and Buddhist views of the holy mountains see A. Bharati: 'Actual and Ideal Himalayas: Hindu Views of Mountains.' In: J. F. Fisher (ed.): *Himalayan Anthropology. The Indo-Tibetan Interface*. Mouton: The Hague 1978, pp. 77-82; G. Toffin: 'Dieux du sol et démons dans les religions himalayennes.' In: *Etudes Rurales* No. 107-108 (1987): 85-106; G. Samuel: *Civilized Shamans. Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington/ London: Smithsonian Inst. Press 1993, pp. 182-191.

<sup>18</sup>In this ritual context the act of 'naming' can be considered as a deliberate effort to appropriate some of the divine powers unseen: "Naming it is a method of bringing the unseen somehow into the ambit of visible reality." (p. 17).

<sup>19</sup>According to B. N. Aziz it is due to these particular circumstances, that in its very essence a pilgrimage represents a 'subjective experience': 'Personal

Dimensions of the Sacred Journey: What Pilgrims Say.' In: *Religious Studies* 23 (1987), pp. 247-261, see p. 261.

<sup>20</sup>It is regrettable that these two 'priests' have never been given any closer scrutiny by the author. Due to this there is a complete lack of information as to the tradition they represent in the framework of this pilgrimage festival, to their social and/or ethnic standing, etc. Moreover, there is no indication as to what these stones stand for in local mythology.

<sup>21</sup>Miller observes that in this context the *jhākri* functions in an 'undifferentiated, unhierarchised communitas' (p. 186).

<sup>22</sup>The *jhākri*'s dependence on public opinion is summarized in the following: "He depends on his reputation, built upon cures or at least improvements in his patients' condition, as his validation." (p. 186). For the very few examples of specific performances indicated, see p. 23 and 28.

<sup>23</sup>The central characteristics of *jhakrim*, according to Miller, are the lack of any 'formal organizational unity among themselves' which they see as 'freedom'; and there is 'no fixed hierarchical relationship among masters' (p. 2; 186). The so-called 'magical battles' which among *jhākri* serve as the arena for contest could provide the necessary material to mirror the ways of interaction typical of this sort of religious specialist. But Miller witnessed only one incident which had been provoked by one of the opponents on purpose - who eventually lost (pp. 38-44).

<sup>24</sup>Notwithstanding these findings, the author does not lose hold of the manifold contradictions woven into the pilgrimage process - he also mentions instances of tensions and quarrels (see p. 21, 127-8, 135).

<sup>25</sup>It is remarkable that this pilgrimage occurs both seldom and irregularly. In this century it was held four times only. In 1987 it was witnessed by the ethnographer (p. 161).

<sup>26</sup>See her article 'Maiti-Ghar: The dual role of high caste women in Nepal', p. 126. In: James F. Fisher (ed.), op. cit., pp. 121-140.

<sup>27</sup>Sax discovers a 'thoroughgoing gynocentrism of Nandadevi's songs and rituals' (p. 94).

<sup>28</sup>M. E. Sallnow: *Pilgrims of the Andes. Regional Cults in Cusco*. Washington/London: Smithsonian Institution Press 1987, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup>On this topic see the contributions in J. F. Fisher (ed.) (see fn. 7); as to Nepal see I. & D. Baral: 'Cultural Pluralism in Nepal: Problems and Prospects of its Preservation.' In: G. Toffin (ed.): *The Anthropology of Nepal. From Tradition to Modernity*. Kathmandu: French Cultural Centre 1993, pp. 9-19.

<sup>30</sup>B. N. Aziz: 'Vitality at the Interface: Anthropological Explorations in the Eastern Himalayas.' In: *National Geographic Society Research Reports/ 1975 Projects*, pp. 67-83; on the current process of revitalization in this realm see M. Helffer: 'A Recent Phenomenon: The Emergence of Buddhist Monasteries around the Stupa of Bodnath.' In: G. Toffin (ed.) op. cit., pp. 114-131.