

The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture, 2005

FROM KIN TO CASTE
THE ROLE OF GUTHIS IN NEWAR
SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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Back cover show Mahesh Chandra Regmi in the audience at the inaugural lecture on 24 April 2003. Photograph by Bikas Rauniar.

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The idea of convergence seems to present no more difficulty to the architect than to the philologist (...). In sociology, on the other hand, practical experience and theoretic study usually are divorced; the sociologist seldom is a statesman or administrator as well. Social changes, therefore, appear to him as automatic processes, like a stream flowing downhill, not as the constant effort of different races with different traditions to overcome the same obstacles. If, instead of keeping anthropology and European history in watertight compartments, we interpreted the one in the light of the other, the convergence of customs would present no difficulty to the mind (...). The result is to bring together those things which are historically unconnected and keep apart those which are closely related.

A.M. Hocart

'The Convergence of Customs', *Folk-lore*, 1923

Acknowledgements

This lecture synthesises my findings from fieldwork undertaken in the Kathmandu Valley since 1970. My work took me to Pyangaon and Theco villages, the old sections of Kathmandu and Lalitpur, Panauti as well as many other places. I worked particularly among Maharjans, Chathariyas, Rajopadhyayas, Shakyas, Citrakars, Manandhars, Putuwars, Balamis, and Paharis. While writing this paper, I often thought of my many friends in these communities, and I am indebted to all the people who welcomed me and answered my endless questions with generosity and patience.

I wish to thank David Phelps (Oxford) for revising my English as I prepared this paper. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Krishna Prasad Rimal, who worked as my research assistant in several occasions and from whose wide experience I learnt a lot.

I am grateful to the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) for having encouraged my research over the years. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of my colleagues at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris, for their support through the years, and its new director, Joëlle Smadja, for funding my trip to Kathmandu to present this lecture.

I WOULD LIKE to express my gratitude to the Social Science Baha for doing me the honour of inviting me to deliver the Third Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture. Given the eminence of my predecessors, this is a more than ordinary privilege for me. The person we are remembering today was a historian who played a major role in the conservation, translation and analyses of Nepali written documents from the nineteenth century onwards. He was mainly interested in economic and social history. In particular, his series of books on the different land tenure systems that once existed in Nepal represents a remarkable achievement. In many ways, the subject I shall be speaking about in the present lecture, *guthis* among the Newars, complements his own historical study of religious endowments. The Newar *guthi*, a social institution that has its own specific characteristics, is not totally unconnected to the religious forms of ownership studied by Mahesh Chandra Regmi. Even if *guthis* in the Newar community can operate without any land, there is a sort of continuity between the two. This is one of the ideas that I intend to develop today.

In Nepal as well as in India and many other countries all over the world, the observance of religious ceremonies and social customs has been ensured through special institutions more or less dependent upon the state. Nepali *guthis*, a word coming from the Sanskrit *gosthi*, meaning an 'association' or an 'assembly', fall into this category. In Nepal, as was demonstrated by the late Mahesh Chandra Regmi, this word designates endowments, mostly in the form of lands, and associations devoted to religious or philanthropic activities. The donors of these might be the king or members of the royal family, as well as private

individuals. Gifts of money and land were made mainly to earn religious merit.

This situation is typical of non-secular states, where the government usually extends financial aid and other forms of patronage to religion. It was the duty of the king to promote religion, to build places of worship, and to bestow on them endowments in the form of money, jewels, and lands. The management of the financial affairs of the temple was a normal part of the administration of the state. In many cases, the ruler himself controlled the form of the ceremonies performed in temple worship.

In Nepal, these religious investments have sometimes been diverted from their original purpose and used for other, essentially secular, functions: maintenance of irrigation channels, payments to military personnel, and provision for major expenses of the royal household, among others. But, on the whole, these types of lands and groupings have played, and still play to a certain extent, an important role in the development of religion and charitable institutions all over the kingdom. Historically, they have been instrumental in the establishment and maintenance of temples and monasteries, Hindu as well as Buddhist, *sattal*/resthouses, bridges and roads, libraries and schools, wells and drinking water fountains, religious festivals of every kind, and the like.

It should be noted that *guthis* are found not only in the Kathmandu Valley and the middle hills of Nepal, but in the Tarai and in the Northern Himalayan regions as well. The oldest are clearly from *Nepalmandala*, that is, from the Kathmandu Valley. Elsewhere in Nepal, *guthis* are not attested before the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹ Of course, the fact that no documents are available for the preceding period does not prove that this system was unknown earlier. In any case, such endowments were a means for the state to protect religion and to guarantee a steady and regular supply of non-alienable funds for various activities. As a matter of fact, *guthi*

1 Regmi (1968, vol. 4: 3). It was only after 1800 that the *guthi* institution gradually proliferated to cover the entire country.

landownership is characterised by permanent possession, a ban on alienation, particularly by a man's heirs, and tax exemption (Regmi 1976: 63). In spite of this irrevocable character, holdings of this sort have often been confiscated by the state for political reasons over the years.

Interestingly, Mahesh Chandra Regmi (1976: 43) stressed that the term *guthi* 'was originally used to denote an association of persons responsible for the management of religious and philanthropic endowments, not the endowments themselves'. It was applied to the lands endowed, rather than the body formed to supervise the functions, 'probably only after the Gorkhali conquest' (Ibid), that is, in a quite recent period. In another place (1968: 21), the same author suggests tracing 'the origin and growth of the *guthi* system as it exists at present in Nepal to the social and religious customs in the Newar community'. The prospect of demonstrating a historical link between the land endowment practices and the *guthi* system of the Newars, a unique feature of this ethnic group within Nepal,² is worth considering. More recently, Prayag Raj Sharma (2004: 64–6, 176–7) has proposed seeing the *guthis* recorded in the Licchavi inscriptions of the Kathmandu Valley as the ancestors of the present Newar *guthi* associations. He suggested an 'unbroken tradition continuing from the Licchavi Period [V–IXth century CE] down to the present'. I will discuss this hypothesis further on.

Newar *guthis* (also called *gu* in Newar) are of very different types. Some, for instance, are compulsory, others purely optional. Even among one category there is wide latitude for variations according to caste or locality. By and large, however, it is possible to distinguish three main types: first, *guthis* set up for the worship of a particular deity or the celebration of a festival; second, funeral associations; and third, terri-

2 Fisher (2001: 134) mentions the existence of *guthis* among the Thakalis of the Upper Gandaki Valley. But among this ethnic group the word *guthi* just designates a lineage's common fund that is administered by a member of the clan, who lends the capital to clan members at a set rate of interest. There is nothing among the Thakalis that resembles the Newar *guthi* associations.

torial segments or ward groups, mainly linked with music, but also in some cases (among craftsmen) with workshops. *Guthis* attached to Buddhist *baha* monasteries can be included in this last group, even if some of their features fall within the first. The first and last categories can be either multi-caste or mono-caste; the second type is always mono-caste. Even though I shall not deal specifically with them here, three other mono-caste *guthis* are also worth mentioning: lineage *guthis* connected with the celebration of a patrilineage deity (*digu dyah guthi*), secret dance societies (*dyah pyakhā*) with a limited male membership that is strictly inherited,³ and various caste associations. Most of these *guthis* are private associations. Only a few of them are recognised by the government and controlled by the Guthi Samsthan, an autonomous body that regulates all lands held under royal *guthi* tenure (*raj guthi*) for taxation purposes and oversees the utilisation of the produce of these endowments. All these *guthi* societies are adapted to an urban environment, and/or to much more complex social structures than are usually found in Nepal, as we shall see later on. They are a feature of all Newars, Hindu as well as Buddhist, and of high caste and 'untouchable' alike.⁴

These associations are of tremendous importance in the traditional society and culture of the Kathmandu Valley.⁵ Basically, they regulate several aspects of Newar social and religious life, and even possess economic functions in some limited cases. They are usually dissociated from kinship units, even if some of them are still anchored in kin groups. It might be contended that *guthis* until very recently were the ideal form of co-operation and social grouping among this people.

3 On these secret dance societies, cf. Toffin (1996). These are separate from all other *guthis*; but, by and large, they can be connected to the first type in charge of particular deities.

4 For funeral *guthis* among the Nay butchers, an impure but 'touchable' caste according to the old Code, see recently Lie (1999: 115).

5 Most of the ethnographers have recognised the importance of *guthi* in Newar society. One curious exception is Robert Levy, who devoted only two pages to this institution in his monumental study of Bhaktapur, *Mesocosm* (1990).

They are vital for the status of an individual, and reinforce in many ways social relations within the community. They also emphasise co-operation in social life, even if dissension and competition often arise between members of the groups. In every Newar locality and caste there is an extensive network of such associations. To take just one example, in the small town of Sankhu, located in the north-east part of the Kathmandu Valley, more than 80 *guthi* associations specialising in a variety of religious activities, exclusive of funeral societies, are in active existence (Shrestha 2002: 161).

It is impossible to consider here in detail all the varieties and aspects of *guthis* among Newars. My intention is merely to put in evidence the main characteristics of such a system and to stress its place within the wider social and cultural space of the indigenous population of the Kathmandu Valley. My purpose is also to offer a more comparative approach, which can explain this institution. This is a point to which little attention has been paid until now, and so I will also comment on Asiatic as well as European parallels. As far as Nepal is concerned, I am interested in examining the links of the Newar *guthi* system with the land tenure of the same name that is widespread in the country and its interactions with Nepalis at large. This is the reason why I shall first discuss *guthis* that bear a closer resemblance to the ones that existed during Licchavi times or that currently continue to operate in the hill districts: that is, the multi-caste *guthis* for the cult of tutelary deities.

Multi-caste *guthis* for the cult of tutelary deities

The little Malla kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley were based symbolically on Tantric religious concepts and were intimately associated with numerous deities. In particular, the capitals of these town-based Hindu–Buddhist kingdoms were centred on the royal palace (*layku*) and on protective divinities, in a similar manner to that found in many other little kingdoms of South Asia. Politics and religion were interconnected. The sovereignty of the king was expressed in ritual and religious terms. It corresponds to the ‘mystical nature of the kingship’ stressed by the British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard in his 1948

Frazer lecture.⁶ Kingship was clearly a governmental activity as well as a ritual office. In this model, the role of goddesses related to royalty was central. Taleju, Kumari, Tripurasundari, and other Asta Matrikas (eight goddesses) and Ajimas (mother-goddesses) were and still are among these protectress deities. All these goddesses, imported from India, were used to legitimise the power of the king.

It has often been forgotten that the cult of these tutelary deities was, and still is, organised through complex multi-caste *guthis* that play a crucial role in the kingdom.⁷ In Kathmandu, for instance, the Taleju and Kumari *guthi* of the city is responsible not only for the daily cult of these two sovereign deities that are central for the king's power, but also for their various *parba* (festivals), *Indra Jatra* and *Mvahni* (the Newar name of the *Dasain* festival), for instance. The *guthi* includes 12 or so representatives of the Newar castes (*jat*), such as Maharjan, Khadgi, Karmacharya, Rajopadhyaya, and even some Parbatiyas. It owns some holdings, and is funded mainly by the Guthi Samsthan. Membership is normally inherited within the family, from father to son.

This kind of association of people is remarkable for its multi-caste composition.⁸ It reflects the traditional social order of the city, from the purest caste at the top of the hierarchy to the most impure one in the lowest rank. It is a concentrate of the whole of Newar society, and it is focused on the king and his personal deity. This couple, divine and human, located spatially in the centre of the city, at least symbolically, signify the pillar of the society around which all castes revolve. The king was held responsible for the well-being of the kingdom, an idea which has not totally disappeared today. Significantly, the members of this city-wide *guthi* are less often called *guthiyar* than *rakami*, a word

6 Evans-Pritchard 1962 (1948).

7 I make an honourable exception of Anne Vergati (1995: 106-10), who recognised this fact.

8 Other multi-caste *guthis*, of a private nature, also operate within Newar settlements. They are set up to play religious music or worship a specific local deity. These associations are voluntary. Lewis (1995: 51) has described a Buddhist multi-caste *guthi* in Kathmandu that is responsible for orchestrating the *Samyak* ceremony, held once every twelve years.

derived from Persian, referring to the obligations of one person or one group towards the royal palace or an institution. These members are, in many ways, the servants of the goddess, and are paid in cash or in food by the Guthi Samsthan.

In other words, the local caste hierarchy is directly related to the king and to the royally patronised divinities of the late Malla Period. Within the caste system, the prevailing hierarchy is established with special reference to the role played by the individual in the service of Taleju, the town's main political divinity and the family goddess of the ruler, who is said to have hailed from the former kingdom of Tirhut in North India. Taleju is not only the king's ally but also the source of his military power. Tantric and Brahmanic priests, astrologers, store-keepers, farmers (for cooking), gardeners (for the flowers), butchers (for the sacrifice), washermen, musicians, fishermen and sweepers⁹ (for sweeping as well as for carrying out capital punishments), and so forth are all included and mobilised in her cult and in the *guthi* set up for the performance of her rites. The Taleju goddess constitutes one divine focus of the politico-ritual life of these kingdoms. The social order as a whole was (and still is today) determined, to no small degree, by men's and women's roles in the service and worship of the royal deity. The fulfilment of these ritual duties is as important as the religious obligations performed by the different *jats* toward the local dominant caste, whether Jyapu, Shakya/Udas or Shrestha. As I showed elsewhere (Toffin 1984), this model is much more reminiscent of the theory of the caste system developed by Arthur Maurice Hocart, the British scholar of the early decades of the twentieth century, who focuses on the pivotal role of the king, than the ideas of Louis Dumont, the French anthropologist, who centred his theory more on the pure/impure opposition than on kingship. Obviously, the Newar caste system appears here as an elaborate religious division of labour.

This kind of centrality in the role of the *guthi* responsible for serving the main protective deity of the locality is by no means peculiar to

9 The Poda (Dyahla) are the traditional fishermen and sweepers of the Newars.

the present capital of Nepal. The same centrality can also be credited to the *guthi* of the Taleju goddess in Bhaktapur, which also includes representatives of the different castes of the city (Vergati 1995). The mediaeval Malla kings established all the rules of the *guthi* that is in charge of the service of this goddess in Bhaktapur, one of the former capitals of the Kathmandu Valley. Taleju also existed in Lalitpur, but, in this predominantly Buddhist city, the royal goddess is supplanted and outdone in importance by Matsyendranath, one of the most syncretistic gods of Nepal: this deity is considered to be Karunamaya-Avalokiteshvara by the Buddhist Newars, and a Natha ascetic and teacher of Gorakhnath by the Hindus. During the Malla Period, Mastyendranath was related to the throne in a very powerful manner. The Mastyendranath *guthi* funds all the ceremonies of this god, in whose Thaha Baha temple a branch office of the Guthi Samsthan is currently housed, and the main events of his two-month-long festival (to consider only the chariot procession) lasting from April to June. It can even be said that the religious life of the Newar farmer villages scattered all around Lalitpur District, which formerly formed part of the Lalitpur kingdom, is in great part focused on this god through various private *guthis*. A recent study of Sankhu also shows that nearly half the *guthis* of this small Newar town are directly or indirectly linked to the Vajrayogini deity (Shrestha 2002). This Tantric goddess plays a supreme role in the local social-religious life. The state, through the Guthi Samsthan, also finances a great part of her cult. It is thus not totally incorrect to see the Guthi Samsthan as a conservative instrument of the old hierarchical system, as modern commentators and activists insist on doing, an institution that it would be essential to reform should any transformation of the society be considered necessary.

Such a symbolic organisation of the city, and the active part played by the *guthis* in it, has a sacrificial and sacramental nature. In the greatest public festivals, such as *Mvahani*, which is associated with the royal palace and possesses strong kingly aspects, the whole body of the sacrificial animal (usually a buffalo) offered to the gods is divided and distributed among those with specified roles in the Taleju

and Asta Matrikas ritual, in a way that reflects the caste hierarchy. Thus, the Brahman and the purely Tantric Karmacharya priests each receive a thigh, whereas the tail, entrails and hooves go to the Khadgi butcher (Toffin 1981: 73). In Panauti, where I undertook a monographic study in the 1980s, this sacrifice and ritual division is financed by a multi-caste *guthi* operated by the Guthi Samsthan. Provision of *puja* materials and payment of ritual specialists, even at a minimal cost, is assured by this Corporation.

These forms of multi-caste associations uniting their efforts across caste boundaries were crucial for the religious cohesion of the little kingdoms of the Nepal Valley, and are still important today in many contexts. They do not differ structurally and functionally from the *guthi* organisations described elsewhere in Nepal. Let us for instance take the still-operational *guthi* associations that were funded in areas within the former *caubisi* kingdoms of Central Nepal, described by Marc Gaborieau (1977) and Philippe Ramirez (2000a: 99–100; 2000b). Their main functions are to finance the greatest annual festivals and to co-ordinate the duties of the various Parbatiya (or Parbate) Hindu castes towards the divinities. All participants, from priests at the top to the lower castes who perform menial functions, are represented and participate in the rituals under the control of the local dominant caste. The *Dasain* festival in homage to the goddesses in particular is still today a pre-eminent representation of the caste system and of the asymmetrical relationships between the ruler and his subjects. As among the Newars, the system is headed by a representative of the authorities at the local level. In this case, too, we are tempted to see, with Hocart, the origin of the state organisation in the co-ordination of such elaborate rituals, which man establishes to ensure prosperity and harmony.

Death associations

Funeral *guthis* are a distinctive feature of the Newars. These mutual associations, in which the members lend assistance to each other for the cremation of *guthi* members, do not exist among Parbatiya Hindu castes or other Tibeto-Burmese ethnic groups of Nepal. We are entering here a new social world, totally different from the multi-caste

associations discussed earlier, an inner Newar world where caste relationships are almost irrelevant and where society operates through other specific rules. One most important difference is that this type of grouping rests on the principle of equality among all members, tempered only by respect for seniority. As a matter of fact, the opposition within such groups between the juniors, *kvokali*, and the elders, *thakali*, is a pervasive one and a fundamental principle of internal hierarchy. Traditionally, *thakali* seniors are much revered in Newar society. They wear a distinct white turban on the head, a mark of chieftainship all over Nepal, and are held in respect. They are even deified or equated with gods through special honorific ceremonies. One other noticeable difference with the previous type of association is that death *guthis* usually lack land endowments. They very rarely have bank deposits or receive rents from buildings. All members, called *guthiyar*, have to make an annual or bi-annually contribution to meet the running expenses. The management of the association is the responsibility of a specified member or members and this revolves each year. The rotation of the responsibility for organising feasts and rituals reinforces the ties of solidarity and dependence within the group. These regulations are an expression of the intra-caste solidarity and unity among the Newars.

Death *guthis*, called *si guthis* and/or *sanah guthis*¹⁰ in Newar, are socio-religious organisations of people of the same caste and more frequently of people belonging to the same locality. Traditionally, these associations, which are the most important *guthis* in Newar society, are compulsory: all heads of households (*thakali*) are obliged to belong to a funeral group in order to claim full status within Newar society. The rest of their families will then be automatically granted the services of the *guthi*. Membership is hereditary: it passes from father to son. It thus appears to be impossible for a person to change *guthis*. In practice, however, this obstacle may be overcome when a change of residence takes place or a dispute happens within the group. To become accepted into a new group, the newcomer has to pay a high

10 Most probably from Sanskrit *snana*, ritual bath.

fee. In many cases, this is a strong financial deterrent to changing membership of a *guthi*. A new affiliation is also sought, often successfully, if one marries a woman from a different caste. Shifting from one death society to another is more frequent in cities than in villages. Consequently, a close correspondence exists in rural areas between kin units and *si guthi*. Yet, when a division occurs within a patrilineage, the split kin groups often attach themselves to different funeral groups. This is the reason why marriage within funeral associations is permitted, as long as it falls outside lineage (*kavā or phuki*) relationships.

The main function of death associations is to dispose off dead bodies at the cremation ground when a death occurs in the house of one of the *guthiyars*. Members express mutual support. They carry the corpse up to the river and participate in the funeral procession. Along with the main mourner, *guthiyars* perform the last rites and pay their final respects to the dead person. Some of them will be in charge of cremating the corpse. Very often this obligation is rotated annually among the *guthi*'s members. A few days later, all the *guthi*'s members will convey their condolences, *bicha vanegu*, to the bereaved family. Normally, the group possesses a shroud, called *devā* in Newar, which is stored during normal times in the house of the head of the group, and is draped on the corpse for some period of time before the cremation.

But funeral associations have important social functions as well. Each *si guthi* has its senior members and an organising committee, who police social regulations within the community and act as a vehicle for moral values. Fines are levied if a member fails to pay his annual fees, or fails to fulfil his functions. The ultimate penalty is exclusion from the *guthi*, a sanction that is exercised when a member marries a woman from a lower caste or cohabits with an 'untouchable' woman. This exclusion (New.: *pi cuegu*) is equivalent to excommunication from the caste. A person afflicted with leprosy will also be barred from the association.

Death ceremonies involve the participation of many ritual specialists—barbers, musicians, various priests, and the like. *Padmagiri*'s chronicle records that representatives of the 'thirty-six castes', i.e., all

the castes of the hierarchy, should accompany the corpse of the king to the cremation ground (Hasrat 1971). Today, high-caste Hindu funerals come closest to imitating this maximal elaboration of specialist roles at death. In the numerous villages dominated by Maharjan agriculturists, the farmers themselves act as patrons. They call on the service of ritual specialists situated at lower ranks in the caste hierarchy—barbers, butchers, gardeners, and so on. Whatever the offices performed, these specialists are paid by the dead person's household. Significantly, the death *guthi* as a unit employs no ritual specialists from other castes. Everything is kept within the local caste group. Likewise, *guthi* funds are not used to pay for funeral expenses (except for the wood for cremation, the provision of which in the past was part of the responsibility of the death association), which must be borne by the household. The *guthiyars* are present to help and demonstrate their solidarity.

Each *si guthi* celebrates its own annual feast. In the past, some of them met twice a year, but this is no longer the case today. These feasts are held over two or three days, and include numerous meals. Buffaloes are sacrificed and their meat is eaten by the *guthiyars*. All the members must participate in the gathering. Fines are levied on *guthiyars* who are absent. Annual fees are collected, and the accounts of the association examined. The *guthi's* patron god, in most cases Bhairav (Bhailadyah in Newar), is worshipped by all the members and transferred to the house of the following year's presiding office-holder. In some cases, however, this god is stored year after year in the house of the *thakali* of the group. Among Maharjan farmers, these feasts are held in special buildings, *guthi chen*, belonging to the association. Very often, a straw hut is erected temporarily. In other cases, thatched screens are placed around the feasting place to keep the event private.

Death *guthi* feasts take place in a sacramental atmosphere that is reminiscent of the cult of the tutelary deities operated by the multi-caste *guthis* examined just now. This is particularly the case with the *si ka bhvay* (or *mu bhvay*), a special feast that takes place at the end of the festivities, usually in the late evening. It is restricted to the eight eldest male members of the association, called collectively the *thakali*.

During the ceremonial feast, the head of the sacrificed animal is shared among these eight persons according to seniority, and eaten along with beaten rice (*baji*) and beer (*thvan*). The oldest is entitled to the right eye of the animal. The tongue, which is considered to be the finest and most honorific piece, is handed to the incoming presiding member to oblige him to conduct his period of office competently and successfully during the coming year. Women are totally excluded from these rituals. As a matter of fact, *si guthis* are organised on the basis of a far-reaching segregation of the sexes in social activities.

Death associations are permeated with Hindu (and sometimes Buddhist) concepts: the impurity of the corpse, the passage of the dead person from the state of a dangerous *preta* ('hungry ghost') to the condition of a benevolent ancestor, *pitri*, a general sense of caste hierarchy and a deep concern with pollution. All these are purely Indic notions that have been adopted by Newars in the course of history. Nevertheless, other Hindu groups or castes in Nepal did not feel the need to form death associations. Therefore, the establishment of funeral associations cannot be explained simply by religious or cultural factors. Social features must be preponderant. I have no explanation to offer for the singularity of the phenomenon, but I would like to suggest one hypothesis that has something to do with the character of kinship units among the Newars. This population does not have clans like the Gurung or Tamang ethnic groups, and its patrilineages are characterised by their shallowness, except among the high Hindu castes. By and large, kinship genealogical links between agnates are usually forgotten as soon the fourth or the fifth generation is reached. Therefore, the dead lose their social identity in a quite rapid manner. A split in the lineage often marks the appearance of two different social and ritual groupings. Consequently, marriage alliances are contracted at a close degree of relatedness between relatives. We can thus conjecture that death *guthi*, in the absence of corporate and deep lineages or clans, satisfy the need to have large groupings to promote solidarity with local communities.

What I am suggesting is that the process of Sanskritisation evoked by P.R. Sharma to link the present Newar social organisation with the

ancient Licchavi Period cannot explain entirely how the society of the indigenous people of the Kathmandu Valley has been formed. Canonical Hindu ideas have also clearly undergone a process of progressive indigenisation before their final assimilation. They have been recast into an autochthonous, most probably a tribal, social environment. The *si guthi* system has to be seen in this light, as the conjunction of Hindu ideas and an older social order. Like many other populations of Nepal, the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley lay in a frontier zone between Tibeto-Burmese and Indic peoples and cultures. I must admit that it is difficult to reconstruct such an ancient social organisation and to elucidate the historical and sociological constraints that produced it. It is also quite problematic to isolate such a hypothetical system from other elements with which it may have become mixed up in the course of history. In Nepal especially, the Parbatiya (hill) Hindus have lived in close contact with the Tibeto-Burmese groups for a long time. Mutual interactions and intimate relationships between the two took place over the course of centuries. As a matter of fact, the tribe/caste dichotomy belongs merely to the realm of ideal-typical types, and has to be handled with caution. But a comparative study clearly shows that this older indigenous system of *si guthi* accords greater value to soil than to blood relationships and focuses more on death than on marriage, by contrast with the North Indian rule followed by the Parbatiyas (Toffin, 1984). To be exact, *guthi* rituals and gatherings place their emphasis on locality and on death.¹¹

***Guthis* attached to territorial segments**

It is now time to take a closer look at the links between *guthi* and territory. In an article published in 1956, the late Christopher von Fürer-Haimendorf drew attention to the social organisation of the Manandhar caste (Newar: *Saymi*), i.e., the Newar oil-pressers. Interestingly, Manandhars of the old Kathmandu city were traditionally divided

11 'Uray (Buddhist trader caste) traditions are intricately organised around death' (Lewis 1995: 56). See also Bert van den Hoek and B. G. Shrestha (1992).

among nine social units, each centred at one locality. The saying *Gungu twalay Nhay sa Saymi*, 'Seven hundred Saymis in nine quarters, *tol*', is still remembered today in Kathmandu. The nine ancestral localities were: Nhu Sah (Jhochan), Dai Sah (Gwa Simuga Galli), Phalcha and Kotha Sah, Chasanda (Maruhity and Bautahiti), Thahiti, Tau-Lami (Tau Lachi), Layku Sah, Pukhudyā (Pako Poka), and Wotu. In most cases, the name refers to a specific locality. Some of these are known to be more recent offshoots from the oldest ones.¹² These spatial units, called *sah* in Newar, were the fundamental elements of their social organisation. They were divided among lineages descended from one male ancestor. These *sah* territorial segments were each headed by a *thakali*, i.e., its oldest male member, for all honorific and ceremonial purposes, and by a *kaji* for all practical matters. Manandhars who left the Valley could remain members of their *sah* territorial segments provided they returned periodically to Kathmandu to participate in the main feasts.

The households of these '700 oil-pressers' taken together formed a local caste-council, called Shingu Guthi, which held a feast every year in Svayambhu, five days after the full moon of the month of Phagun (February–March), *Phagu Punhi*. The seven groups each contributed a certain type of food or service for this communal feast. Thahiti, for instance, made rice-beer available, Wotu provided beaten rice, Nhu Sah was responsible for the purchase and the cutting up of the meat, and so on. A Buddhist Vajracharya priest was called to make offerings to the gods. This communal *guthi* was entitled to expel Manandhars guilty of inter-caste marriage. As is well known, the joint preparation and consumption of meals preceded by an act of worship is one of the principal means of enforcing the solidarity of a social group among the Newars.

The nine localities were also centred in the neighbourhood of one of several collectively owned oil-press workshops, similarly called

¹² It is said that originally there were only seven of these units, each corresponding to one oil-press. I myself conducted a survey with Krishna Prasad Rimal on this subject during the early 1980s.

*sah*¹³ or *chikā sah* in Newar. These workshops each consisted of 24 members, each taking on the duty of the oil-presser for 24 hours, turn by turn. They were organised through the *guthi* system, and were called *guthi sa* or *manka guthi*. The twenty-four *guthiyars* were regular participants in feasts, *guthi bhvay*. The Layku Sah, for instance, meet seven times a year, on religious dates such as *Mvahni*, *Magh Punhi*, *Ram Navami*, *Sithi Nakha*, *Gathamuga*, and the like. Each of these *sah* have some duties during the important festivals of Kathmandu – for instance, the erection of ceremonial poles (*yamsi* during *Indra Jatra*, *chir* during the full moon of Phagun) and the making of ropes to pull the god's carts. They also have to supply food and oil to the gods and the festival organising committee. Every month, they provide a bamboo container filled with oil for the royal goddess Taleju. This complex and highly constrained system has today entirely disappeared owing to internal quarrels and the appearance, in the 1970s, of individually owned *sah* workshops replacing the old collective ones.

The social organisation of the Maharjan (or Jyapu) farmers of Kathmandu also expresses the crucial role of territorial bonds among the Newars. As I documented in an earlier study (Toffin 1994), this local caste group is divided among 32 named quarters, *tvah* in Newar, which are distributed among the three traditional parts of the historic city: the upper town, *Thane*; the middle town, *Dathu*, around the palace; and the lower town, *Kvahne*. It seems that this old division was linked in the past to the military defence of the town. As a matter of fact, during the mediaeval period, the Maharjans were enrolled in the military forces of the town and were attached to the main gates of the city, which they had to defend.

These thirty-two units, called *twah guthi*, 'the association of the quarter', in Newar, correspond to distinct Maharjan social groupings consisting of the farmers of the neighbourhood. Each association has a common territory and common protective gods. Their male

13 *Sah* is probably a corruption of Sanskrit *sala*, shed, house, workshop. Cf. Sharma (2004: 65).

members, *guthiyar*, are all designated by the same name, derived from the name of the corresponding quarter. They have their own identity and must marry outside their group. Interestingly, they all worship the same local indigenous god of music, Nasadyah, a form of Shiva (Nritinath). The cult of this deity is a pivotal one in the grouping, and reinforces the unity of its members. An altar of Nasadyah is found in each of the 32 quarters. It is often considered the *kuldyah* or *agā dyah*, the lineage and secret deity of the quarter and the association.

Moreover, all *guthi* members participate in a musical group based on an apprenticeship in the playing of a special cylindrical drum, exclusive to the Newars, the *dhimay*, and the playing of this membranophone during religious ceremonies. All the male members in the neighbourhood must belong to this association, called the *dhimay guthi*. The *dhimay* drum is considered a sacred instrument, and women are debarred from touching it. It is even considered an embodiment of the Nasadyah god. Affiliation to the association is hereditary, and follows the agnatic line. A man never has the opportunity to change *tvah* during his lifetime, and will remain attached to his local *guthi* even if he moves to the suburbs of Kathmandu. Today, some of these territorial segments have disappeared, and some others have split. But the overall structure remains active and functions on the same musical and religious lines as before.

These territorial associations also exist among the Newar farmers of Lalitpur. In this locality, the Maharjans are divided traditionally among 44 quarters, *tvah*, out of which 40 are still operating today. Each possesses a shrine devoted to Nasadyah and another one dedicated to Ganedyah (Ganesh). But in Lalitpur, the territorial segments, locally known by the name of *manka guthi* (from *manka*: 'common'), are connected to the *dhimay* drum in a more loose manner than in Kathmandu, and do not form an exogamous group. The members of the same *guthi* can marry among themselves if they are not able to trace consanguineal bonds to a common ancestor. Normally, a gap of seven generations has to be observed on the agnatic side and five on the uterine side before a marriage can take place; but very often, as soon as kin links are forgotten, marriage is authorised. As in Kathmandu, every

Maharjan quarter has its own music house, *manka chen*, the 'common house', for apprenticeship and rehearsal.

Multipurpose *guthi* associations

To complete my picture of *guthis*, I would like to stress another aspect of the system, active only among certain Newar groups: its multifunctionality. This facet, which has not yet been described in the literature, concerns only those associations of which membership is compulsory. Let us consider, for instance, a local Balami *guthi* configuration. Balamis are a small group of persons living on the edges of the Kathmandu Valley and in the adjacent valleys to the south and to the west. They formerly specialised in cutting and selling wood, but currently are mainly agriculturalists. They speak a dialect of Newar and share a great part of the Newar culture. In the village of Phulchok, a few minutes' walk from Pharping, all male Balamis of the settlement must belong to an association that is in charge of most of the religious activities of the group. The *guthiyars*, currently numbering 65, meet six times a year: at *Guni Punhi*, *Theila Punhi* (the local name for *Yamarhi Punhi*), *Magh Sankranti*, *Shri Panchami*, *Phagu Punhi* and *Shithi Nakha*. These religious events are the major annual occasions for village gatherings, and the corresponding rites a prerequisite for preserving the village's year-round welfare. On some of these occasions, dances, an important part of Balami culture, are performed and exhibited in different wards of Pharping. Small loans, with fixed interest rates, are concluded every year between the members during these meetings. The local association thus provides a wide framework for general mutual support and continuous interaction between the villagers.

At every meeting, a feast, *guthi bvay*, is held in a special house collectively owned by the group. All members must be present. Members absent without a reasonable excuse are fined by the current officeholder of the group. A ceremonial meal, consisting of the sharing of the head of the animal sacrificed, *si ka bhvay*, is taken by the oldest persons, *thakali*, at the end of each of these occasions. Interestingly, this *guthi* also functions as a funeral association, *sanah guthi*. Its members have to participate in the funeral processions of all the male mem-

bers and other members of their families. Moreover, *thakali* seniors are entitled to expel a member in cases of bad behaviour, robbery or other misconduct. As elsewhere, marriage is allowed within the local society if the contracting persons are not closely related.

A quite similar pattern, but with its own specific features, prevails in Pyangaon village (in Lalitpur District), where I undertook my first fieldwork in my early days in Nepal (1970-3). This Newar mono-caste locality is inhabited by a sub-caste, called Svāgumi or Gamo, of a slightly lower status than Maharjan, but still more or less attached to this large farmer caste.¹⁴ The village is almost entirely endogamous. Its inhabitants speak a Newar dialect that is difficult to follow, but not totally incomprehensible, for a Newar from Lalitpur. The population (about 900 persons in 2001) is divided among five exogamous lineages, called *gvahā*, but also known by the term *guthi*. Four are 'Hindus', *shivarmargi*, and employ a Brahman priest while the fifth is 'Buddhist', *buddhamargi*, and they call on a Vajracharya Buddhist priest for their main domestic rites. The two groups, *shivarmargis* and *buddhamargis*, come originally from distinct places, located south of Lele village, not far from the Mahabharat range. They can, of course, intermarry.

As within the Balami village of Phulchok, these *guthi* groups regulate the social life of the village and serve as death associations. The four 'Hindu' *guthis* meet separately on every fourteenth day of the dark fortnight (*caturdasi*, or *carhe*) to share a ceremonial meal in a common house called *guthi chen*. Sacrifices of animals and a feast of an animal head (the *si ka bhvay* division, locally known by the expression *karā svigu*) take place on each occasion. These multipurpose and compulsory lineage 'associations' operate the main local festivals, especially that of Nikunca Mahadyah during *Indra Jatra* (the full moon of the month of Bhadau), the winter pilgrimage to Kaleshvar Mahadev (south of Lele), and other offerings to different deities that ensure the prosperity of the community. They provide a definitive corporate

14 For a long time some inhabitants of Pyangaon have been calling themselves Singh, an honorific title adopted by the upper stratum of the Maharjan caste.

character to the activities of the locality. Interestingly, in this village, the kinship units correspond to the division into *guthis*. We are here in the presence of an archaic form of *guthi* association, closely connected to the patrilineage structure. These five groups, made up of the male heads of the settlement's households, are thus the basis for the performance of the cult of the lineage deity. The small size of the village probably explains, at least partly, such a merging of functions. Since 1950 (2007 Vikram Sambat), the five *guthis* of the village have each split into two, as a result of an internal quarrel.

In other Maharjan settlements located in Lalitpur District, the funeral *guthis* form large groupings made up of different patrilineages (*kavā*), often unconnected to each other, following the model described earlier. In these localities, death groupings are not only in charge of funerals and cremations of their members, but are also linked to the celebration of the local protecting deity. The cult of such a deity, more often than not a goddess, is organised and has its functions subdivided mainly on the basis of the farmers' funeral groups. In other words, these multifarious associations are the keystone of the village structure. Here, as elsewhere, territory is the predominant factor. Even if they are not totally isolable wholes, these Newar villages can be studied as systems of their own, by contrast with what happens in most parts of India and among the Nepali Parbatiya castes.

In Theco village, for instance, the four funeral *guthis* of the upper part of the locality each have a special duty towards the Bal Kumari goddess presiding over the welfare of this part of the village. The first death *guthi* offers cooked rice to the goddess every month on the eve of the full moon. The second offers rice-beer on every full-moon day. The third one presents rice, vermilion paste, incense and flowers on the first day of the lunar month. The last one takes responsibility for the cult of the fierce Bhairava god attached to the goddess and which is located in the upper part of the village. The tasks of watching over the temple, guarding the statues and cleaning the roofs rotate among the members according to an internal age-set division. Moreover, the festival of the goddess, which is held during the full moon of Mangsir (November-December), and which represents the main

festival, *desh jatra*, of Theco village, is organised through these funeral groups. Not surprisingly, affiliation to these *guthis* is compulsory, and is strictly inherited from father to son. It is nearly impossible to change from one *guthi* to another during one's lifetime. They have an ascriptive component.

An anthropological approach

I have already stressed the great diversity of these associations with respect to their sociological characteristics: compulsory/optional, inherited/voluntary, and mono-caste/multi-caste. In this respect, two very different sets of *guthis* have been examined in the preceding pages. The first one is linked to the caste system, the kingly order over the city; it reproduces a hierarchical order derived from classical India, and is centred on a sovereign seen at the same time as the incarnation of Vishnu, the zealous devotee of Pashupatinath, and an intimate partner of personal tutelary goddesses. The second form of *guthi* has to do with the world within the caste; it enhances other social functions, related to death inside local or kin-bounded communities, economic co-operation and territorial bonds. It stands in sharp contrast to the first one.

These two sides of the *guthi* system are not mutually exclusive, however. The Valley of Nepal has been in close communication with India for two millennia, with periods of intense exchanges and a continuous migration of population. It was been a land of refuge for Buddhist monks during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and for Hindu castes at various other periods of time. Interactions between the more Indianised political and religious centres and the peripheral small towns and villages have been important in all periods. As I have argued elsewhere (Toffin 1984), the caste system has been penetrating the indigenous communities of the Kathmandu Valley from a very early date, and its influence was reinforced in the post-Malla period. Hindu kings, for their part, have ruled over the population of the Malla city-states since the early mediaeval period and exerted their influence everywhere, even if Newar settlements have been able to retain their autonomy in various fields.

Nonetheless, compared with India, Newar society obviously displays two distinctive traits: the importance of territorial bonds and the strength of mono-caste organisations not wholly connected with kinship. These elements, which are not unknown to Indian sociology, are associated in a more constant manner with the tribal world than with the universe of the caste. *Guthis* have unmistakably been borrowed from India since Licchavi times, but they have been reshaped and reformatted, at least partly, in local terms to adjust to a different social structure. Newar society cannot be explained in terms of the caste system alone. Therefore, the theory of Louis Dumont about caste organisation and hierarchy as a whole, embracing all aspects of social life, does not hold for this ethnic group. Among the Newars, as probably in most parts of India itself, caste does not encompass the whole of social life.

Interestingly, such a feature has not prevented Newar associations from influencing Parbatiya Hindu castes, to the point of having been adopted by them. Some decades ago, Khem Bahadur Bista conjectured that the *devali pujas* of the Bahun and Chetri groups underwent important interactions with the Newar *digu dyah guthi* (1972: 130). The similarities between the two cults are so striking that the hypothesis is worth considering. And another Nepali anthropologist has recently reported that Parbatiyas around Sankhu in the Kathmandu Valley have now begun to adopt the custom of establishing death *guthis* for assisting and attending the funerals of their caste-fellows (Shrestha 2002: 157). Obviously, such unnoticed interactions between Newars and Parbatiyas have not been limited to these two examples, and extend to many other fields, all of which would be worth investigating.

The proliferation of *guthi* associations within the social fabric of Newar society is obviously one of the main characteristics of the traditional culture of the Kathmandu Valley. A Newar man may belong simultaneously to six, seven, and sometimes to even more associations. He can be a member at the same time of a death society, a *guthi* for a lineage deity, a neighbourhood association, a *guthi* set up for devotions to Bhimsen, a caste *guthi*, and so on. He will, therefore, belong to six or more different networks of persons, including kin,

caste-mates, neighbours of the same caste, and fellows belonging to other castes. For each of these associations, he will participate in various feasts every year, contributing in money or in kind, taking his turn in each of them, following the specific regulations of the various groups. These circles of individuals and networks, each one intersecting with the others, form a structure that regulates the rights and obligations held by each person as well as the mechanisms by which they are enforced. Such a vitality of the associative life is a clear sign of the importance of sociability among Newars. It is also an indication of the strength of the social bonds among this population and of the low value conferred on the individual, on the isolate person cut off from all networks. Admittedly these meetings are not always harmonious, and quarrels often occur. But even the disputes that happen during feasts when too much rice beer or alcohol has been drunk, or at the time of the inspection of the account books, can be, once settled, a factor of socialisation and an element of cohesion.

The complexity of such groups, which are at once linked to residence, kinship and caste, is worth stressing. The link with territory in particular has to be underlined. Most authors, the majority of them being anthropologists, have insisted on the importance of locality in this system. Obviously, *guthi* organisation is based in most cases on geographical propinquity and possesses a strong local rootedness. We are touching here on a general feature of Newar society and culture: the predominance of territory over kinship. As was demonstrated above, kinship ties quickly disappear after some generations and are replaced or expanded by bonds based on soil and residence. The absence of any extended structure of unilineal descent groups is itself a significant factor in the explanation of this pattern of kin-and-territory local organisation. The introversion of Newar society, attached to locally-bounded institutions and edifices, practising high rates of territorial endogamy (especially among Maharjan farmers), even within large cities like Kathmandu or Lalitpur, and composed of a great number of mono-caste farmer villages, is a distinctive feature of this society, quite in contrast to the general pattern among the Parbatiya Hindu castes. We may wonder whether the capture of

the Kathmandu Valley in 1768–9 and the subjugation of the Newars by a conquering group belonging to a different culture may not have accentuated this phenomenon. What I am suggesting here is that the Newars may have reacted to the unification of Nepal and to their political defeat by retiring within their institutions, limiting their contacts with their immediate neighbourhood. A society like that of the Kathmandu Valley, exposed to migrations and political change for more than two millennia, cannot be envisaged as having survived without having undergone important modifications in its structure over the course of time. It has had too eventful a history not to have seen such changes.

Towards a comparative perspective

These ties based on territory are reminiscent of elements of the Tibetan social structure. Pascale Dollfus (1989: 161–2) has described ward associations in Ladakh, named *bcu-cho*, that fulfil religious functions, such as reading sacred books, ceremonial circumambulations around the locality, or organising the New Year Festival by rotation. As among Newar *guthis*, the members who move from one ward to another remain affiliated to their original *bcu-cho*. Further, mutual aid associations called *kidu*, set up for religious or economic purposes, are well known in Tibetan culture and society (Miller 1956). In Ladakh, death societies of the *pha-spun* type have duties during death as well as during other rites of passage—childbirth and marriage, for instance. The associations are made up of agnates, but also of other persons interested in participating. Members worship a common deity, *pha-lha*, the god of the group, before undertaking a journey or on other occasions, to ensure good health.

Let me now stress three facets of the *guthi* institution that lead to a broader comparative perspective. To begin with, the *guthi* system of the Newars reflects a culture that places religion at the heart of its preoccupations and activities. There are no ethnic groups in Nepal that devote more time and money to rituals, festivals and offerings to the gods than the Newars. This population is without a doubt exceptionally ritually oriented. Among the Maharjan farmers of Kathmandu,

the average number of festive days dedicated to religious ceremonies, including domestic events, is over 65 in a year. The Newars have clearly produced a hypertrophied symbolic world with few parallels in the Himalaya. Besides, the number of religious edifices within the Kathmandu Valley is without equivalent in the country, and perhaps even in South Asia. Their quantity and variety is emblematic of this culture. Every village, every quarter of a town possesses dozens of temples or altars dedicated to its gods. Sanctuaries and temples always mark out the territory. These edifices are of fundamental importance in the layout of the localities, especially within the former Malla capitals, with their *mandala* structure enclosed by circles of gods and goddesses. Territory is always religiously validated. The same can be said of any social groupings among the Newars: lineages pay homage to their ancestral *digu dyah*, persons belonging to the same neighbourhood worship the same Ganesh, caste-fellows have their own Tantric deities, members of musical groups co-worship their god of music, and every association has its own deities. The shared deity legitimises the group, gives it its identity, and creates a mystical link between the partners. By the sharing of consecrated food that has first been offered to the deities, a sacred bond is created among the members.

Second, the institution under consideration reflects a society in which the state allows considerable autonomy to local populations. As a matter of fact, until very recently, the Nepali state interfered only in a minimal way in the life of its citizens: there was no registration of births and deaths, no cadastral mapping, no strict tax system, the administration of civil law was mainly in the hands of local headmen and chiefs, and so on. Lawyers, for instance, were traditionally not to be found among the people. They are new actors in Nepali public life. Formerly, ordinary day-to-day conflicts were settled within the group, not in a judicial court. Only major disputes came to the notice of the justice system. Even in the heart of the state, in the Old City of Kathmandu as well as all over the Valley of Nepal, a Newar *kaji* or *nayo* was usually in charge of minor court cases, divorces, and so forth. Such a situation still continues in many ways, not only in rural

settings but also in towns. The heads of Newar associations were entitled to manage a wide range of affairs—a range that would have been unthinkable in most European states, for instance. Besides, a high proportion of *guthi* lands or endowments have long been private, *niji*, and are managed entirely by private associations. In the past, the state interfered in their affairs only in the absence of heirs.

Such a situation has numerous parallels in Asia. Let us take China south of the Yangtze as an example. In this country, too, society had for a long time, since at least the ninth or tenth centuries, been made up of a great number of private associations, very often polyvalent, controlling large sectors of social life. In the middle of the thirteenth century, these groupings in Hangzhou were dealing with poetry, literature, crafts, Buddhist rituals, archery, crossbow shooting, festivals for patron deities, and death ceremonies (Gernet 1994: 88–90). These powerful associations even undermined the state institutions later on. According to the French Sinologist Jacques Gernet (*Ibid*: 90), they were the descendants of old farmers' groupings linked to the god of the village's soil, a situation that recalls the Newar pattern. These Chinese groups have disappeared or have been considerably transformed in the post-communist period.

Finally, *guthis* are well adapted to a complex urban life and/or to densely populated, large villages that cannot be organised on the basis of kinship alone. Pyangaon village is a unique case in the Kathmandu Valley where the size of the locality and the relatively small number of its inhabitants permit an organisation of the society according to patrilineages. In other areas, the absence of profound and incorporated kin groups among the Newars requires the creation of different type of groupings congregating their members around some common aim: offerings to the gods, death processions, cremations, music, and the like. This mode of grouping, borrowed from classical India, and probably more frequent in ancient Indian urban life than it now is, fills this need.

In this connection, Newar associations are reminiscent of the various voluntary societies that existed in Europe during mediaeval times. In addition to the flourishing guilds specialising in economic

activities,¹⁵ Italian and French towns of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries possessed powerful associations, often based on a named quarter or neighbourhood. These groups, officially devoted to religious and charitable ends, were responsible for the organisation of local feasts, the accomplishment of religious activities, and the like. They played a very active role in city as well as family life, binding together very different people from the same locality (Rossiaud 1989). A person could belong simultaneously to six, seven, or even ten of these groups. These voluntary associations were not fundamentally different from their Newar counterparts apart from two reservations: they were not bounded by caste, and they were apparently more open to other groups. Death societies also existed in these towns, as well as in rural areas of Europe, during the mediaeval period. Some of them are still active in certain regions of France, especially in the Calvados and Eure areas of Normandy (in the west of France). In French they are called *confréries*, *charités*, or *fraternités*, and are known by other, more local names as well. All of these present striking similarities to the Newar *si guthis*: escorting the dead to the cemetery, providing a dress to the corpse or a special fabric to cover it, providing assistance to the bereaved family, frequent feasts uniting the members, membership limited to men, strict hierarchies between the various functions, systems of fines in cases of bad behaviour, the importance of religious values, and so on (Segalen 1975).

Very different societies, situated geographically thousands of miles from each other, have thus created the same kind of institutions, drawn from a similar repertoire of social mechanisms, to answer the same religious and social needs. Although the caste system obviously differentiates South Asian and European urban societies from each other, *guthi* groups, as well as many other elements which cannot be examined here (in particular a high percentage of mercantile and craft activities), place these societies in closer proximity and partially blur the caste-based East/West dichotomy.

15 Economic *guthis*, of the guild or co-operative type, do exist among Newars, but they are confined to some castes and are more exceptions than the rule (Toffin 1976).

***Guthi*, changes and modern society**

The picture depicted in the preceding pages belongs in large part to the past, or is rapidly vanishing. It must be admitted that the *guthi* system is still very active in many Newar rural settlements, especially among Maharjan farmers and other associated agriculturist castes (Gamo, Gathu, Balami, Desar, etc). Pyangaon village, to which I have returned of late years, has retained its ancient social organisation in a remarkable way. In cities, too, the Maharjans have preserved their social structure quite strictly and behave in a more conservative manner on many matters than other castes. But in most cases, especially in urban areas, *guthis* are on the verge of disappearing. Bal Gopal Shrestha (2002: 161) gives a list of 41 socio-religious associations that have closed down during the last years in the small town of Sankhu. The same situation prevails in Panauti (Kabhrepalanchok District). Many associations, which were responsible for certain festivals or dance performances, have recently disappeared. Even the *guthis* in charge of the lineage deity appears to be on the wane among many castes. They draw together only a small number of agnatic kin, without their families. The most numerous among the enduring *guthis* seems to be the death groups, with a few other exceptions here and there.¹⁶ But in nearly all cases, *guthi* membership is no longer binding, as it once was (Quigley 1995: 101). In truth, a global dissonance has developed between these institutions and modern society.

This general collapse can be explained by a series of interrelated factors. In the first place, the massive increase in spatial mobility and the accelerated movement of the population from the centre of the city to the suburbs and the surrounding countryside contribute to the change. As a matter of fact, the *guthi* system depends above all on a fixity and proximity of residence. The Nepali urban society of the Kathmandu Valley is evolving toward a mobile society where distant kin do not ordinarily meet one another. Members of the same death association thus find it increasingly difficult to come together for

16 For the Citrakars painters and mask-makers, see for instance Toffin (1995b).

cremation, as is required by the rituals so as to prevent or lessen the danger of the departed one's becoming a *preta* ghost.

A recession in religious concern and interest can also be invoked. The people at present devote less time and money to rituals, and become reluctant to attend to their ritual duties and traditional obligations. Religion is not rejected, but the constraints of modern life and salaried work have reduced it to a less central position than it has traditionally occupied hitherto. The westernisation and modernisation of lifestyles, and the development of new media like television and video, even in rural settings, have altered mentalities and opened up a large part of the population to newer horizons and more materialist values, widely different from the old socio-religious order, which had been permitted to remain relatively undisturbed until very recent times. Individualism has appeared at the same time, for example, in marital choices, and the traditional hierarchy prevailing in the *guthi* is rejected by the younger generations. Interestingly, men and women are at present attracted towards new ideas in religious matters. In this respect one can mention Theravada Buddhism and the Krishna Pranami sect, which are thought to be better adapted to the modern situation and its values.

The method of financing charitable and religious institutions itself has changed. Since the downfall of the Rana regime in 1951, the state practice of making land endowments to temples or other religious and charitable institutions has become obsolete (Regmi 1976: 55). People still contribute for religious purposes, to construct a new temple, for instance, or to perform a special ceremony, but they do this mostly by subscriptions in money, and no longer by establishing endowments of private lands under the *guthi* system. Consequently, *guthi* land endowments are no longer an important aspect of state and individual practice.

These recent developments have to do with new egalitarian aspirations that are rapidly expanding in the society. Besides, a commitment to set up a more secular state has arisen in various arenas. Secularism, in its origins a Western conception, is proclaimed by a growing number of persons who want to put an end to the interdependence between

religion and political authority. This change in perception calls into question the validity of the Guthi Samsthan, which was formerly the custodian of religious and cultural sites. This institution is nowadays seen as a relic of the past. Nepalis believe the Guthi Samsthan is in dire straits. The difficulties of financing the public ceremonies and the cult of deities are more often than not ascribed to the incapacity of the Corporation than to inefficient administration. The absence of up-to-date and rigorous records of *guthi* lands in every part of the country has brought with it misuse and irregularities. Besides, the temple managers have gradually taken for themselves the major share of the income from *guthi* lands. Economists also tend to criticise these lands, which yield no revenue to the state.

Internal quarrels have undermined the solidarity of many private associations and led to a total collapse of quite a few. It is difficult to determine whether disputes are more frequent currently than heretofore. In the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, at a time when the Ranas were engaged in the large-scale enterprise of Hinduising the kingdom, purity issues obviously led to many disputes on questions of relative status, not only among the Hindu but also among the Buddhist Newar castes. My impression is that quarrels have been common for a very long time, but that new individualistic and egalitarian concerns have multiplied these conflicts, and do not incline the people to reconstruct or join new associations. The younger generation is increasingly reluctant to participate as much as before in these endless festive meals, supplemented by a high consumption of alcohol.

Among persons responsible for festivals and state-supported rituals, the general sentiment prevails that in the past *guthis* were rich and capable institutions with lavish endowments at their disposal, and that this situation has deteriorated because the Guthi Samsthan does not provide sufficient means to carry out the *guthis*' duties. It is true that, in most cases, the Corporation has not compensated the *guthis* for the general rise in prices and economic costs over the last thirty years. *Guthis* are thus facing financial constraints that have obliged them to give up some ritual elements or even to cease performing the

duty for which they were originally established. In the same way, land reforms launched in 1955–60 has led a large number of tenants or other people occupying collective properties to register private *guthi* lands in their own names and stop providing funds in cash or kind to the association to which they were formerly attached. As the diminishing or disappearing *guthi* revenues have not been counterbalanced by the provision of new private resources, many religious associations set up for small festivals and minor cults are vanishing year after year.

At the same time new associations have appeared that are totally different from the earlier *guthi* system, even if their names sometimes still make use of this older term. This is especially the case with the caste associations established after 1990, in the wake of the democratic movement. The Maharjans have created, for instance, a pan-*Jyapu Mahaguthi*, whose structure reproduces that of democratic organisations, with branches assigned to diverse localities or districts, and whose leadership is invested in the junior generation and in social activists, instead of the traditional *thakali* elders. The Maharjans of Lalitpur have chosen to stay away from this organisation, and have established their own collective association, called *Jyapu Samaj*. The Citrakar painters, for their part, launched a *Citrakar Samaj*, supposedly including all the Citrakars of the Kathmandu Valley and of Nepal.¹⁷ These new groups, which claim recognition from the government, are formed to preserve the caste's own customs, to pursue programmes of community uplift for their poorer members, and to defend their specific interests. They are mainly cultural and social organisations, but are often permeated by an unambiguously leftist political orientation. They are frequently interconnected across caste boundaries. These bodies are financed by subscriptions from their members, even when a construction is needed. It must be added that other kinds of organisations—scouts, women's associations, literary societies, and

17 Personal information from Lubomira Palikarska, who is currently undertaking a PhD on the Citrakars of the Kathmandu Valley under my supervision.

youth clubs—are being established and slowly replacing the traditional *guthis*. These groupings seem to be more attuned to the new social and cultural conditions than the somewhat fossilised associations of the past with their weighty hierarchies.

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