

A NOTE ON THE PHAGUWAA FESTIVAL OF CHITWAN THARU

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1. Aim of Note

The aim of this note is to give a preliminary indication of the Phaguwaa Festival of the Chitwan Tharu as celebrated in March, 1979.¹ How do they celebrate it? When? Where? There is an account of the same festival among the Dang Tharu in Western Nepal by Alexander W. Macdonald (1969), which is a little different from the one among Chitwan Tharu. Although it was his account which stimulated me to write this note, I will not comment here on the difference. I restrict myself to a diachronic description of the festival I observed.

2. Research

This research was conducted on a ten-day field trip in March, 1979, in Surtaanaa Village, Khairahani Gaun Panchayat, Chitwan district of Southern Nepal. In this

1. I am very grateful to Mrs. Irene Joslin, U.S.A., and to David Paterson, in Kathmandu, who both commented on this note and corrected my English. Their assistance made this note possible. I am also indebted to Mr. Ram Sanehi Chaudhari, Kathmandu, for checking the facts and Tharu words.

district, Surtaanaa is one of the biggest villages where only Tharu live. Information for this note was provided largely by my own observations. I used Nepali for communication with Tharu villagers though I have tried to learn their language, Tharu.

As for researches on Chitwan Tharu, there are, so far as I know, only a few works: Dorothy Leal (1972a, 1972b) in linguistics and William M. Leal (1974) in cultural anthropology.

3. On Chitwan Tharu

The words 'Chitwan Tharu' in this note refer to Tharu in the Chitwan district. Chitwan Tharu have a population of 24,718 (13.45%) out of 183,644 in the district, according to the 1971 Nepal census. They call themselves 'Tharu' and call their language 'Tharu'. Their language is an Indo-European language (D. Leal, 1972a).

4. Transcription of Tharu language

According to the Chitwan Tharu phonemic summary (D. Leal, 1972a), Chitwan Tharu has the following phonemes.

Vowels: i e aa[a] a[a] o u.
 Consonants: p ph (aspirated) b bh m mh,
 t th d dh n nh,
 T (retroflexed) Th D Dh,
 c (affricate) ch j jh,
 k kh g gh nG [ŋ] nGh [ŋg]
 w s l lh, r rh, y, h.

In this note, all the native words are Tharu language and are transcribed as indicated above.

5. Reason for the Festival

The *Phaguwaa* Festival (*Phaagu* in Nepali) is also called *Hori* or *Holi*. Though I asked some Tharu villagers about the reason for celebrating the festival, their answers were vague. The only reason I could get was that it was not for gods, nor for the dead, but "for a new year of the Tharus".

6. Dates and Main Activities

First I will list the dates and main activities of the festival as a whole:

<u>1979 March</u>	<u>phases of the moon</u>	<u>main activities</u>
6	8th day of the ---- new moon	drum dancing "
7	9th	"
8	10th	"
9	11th	"
10	12th	"
11	13th	"
12	14th -----	making liquor drum dancing
13	15th (full moon) --	fishing <i>roTi</i> making feasting drinking hut burning drum dancing

14	1st day after the full moon	-- red powder revelry holy baths feasting drinking drum dancing <i>mantar</i> ritual worshipping gods
15	2nd -----	drum dancing

Those activities depend on the lunar calendar.²
 March 13, 14 and 15 each have a name --- *saamati ki din*,
dhuraheri and *chaitwaari*, respectively.

7. Returning Home

Between March 6-12 it became hotter and hotter. The wheat was almost ripe enough to harvest in the fields surrounding the village, but there was still plenty of time to start planting maize and rice, and it seemed to me that the people took it easy. I noticed two houses and a few livestock pens just under construction. A family was digging a well in its yard. All of those things show that they were not yet harvesting.

Although I could see almost no people working in the fields except those pasturing livestock, I often met persons who lived outside Surtaanaa, but whose home village was

2. In the Nepali calendar, March 6 corresponds to Phagun 22, March 13 to Phagun 29, March 14 to Chaitra 1 and so on. But the activities of the festival do not depend on this calendar.

Surtaanaa. The village was busy with people going and coming back to Surtaana for the festival before the 12th of March, for example: schoolboys living in dormitories, in towns such as Birganj or Kathmandu; officers living in towns; or young wives living in villages other than Surtaanaa.

Drum Dancing

Phaguwaa khelaae jaai means 'let's go to play *Phaguwaa*.' In this sense *Phaguwaa* means the drum dancing. It continued daily for ten days³ from March 6-15. In this section I will give a sketch of the drum dancing between March 6 and 13. (A description of the drum dancing on March 14 and 15 follows in sections 19 and 20).

Men danced, beating drums, in the yards of houses and from house to house every evening between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. in the dark. The drum dancing crowd could be divided into three parts:

1. men singers
2. drum dancers - men and boys
3. spectators - men, boys, women and girls

Eight to ten singers were at the center of the crowd, twenty to forty drum dancers around them and finally more than fifty spectators surrounding the dancers. Each drum dancer had a drum in his left hand, and a bamboo stick in

3. One informant told me that usually the drum dancing would start at least one month before the full moon though the beginning of it depends on the dancers. But to my knowledge it started on the eve of the 6th.

his right for beating the drum, which was 40 centimetres in diameter with a skin of leather. Some men had gallon cans or polyethylene water bottles instead of drums. Boys and male infants had wooden sticks for beating each others' sticks; one boy had a puppet which amused the crowd. The drum dancers made a circle surrounding the singers at the center, and moved in an anti-clockwise direction around them, beating drums and dancing.

They played for about 10 minutes in front of each house before moving on to the next house. Spectators followed the dancers but some women watched from in front of their own houses.

I have not yet studied the songs sung during the drum dancing.

9. Making Liquor

Women of each family made *mod* (liquor made from rice) in front of their houses on the morning of March 12. It is an important liquor not only for the *Phaguwaa* Festival but also in everyday life. Since *mod*, offered to guests, indicates respect to guests, almost all families keep it in their houses. Consumption of *mod* became high between March 13 and 15. *Mod* was offered by villagers to each other on those three days. So almost all of the men were drunk with *mod* (and respect!) on those days.

10. Fishing

On March 13 in the morning, villagers went fishing in the river three hundred meters to the south of the

village. They formed fishing teams. A team was composed of two or three households with twenty to forty in a team. Each team was divided into two parts with separate functions: men who bailed water out of a pool which was partitioned with mud from the river and women and children who caught fish and shrimp in the dried-out pool. I saw several such fishing teams at the river that morning. All of the fish and shrimp were for the feast on this and the following days.

The main work in fishing was bailing out water. They chose natural pools in the riverbed as fishing pools or they made pools in the main but slow stream by partitioning it with mud. Fishing pools are around 10 meters long by 20 wide, though the size depended on the number of men in a team. In one team six men engaged in bailing water and in another team, fourteen. The method of bailing was: two men shared a basket, which had four ropes attached to it. Each man pulled two ropes, one in either hand. The men lined up along the small bank of mud which dammed up the stream. I estimated two to three hours to bail out a fishing pool.

After emptying the pool, women and children, who had been waiting around the pool with fish baskets at their waists, rushed to catch the fish and shrimp by hand. They fished from early morning till about 1:00 or 2:00 p.m.

11. Domestic Animals Killed

A castrated goat was killed for the feast in the yard of a house in the afternoon of March 13. It was

divided among six families. I was told that a large white pig was killed in a certain house for sale to villagers for the feast. These were my only observations about animals killed for the feast.

12. Making *roTi*

It was interesting to see many fires in the yards of the houses after dark on the evening of March 13.

Women began to make *roTi* (fried bread made from rice flour) at the same time at around 5:00 p.m. In one family, women made three holes with hoes in the ground outside, the holes being linked with a large hole below ground. These were cooking places for *roTi* only. A large pan was placed on each of the three holes. Rice dough was dropped into the pans and deep fried on the fires. In another family, rich *jimdaar* (head family of the village) women made five or six fireplaces inside their grain-hut. Each fireplace was made with tripod-stones on the ground. Almost all the families, however, made fireplaces outside in their yards. The reason why they fried *roTi* outside, though the kitchens contain cooking places, was to protect the *roTi* from the ritual impurity of the kitchens. It is clear that *roTi* was a special food for the festival.

Children ate some *roTi* as soon as they were fried, but most were kept in bamboo baskets for the following two days. *RoTi* has the following three kinds of shapes:

1. *sel roTi*; doughnut-shaped, 10 centimeters in diameter
2. *cikari roTi*; round and flat, 10 centimeters in diameter

3. *bari*; round and flat, 4 centimeters in diameter, with peas and spices.

RoTi making continued up to 7:00 or 8:00 p.m., namely till the drum dancing began. When the drum dancers came to someone's yard, the women of the family rushed to fill up the cooking holes with earth.

13. Burning a Hut

A straw hut was burned in a grass field, two hundred meters to the south-west of the village, on the eve of the full moon. This was called *saamat leseke*; *saamat* is a straw hut for this event and *leseke* is to burn something. So this day was called *saamat ki din*, that is, day of *saamat*.

The hut was built that evening by those who pasture cattle as their everyday duty. Ideally, the hut was to be built to the west of the village, but actually it was to the south-west because there was no proper land to the west to perform the ceremony of hut burning. The location of the hut is shifted between the east and the west on alternate years.

The hut was round, 3 meters in diameter and 2 meters high. It was covered with many bundles of straw; they were sustained by a hut-framework of maize stalks bound with straw ropes. The hut was merely one room, whose entrance was on the west.

A great number of spectators had already surrounded the hut when a *guro* (priest) and his assistant, who is not a personal assistant for the *guro*, but a servant for the

village, entered the hut at 7:00 p.m. I was pushed to follow the *guro* into the room by Chaudhari, a member of the powerful *jimdaar* family, who was drunk, but kindly wanted me to see the *pujaa* (worship) performed by the *guro* inside. The hut was filled by the four persons in it -- the *guro*, his assistant, Chaudhari and I. We remained in a half-seated position because of the smallness of the hut.

Later events showed that Chaudhari may have urged the *guro* to start the *pujaa*. The *guro*, in a half-seated position, facing east, dug a small hole in the center of the floor with a small hoe. The things which the *guro* and his assistant brought were:

1. a hoe
2. water in an earthen vessel
3. an egg
4. an oil lamp
5. *prasaadi* (offerings) of seven small *roTi*
6. a handful of white rice flour
7. a chick

The *guro* put the water vessel into the hole and put the egg on the ground at the left side of the water vessel. An oil lamp was lit and rested on the water vessel. Seven *prasaadis* were laid in a line from left-to-right between the *guro* and the water vessel and egg. White flour was scattered on the *prasaadis*, and then around the egg and vessel. The *guro* then plucked a few feathers from the chick and poured water on it. The above-mentioned was a series of *pujaa* which I saw, but failed to get any interpretation for, because those villagers whom I asked could not interpret it. I am

sure that the *guro* must know the explanatio but I have not asked him as yet.

Next, the *guro* set fire to a straw-bundle, and urged us to go outside because of the danger when lighting the hut. He brought the burning straw-bundle out of the hut. Many men, waiting for the *guro* at the entrance of the hut, lit their respective straw-bundles from his, then set fire to the hut from all sides, together. The villagers shouted for joy, and the hut caught fire immediately and burned up. The chick ran away from the burning hut. It had been, I heard, sometimes burnt to death before. When it escapes safely the villagers do not catch it, and it becomes wild. The *saamat leseke* was over at 7:20 p.m., and the villagers began to leave for the village. A bright full moon had just come up in the dark sky.

On their way home, the villagers met about thirty to forty drunk men from the village, and the latter started to quarrel with the *guro* and Chaudhari about something. The men, who were the headmen of each family, said: "who ordered the burning of the hut before we arrived? It should have been burnt in front of us, and the drum dance should have been played around the burning hut". The main event of the festival, hut burning, had been performed without the drum dance, and was already finished before they, the family heads and drum dancers, arrived at the hut to participate in it. However, this quarrel calmed down after a few minutes. One villager said to me, "don't worry about the quarrel because all of them are drunk, but actually the event was not satisfactory for lack of the drum dance around the burning hut".

The drum dance started around 7:30 p.m. on this night as well. It continued till late at night. I was told that men continued to drink *mod* (liquor) till the next morning.

14. Red Powder Revelry

Young people doused red powder (*abir*) on each others' heads, everywhere on the roads, in the yards or on verandas of houses roughly between 7:00 and 9:00 on the morning of March 14. The young people who did it were mainly boys and girls, rarely adults, but all the villagers including me, were victims. They would suddenly attack a victim's head with a fistful of the red powder, taken from a sack behind their waists, and spread it on his face. Some children held dark-blue colored water in a tube to pour on others. No passerby could avoid the red powder, and everyone's hair, face and clothes became red. The village was filled with the uproar of young people who doused the others and then ran away. This uproar reached its climax around 8:00 a.m. and calmed down around 9:00 a.m.

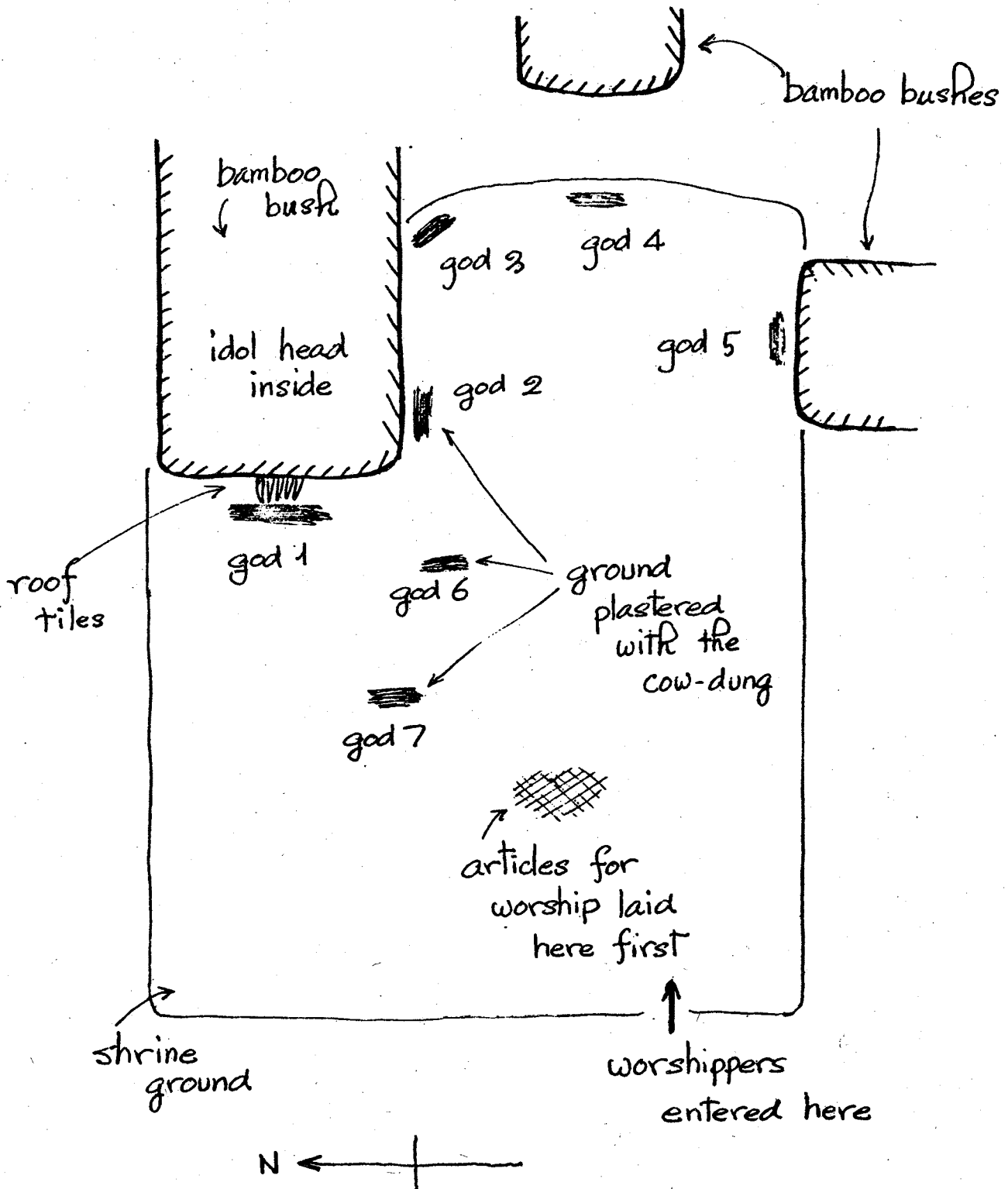
15. Mantar Ritual

All the children were given the *mantar* rituals by *guros* (sorcerer-doctors)⁴ on the morning of March 14. Each family employed a *guro* as a retainer. One *guro* conducted the *mantar* ritual on the verenda of the *jimdaar* house at

4. The *guros* have different roles and statuses. I put 'sorcerer-doctor' in brackets as the meaning of *guro* according to his role in the rituals, though I put 'priest' in the hut burning event of Section 13. As for *guro*, see W.M. Leal (1974), where he discusses in detail the *guro's* role, but does not refer to the difference in roles among *guros*.

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Figure 1 Locations of Gods in the Shrine



8:25 a.m. The *guro* (in his fifties) wound a white thread, on which two *long* (a kind of dried seeds) were tied around each child's neck, after murmuring a prayer and blowing on the thread. The white thread protects children from *bhut-dain-boksi* (spirits-witches) which cause sickness.

On returning home the *guro* was doused with a handful of red powder by a girl.

Gods in the Shrine

While the young people were amusing themselves dousing the red powder on each other, a *guro*, the same person who had conducted the *pujaa* in the hut burning, went to the *Brahmthaan* (village shrine for *Brahmaawaa*) one hundred meters east of the village to worship the village gods. This took place at 8:30 a.m. I heard that a *jimdaar* would go too, but actually no *jimdaar* went. Participants in the worship were a *guro* and his assistant, the same two as in the hut burning. I followed them with a friend of mine, and a boy followed us out of curiosity; however, strictly speaking, the only real participants in the worship were the former two.

Brahm-thaan is a small piece of ground 14 by 11 meters in size with bamboo bushes on the east side. (For diagram, see Figure 1). There is an idol head in a thick bamboo bush in the north-east corner of the shrine, and an entrance to the shrine grounds on the south-west corner. The seven gods in the shrine are:

1. *Brahmaawaa* (god 1, so referred to below in this note) head god to protect and keep the peace in the village

2. *BhatagaiDi* (god 2)
assistant of god 1
3. *ThanagaiDi* (god 3)
assistant of god 1
4. *Parihaar* (god 4)
assistant of god 1
5. *Jogihawaa* (god 5)
destroyer-god if not worshipped, and total abstainer, but hashish smoker
6. *DihacanDi* (god 6)
god for determining house locations, and total abstainer
7. *Jokhin* (god 7)
god for a rich harvest

The above-mentioned gods are listed in the order worshipped.

17. Worship Procedure

The *guro* and his assistant entered the shrine grounds at the south-west corner and put the things for worshipping on the ground in the south-west corner. Those things were:

1. handfuls of cow-dung
2. *guiThaa* (fuel of dried cow-dung rolled round maize stalks)
3. wood shavings, to be put on the fire as incense
4. several small *roTi* for *prasaadi* (offerings)
5. red powder
6. an earthen cup for water and a bamboo stick 10 centimeters long
7. hashish in a little pipe
8. *mod* (liquor) in a bottle
9. a bucket for water

The *guro* lit a fire on a pile of *guiThaa* while the assistant brought water with the bucket from the stream near the shrine. The *guro* washed his hands with the water just brought.

Worship procedures were as follows:

- (1) The *guro* plastered cow-dung 30 centimeters wide on the ground in front of god 1, that is, on the west of the thick bamboo bush as shown in Figure 1. He did the same thing before god 2 to god 7 in turn.
- (2) The *guro* put a piece of smoldering *guiThaa* on the ground just plastered with the cow-dung in front of god 1, and then did so to all the gods in turn.
- (3) Murmuring a prayer in front of god 1, the *guro* put a pinch of wood shavings as incense on the smoldering *guiThaa* and lined up a few *roTi*s in front of the pile of wood shavings and *guiThaa*. He then repeated this in front of each of the other gods (from 2 to 7) in turn. Though the number of *roTi* lined up in front of each god was different, it is too detailed to be listed here.
- (4) While the wood shavings and *roTi* were being arranged, an earthen cup with water, and a bamboo stick placed on the cup, were put in the south corner of the ground plastered with the cow-dung in front of god 1 only. The water in

the cup was for god 1 with which to wash his face, and the bamboo stick to clean his teeth. Meanwhile a piece of hashish in a small pipe was put in front of god 5 only, for him to smoke.

- (5) In front of god 1, there were, from the west side, the ground plastered with the cow-dung, the five roofing tiles which had been left before, and the thick bamboo bush (see Figure 1). The *guro* dotted the red powder on two bamboo stalks in the bush and on to the tiles, and sprinkled it on the ground plastered with the cow-dung. (Therefore, accordingly, on the pile of wood shavings and *guiThaa* and on the *roTis*). He then sprinkled it on each place plastered with the cow-dung in front of gods 2-7, and in the case of god 5, he also dotted it on a bamboo stalk.
- (6) The *guro* poured *mod* and water on the ground plastered with the cow-dung in front of god 1 and prayed with his palms together. He also poured *mod* on each place plastered with the cow-dung in front of gods 2-7, except gods 5 and 6 who are not drinkers. Then he made me drink a draught of *mod*.

The *guro* finished the worship at 9:15 a.m. All the acts of worship mentioned above between (1) and (6) were done by him alone.

18. Holy Baths

Around 10:00 on the morning of March 14, many people took holy baths, in company with friends or children in fives and sixes, in the river to the south of the village.

I had heard that people would go to the river after pouring ash from the burned straw hut on their heads, but the people I saw actually went to the river directly. The villagers washed the red color out of their hair and from their faces, and changed their red colored clothes for clean ones. At that time they washed their bodies as well. Young villagers had the first meal of the day after the holy baths.

19. Drum dancing on March 14

The drums had been sounding now and again since around 6:00 in the morning of March 14. Before noon, I saw a man decorating his drum with long peacock feathers. By around 2:00 in the afternoon all the drums had already been decorated with peacock feathers.

All the drum dancers then began marching in procession, beating drums decorated with peacock feathers. They were headed for the bazaar, a ten-minute walk to the north. At 5:30 they came back to the village, beating drums and dancing. Though smeared with dust and sweat looking tired, they were more enthusiastic than before. They played for a while, surrounded by a lot of spectators in the *jimdaar's* yard, and broke up around 6:00 p.m. so that they could have their evening meals.

Later, they played in the *jimdaar*'s yard between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. in the dark. The drum dancing which had begun at this time on March 6, employed most of the people in the crowd. However, this time, they mimicked the dance of the Indian Tarai. One player danced, beating two bamboo sticks together. Most of the players had such bamboo sticks, and some had cymbals or cylindrical drums different from the previous ones. The spectators, who surrounded the dancers, burst out laughing very often because of the mimicry.

20. On March 15

On the morning of March 15, the people beat the drums decorated with peacock feathers. They would dance, I heard, all day until evening, and that nothing special would be done on that day.

I left the village on the morning of that day.

21. Concluding Remarks

There is no conclusion to this note, because it is merely a diachronic compilation of the visible facts. These visible facts are clues with which to elicit the invisible beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions and social structures. It is my present endeavour to elicit these from the facts compiled here.

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