

Rituals followed by “Newaras” of Kathmandy Valley

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ABSTRACT

The “Newaras” are the indigenous people and the creators of the historical civilization of Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley. The Valley and surrounding territory have been known from ancient times as Nepal Mandala. “Newars” have lived in Nepal Mandala since very early times, and immigrants that arrived at different periods in its history eventually merged with the local population by adopting their language and customs. “Newars” are a linguistic and cultural community of mostly Tibeto-Burman and some Indo-Aryan ethnicities. Scholars have also described the “Newars” as a nation. Scholars in this field have consensus that prehistoric “Newars” were originally interconnected to the ancient “Kirat” people (Kiratis). Stone Age, prehistoric “Kirat” tools found by Anatoly Yakoblave Shetenko (Leningrad Institute of Archaeology) date back to 30,000 years ago, matching prehistoric tools unearthed in China’s Gobi Desert and Yunnan. According to Nepal’s 2001 census, the 1,245,232 “Newars” in the country are the nation’s sixth largest group, representing 5.48% of the population. “Newaras” practice Hinduism as well as Buddhism. They have their own culture and follow their own festivals that are unique in the world. “Newar” culture is very rich in pageantry and rituals throughout the year. Many festivals are tied to Hindu holidays, Buddha’s birth and the harvest cycle. The important “Newar” festivals are “Mha Puja”, celebrated in the occasion of the New Year as per local calendar (“Nepal Sambat”), and “Bisket Jatra” celebrated on the first of “Baisakh”. One of the important festivals celebrated by “Newar” people is “Gunhu Punhi”. During this nine-day festival, “Newar” men and women drink a bowl of sprouted mixed cereals and offer food to frogs in the farmers’ fields. On the second day, “Sa Paru” (“Gai Jatra”), people who have lost a family member in the past year dress up as cows or anything comical and parade through town, a ritual carried by a king to show his queen that not only his son died but other people die too. The last day of “Gunhu Punhi” is “Krishnas-tami”, birthday of lord Krishna, an incarnation of lord Vishnu. Many rituals are related to the stages of life from birth, first rice-feeding, childhood, puberty, marriage, seniority and death. The complexity and all-encompassing nature of these rituals cannot be exaggerated. For instance, “Newar” girls undergo a “Bahra” ceremony when they reach puberty. Because menstruation is considered ritually impure, girls undergo ritual confinement for 12 days. Girls are separated from all males and from sunlight for 12 days while they are doted upon by female relatives. On the 12th day the girl must pay homage to the sun. Should a “Newar” man or woman live long enough, there are five rituals, known as “janku,”—which can be confusing, as the first rice feeding ceremony of a child is referred to as “janku” as well—performed between the age of 77 and 106. These are carried out when the age is 77 years, 7 months, 7 days; 83 years, 4 months, 4 days (after one has seen 1000 full moons in one’s life); 88 years, 8 months, 8 days; 99 years, 9 months, 9 days; and, finally, at 105 years, 8 months, 8 days. After these rituals are performed, the person will be regarded as a god. Husband and wife will perform their rituals together, as the events occur for the husband.

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