

# funeral observances of a group of non-ascetic sunyasi in central nepal

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According to Indian tradition, a Sannyasi is one who, either after having been head of a family or since adolescence, chooses to renounce everything that is part of the life of a layman. Without his family, celibate, and without a fixed residence, he has to give up all profane activities and, living on alms, devote himself to asceticism and meditation.

It would seem surprising, then, to find whole communities of self-declared Sannyasis who nevertheless pursue an apparently completely lay life. The classic works on Indian asceticism mention this fact without elaborating upon it (refs 2-5).

This paradoxical case is also found in Nepal. Co-existing with the orthodox Sannyasis--in ochre clothing, forehead covered with ashes, visiting the sacred places devoted to Siva--one sees whole groups of Sannyasis making their livelihood as farmers or, in the towns, practicing various professions. An instance of this is K., a gaun panchayat in Central Nepal. At first glance, its only inhabitants seem to be members of the Nepali castes--Brahmins, Chhetris, and the occupational castes--but more careful observation shows that among those who appear to be Chhetris, there are a significant number of Sannyasis.

During two stays in the field between 1972 and 1974, I was able to study a caste of Sannyasis--which as far as I know has not been subject to serious investigation in Nepal.

K. is a gaun panchayat<sup>6</sup> of 2895 individuals among whom there are 335 Giris, a sub-group of Sannyasis. Nine-tenths of these Giris are of the same lineage. They have been in the village for 150 years. The founding ancestor of their lineage, Narayan Giri, acquired land in K. Since then, his descendants have continued to expand their holdings and influence within the village so that they presently dominate the political scene there.

The Giri way of life and that of the neighboring upper Nepalese castes is identical. House types and clothing are the same (the Giris manifest none of the outward signs of the mendicant); they engage in the same agricultural activities (rice, corn, wheat, and buffalo-raising) and observe the same ritual calendar. Their similarity is equally manifest in the social structure. The Giris and the Chhetri-Brahmins each see themselves in the same way, that is, as a caste group, with a fixed place in the caste hierarchy and with strictly defined relations with other castes. Nor is this a uniquely Giri apperception; the other castes indeed relate to them as a caste group.



As my research progressed, I was led to ask what constituted the uniqueness of the Giris as well as what they shared with the other castes. Moreover, are the differences which do exist related to a survival of ascetic traditions?

It was the study of life-cycle rituals which brought a satisfactory answer to this question. Of particular importance were the funeral rites, the description of which forms the core of this article. These rites reveal the ambiguity of the Giri position claiming two contradictory affiliations; one with the world of the ascetic and the other with the lay population. The Giri do not in fact cremate their dead, as widespread Hindu tradition dictates, but rather, bury them as is the rule among ascetics. As will be shown in what follows, however, in funeral rites the Giri conduct themselves in a manner completely opposed to the ascetic tradition. We must therefore investigate the meaning of these contradictions.

The following description is based primarily on an account of the death of my principal informant which occurred several months before my second stay. The different stages of the rituals were outlined for me by the members of his family and by the Brahmins who officiated.

### The Funeral Rites

Even before the actual death, a first rite is essential. Called vaitarani (from the name of the river separating the world of the living from that of the dead), it is the first of a number of rites intended to facilitate the passage of the dead into the other world. In the presence of the purohit,<sup>7</sup> a cow is brought into the dying individual's room. The dying must hold onto the cow's tail (although people often content themselves with a cord joining hand and tail) in keeping with what must be done when, entering the Kingdom of Yama--God of the Dead--he will cross the formidable river Vaitarani hanging on to the tail of a cow. The cow is then given to the purohit, who is the necessary intermediary between the living and the souls of the dead. In fact, everything needed by the dead in the next world is actually given to the Brahmins inasmuch as they have the power to impart a spiritual value on the goods making them utilizable in the metaphysical world.

As soon as death is confirmed, the eldest son, who conducts all these rituals, places a pinda beside the deceased. This is a compact ball of rice which reappears throughout these rites; it is the funeral offering par excellence. The other sons make a bamboo litter to carry the corpse to the burial grounds. Dressed as usual, but covered by a white sheet, the corpse is laid on the litter. All the kin of the dead come to toss water, rice, and flower petals on him and to get ready to walk in the funeral procession.

Man celebrating his father's sradhha: offerings placed around the pinda, the rice ball in the middle of the photo.

The burial grounds lie along the shore of the Sun Kosi, approximately two hours walk from K., and are used only by the Giri of K. The cortege or malam is constituted of the men of the lineage (women never participate in this) and neighbors of all castes. At the head of the procession, an old man, scatters rice and coins all along the way. A Brahmin follows blowing a conch shell. The litter is carried by five sons and brothers of the deceased, barefoot and wearing a white dhoti.<sup>8</sup> Behind them come the rest of the participants.

At the shore of the Sun Kosi, the members of the cortege dig a pit grave (kharal), while the sons undress the dead man and wash him with river water. He is then dressed in the characteristic Sannyasi garb: orange turban and dhoti with a rosary of rudraksa<sup>9</sup> seeds around his neck. They draw the three horizontal lines which distinguish the Saivite ascetics on his forehead with ashes. The corpse, legs crossed in a meditative posture, is then placed in the grave. Next are placed all those objects which signify the ascetic: kamandalu (water jar), cimta (fire thongs), trisul (trident), and damaru (small two-sided drum). A pinda is placed in his joined hands. Other offerings are added to this--coins and especially salt. Salt is considered to be perfectly pure substance and is a prototypical offering. This salt offering--it is sometimes said to be necessary to fill the grave with it--is also a feature of Sannyasi burial and seems to me to be connected to belief in the purity of ascetic, unlike the ordinary dead.

The son finally throws a handful of sand in the grave. All participants do likewise and fill the pit. A mound of sand and rock, called cihan is piled on the grave. This rough funeral monument is carried away by the monsoon floods giving the Giri cemetery the appearance of an ordinary rocky riverbank. On the mound a linga, symbol of Siva, is erected and honored.

Up to this point the Giris' funeral observances follow the ascetic pattern as reported by (refs. 10-12). Tradition, however, dictates that the ascetic, as death approaches, actually enter into deep meditation, thereby directly achieving complete release. As we will see, this belief is absent among the Giris.

The first contradiction between the Giri ritual and ascetic practice appears as soon as the burial is completed. While the burial of a Sannyasi is theoretically not a source of pollution (so that theoretically participants have no need to purify themselves afterwards), after the Giri burial at K. all participants do take a purificatory bath in the Sun Kosi and the sons and brothers of the deceased shave their heads. Everyone then returns to the village where the purohit purifies the non-relatives (those who don't need to go into ritual mourning) with cow's urine.

### Rituals of Mourning

The events which follow resemble those seen among Chhetri-Brahmins and relate to the same beliefs. Here, Giri ideology is no longer at all ascetic.

For thirteen days a series of rites follow one another. They serve to separate the deceased from the world of the living and facilitate his incorporation into the afterworld of the ancestors. To effect this end, it is important to observe these rites scrupulously and to the last detail.

During the first twelve days after death, the Giris of K. regard the soul as pisac, a term which generally means demon or phantom, particularly in the sense of spirits of the dead who, tormented by hunger and thirst, return to wander about the places where they lived. It is necessary to feed this pisac, but above all a body must be created for its use in the journey in the afterworld. Such, then, are the objectives of these initial rites.

The day after death, the eldest son erects a small mound of earth (dhikuro) in the courtyard of the house. According to the purohit, the corpse is likened to this mound--seeing nothing, hearing nothing. Some small branches of a wild cherry (paiyu) are planted in the top of the mound. They support a small earthen ball with a hole in it through which the son pours milk onto a pinda resting on the dhikuro. This offering is repeated every morning for nine days and is prerequisite to the formation of a spiritual body for the pisac. At the same time, the purohit draws the various body parts on the ground, each day adding to the extent of elaboration of these body parts appropriate to that day. The first offering constitutes the head; the second day, the eyes and ears; the third day, the chest and arms; the fourth day, the stomach and sex organs; the fifth day, the lower limbs; the sixth, the nervous system; the seventh, the heart and respiratory system; the eighth day, the skin and teeth; and finally, on the ninth day, the blood.

During these same nine days another ritual is performed suggesting that the pisac during this period traverses the infernal regions and undergoes a thousand agonies. To light the way for the dead man's spirit's journey through these dark worlds, the eldest son places a small cup with several kinds of grains and a small oil lamp at a crossroads. Each day the spirit broaches a new stage, the names of which either evoke a fearsome place (e.g. hahakar - 'anguish, misfortune' - the second stage; tamisra - 'domain of darkness' - the third; or raurava - 'terrifying, fearsome') or one of the traditional inventory of hells (e.g. on the fourth day, Andhatamisra, the "second or eighteenth of the twenty-one hells"<sup>13</sup> or Kumbhipak, "the name of the hell in which the wicked are baked as in a potter's kiln"<sup>14</sup>).

On the tenth day the pisac's spiritual body is finished. It must now be fed, so the son puts out a pinda and the various dishes necessary for a full meal. The completed drawing of the body is then rubbed out. Finally, the eldest son attaches the paiyu branches to his forehead and with his head destroys the dhikuro.

On the twelfth day after death, several important rites sanctifying the changed state of the deceased take place. Due to the funeral observances, the deceased escapes from the pisac state and becomes pitra an ancestor. The rites of the twelfth day serve to make the other shades admit the new pitra. He is united with them during a ceremony called sapindikaran, or 'incorporation as sapinda.' Sapinda are all the relations in the paternal and maternal lines back seven generations, that is, those who have the right to partake of the pinda during memorial services.

The sapindikaran takes place as follows. The purohit begins with a general invocation of the gods, then the eldest son makes four pinda. The first three represent the paternal ancestors--father of the deceased, grandfather and great-grandfather. The remaining one represents the dead man or new pitra. After honoring his ancestors, the son cuts the latter pinda into three equal parts which he then combines with the other three pinda, creating three new balls symbolizing, thereby, the incorporation of the deceased into the realm of the ancestors.

A final ceremony draws the formal funeral observances to an end. This is the sayya dan or 'gift of the bed.' The family of the deceased gives the Brahmins who directed the rituals a considerable collection of things representing all that an individual might need for a year: food, clothes, bedding ... These gifts are intended to be symbolically transmitted to the dead man through the intermediary of the Brahmins in order to guarantee his maintenance during his year-long journey towards the pitralok, world of the ancestors. At the end of this ceremony, all the mourners are purified with urine and partake of their first normal meal since the beginning of their mourning period.

For one year, the dead man's soul travels toward the pitralok. It takes a road which, if easy for the virtuous, according to popular belief is, in most cases, lined with snares and trials. Thus it is necessary to help the dead along with offerings on prescribed dates. This is the objective of the masik ('monthly') observed each month (or every two weeks during the first three months) on the lunar day corresponding to the day of death. There are altogether sixteen masik. They unfold in the same way; on the morning of the ceremony the eldest son washes, shaves his head and abstains from all foods. While the purohit invokes the ancestors, now joined by the dead man, the son follows his instructions and offers rice, milk and saffron. Different taparo (large leaf plates) are assembled: one contains rice with a blade of dubo<sup>15</sup> grass representing the

rishi<sup>16</sup> who preside over the ceremony; another is filled with paddy on which is placed a glass of lemonade to appease the thirst of the deceased; in the last one are assembled delicacies of all the sorts comprising a meal.

After the year following death, only the memorial services called sraddha<sup>17</sup> are celebrated on the lunar anniversary of the death. The observance of these sraddha is kept for three generations, that is, for the father, grandfather and great-grandfather. The ritual is performed by the eldest surviving lineal male descendant. A woman's sraddha is also observed by her husband's family for three generations; ego's (male) mother, grandfather's wife and great-grandfather's wife. They are related only by marriage.

The morning of sraddha, the officiant shaves his head and dresses in a white dhoti. The ceremony begins with diverse purificatory rites done by the purohit. It is composed of two main elements:

An offering of water, during which the purohit invokes by name all the dead of the family. The officiant holds a pitcher of water and pours it slowly into a basin (if other descendants are present, they each hold their fingers under the stream of water). It is said that the water should be poured from the horn of a rhinoceros.

The dedication of a pinda which represents the dead man as a pitri. It is covered with floral offerings, curds, saffron and ribbons. Then the pinda is placed in a stream (any water serving as a substitute for the Ganges) or fed to a cow.

The invocation of the ancestors also takes place each year on three days of special religious importance. According to tradition, a year on earth is equivalent to a single day in the afterworld. The offerings made during these three rituals represent the three daily meals of the deceased.

The first of these takes place at Gokarna Temple, in the Kathmandu Valley, on the new moon of Bhadau (Aug.-Sept.). Only the dead males are worshipped. There is a substantial crowd about the temple; the people purify themselves in the Bagmati and offer pinda to their ancestors. The primary officiant shaves his head to indicate mourning and wears only a white dhoti.

An analogous ceremony honors the women of the family, this time, two days journey away at Matatirtha, near Thankot, on the new moon of Baisakh (April-May).

The Giris of K. try, insofar as possible, to go to both places. Otherwise they observe the same ritual with the offering of the pinda at their burial grounds on the banks of the Sun Kosi.

A second period dedicated to the ancestors takes place during the dark phase of the moon in the month of Asoj (Sept.-Oct.). For sixteen days--from which comes the name of this time, sorasraddha--the senior member of each family observes sraddha in honor of his ancestors. The sraddha takes place on the day of the moon phase corresponding to the lunar reckoning of the day of death. This is done for the ancestors of the preceding three generations the same as the annual sraddha. The senior member of the lineage gathers the other members of the family around him and officiates under the direction of the purohit. He makes as many pinda as there are dead people to be honored (each ceremony is dedicated primarily to the particular relation who died on the corresponding lunar date, but each time all are invoked) and makes the usual offerings to them.

The third major occasion devoted to the pitri is Bala caturdasi, the fourteenth day of the dark phase of Mansir (Nov.-Dec.). Many Giris, like many of the hill-dwelling peoples, gather at this time at Pasupatinath in the Kathmandu Valley. On the night before the purohit prepares two torches (maḍi) and seven kinds of seed (corn, rice, wheat, barley, sesame, mustard and radish). In the evening the families gather round the torches at Pasupatinath and spend the night begging Siva to intercede for their dead. Plates of rice and other delicacies are placed on the ground in the belief that the dead, attracted by the glow of the torches, come back to partake of the food of the living on that night. They depart at dawn, the way lit by small wick lamps placed by the faithful in the waters flowing by. The people, then, after bathing, go in a procession around the hills surrounding the temple all the while throwing the seven kinds of seed to the wind intended to nourish the wandering spirit of Bala, guilty of eating human flesh.<sup>18</sup>

If the Giri cannot go to Pasupatinath, he will go to the Sun Kosi, pay homage to Siva in a small temple of his there, and then go to the 'cemetery', there too tossing the seven seeds to the breeze. Through the night, they stay and pray, keeping their lamps lit.

The succession of these rituals seems to indicate that the Giri share the beliefs concerning death and the afterlife with the laity. If they bury their dead like ascetics, it is a gesture now devoid of meaning. Far from thinking that their forefathers escape death pollution and pass directly in ecstasy to final release without need for sraddha or any other help from the living; they have adopted the perception of afterlife--as well as the related practices--of the Chhetri-Brahmins. Death is a source of pollution; those near to the deceased are considered impure. The unhappy fates of the dead require assistance from the living, inasmuch as the passage to the pitralok depends on the care the descendants give to the proper observance of the funeral ceremonies. Life after death is dependent on offerings. Everything conspires to bind the living to the dead in a relationship of dependence--a mutual dependence since the deceased has the power to harm those who neglect the rituals.



### Mourning and Lineage Solidarity

The funeral observances are an expression of lineage solidarity. Throughout the sraddha and the annual rituals, we have seen how the relation is not only drawn between a dead father and his son, but between a group of ancestors and their descendants. It is important to bring this feature into relief in the Giri case because, unlike the solitariness and the cutting-off of all social ties marking the ascetic, the Giri perceive themselves as a hereditary caste group. A demonstration of the cohesion of the lineage by behaviors identical to those of other Nepalese castes could only reinforce their adherence to the social structure and bring them further into the position of one caste among many.

The unity of the lineage is manifest, then, in the communal observance of the prescriptions and prohibitions concomitant with the death pollution affecting all lineage members, observance practiced by the Giri as well as the higher Nepalese castes. This impurity is called jutho. The closer the relation to the deceased, the more constrained the obligations.

The strictest mourning is that of the widow of the deceased since it is definitive. On the day of death, she takes off her jewels, dresses in a white sari and removes the vermillion color from the part of her hair--the symbol of marriage. She remains thus until her own death.

The son of the deceased (in particular the eldest son who conducts the rituals) wears white and shaves his head and face on the day of his father's death. Moreover, during the thirteen days of mourning he remains in seclusion in a room of the house (theoretically the kitchen) listening to the Brahmins read the Bhagavat-puranam. During this period he must sleep on straw and eat only once a day. Moreover, salt is strictly forbidden (undoubtedly the consumption of salt, being the perfect gift for totally pure ascetics, is forbidden because the descendants who, by a contradiction unique to the Giri ceremonies, are polluted by the contact with a dead person, even a 'Sannyasi,'). At the end of thirteen days, the sons are free to take up their ordinary life, but they must still (at least the eldest) wear white clothes for a year and celebrate the masik (shaving the head each time). After the first year, the eldest will celebrate the sraddha and the annual rituals for the rest of his life and will pass this obligation on to his own children.

Grandchildren observe, on the death of their grandfather, the same practices as the younger sons.

The brothers of the deceased help the sons throughout the mourning rites and submit to the same restrictions, but only for ten days, after which they are freed from their impurity.

All consanguinal relatives over seven generations, which is to say all the sapinda, are subject to the same ten days of jutho. Between seven and fourteen generations, consanguine relations must observe three days of mourning, but the question doesn't arise in K., since geneological memory does not go beyond seven generations, that is, beyond the arrival of the founding ancestor. The obligations implied by jutho are as follows: to eat only once a day, to abstain completely from salt, to do no other religious worship (besides those required by the funeral observances) or puja, to offer neither food or water to anyone lest they be immediately polluted by contact.

Through this study of Giri general observances, we have tried to establish that there is a contradiction between the apparent faithfulness to ascetic tradition during interment and the adoption of beliefs and rituals growing out of a totally different system. In fact, the Giri seem to have preserved only the outward features of their distant past as mendicants, features which distinguish them from the other castes without inhibiting their integration into the society of castes.

It would be interesting to be able, from the perspective of historical research, to retrace the steps in their increasing affiliation with the laity and their submission to, and success at making a place for themselves in, a rigorously hierarchical order.

#### Footnotes

1. This article was translated from the original French by Kathryn S. March.
2. J.N. Bhattacharya, Hindu Castes and Sects, Calcutta, Ed. Indian, 1896.
3. J. Sarkar, A History of Dasnami Naga Samnyasis, Allahabad, Sri Panchayati Akhara Mahanirvani, 1959.
4. E.A.H. Blunt, The Caste System of Northern India, Delhi, S. Chand and Co., 1969.
5. G.S. Ghurye, Indian Sadhus, Bombay, The Popular Book Dept., 1953.
6. Gaun panchayat or village panchayat, the primary level political unit.
7. Purohit, a domestic priest attached to a family through a patron-client relationship for the performance of the family's rituals.
8. A piece of cloth wound around the waist and hanging to the ankle.

9. Elacocarpus seeds. The necklaces of these seeds are one of the distinguishing marks of Saivite ascetics.
10. P.V. Kane, History of Dharmasastra, Poona, Bhandakar Oriental Research Institute, 1930-1965, 5 volumes, c.f. vol. 4, p. 230.
11. J.A. Dubois, Moeurs, Institutions et ceremonies des peuples de l'Inde, Paris, Imprimerie Royale, 1825.
12. J.C. Oman, The Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1903.
13. Cf. R.L. Turner, A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963 (reprint), p. 16.
14. Cf. R.L. Turner, op. cit., p. 100.
15. Cf. R.L. Turner, p. 315: "a partic. kind of grass, Cynodon dactylon, used in sacrifice."
16. Rishi in Sanskrit rsi, the mythical sages who received the Vedas by divine revelation.
17. Cf. Turner, op. cit., p. 575: "a ceremony performed in honor of and for the benefit of deceased ancestors consisting of the daily offering of water and at stated intervals, of balls of rice and meal (pinda) to three paternal and maternal forefathers."
18. Concerning this festival and the related legends see M. Anderson, The Festivals of Nepal, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1971, pp. 201-207.

