

Maev Conneely McInerney - Tamang through their rituals. Nepal 2013

Forword

I will access Tamang culture through two main rituals that I was fortunate enough to see in my time there in the summer of 2013. The first is the Hindu festival of Janai Purnima, an important rite of purity and security. For the Buddhist in the village I was in it was this, but also a gathering of friends and a celebration.

While I was in the village teaching in the school one of my colleagues, Bim, got engaged and married. Through the ritual of marriage I will look at what I have understood of kinship and the cast system among Tamang people.

In the Third part of this essay I will focus on a few rituals of daily life, and what they reveal about the culture and the psyche of the people.

I. Janai Purnima

The Hindu festival of Janai Purnima (literally, “night of the full moon”) was on a Wednesday. The day started normally, with *dulchia*, fresh buffalo milk tea. The whole village gathered in the biggest flat space, where we met Sange, our host’s, friends from Ischok, a village across the valley. All squeeze together we waited in anticipation.

A table was set up on a mat on the floor, with tin and grass plates. Many bottles of rakshi - a clear alcohol made locally from millet - were being passed around. The bottles were stopped with flowers. Hygiene rules in Nepal mean that people pour water directly into their mouths without touching the bottle to their lips. This is difficult and requires an amount of coordination that I did not have. The swinging back of heads and artful pouring of rakshi felt like part of the ritual, and added to the drama of the occasion – partly through my dramatic failure to drink without drenching myself.



Finally the witchdoctors arrive, in a procession, hopping in a strange dance to the rhythm of their drums. They were wearing a uniform of white skirts, headdresses and bandanas. They had scarves around their necks, the ones that are given at any sort of event, as some sort of honour. More on the scarves in part 3: rituals of everyday life. Prayer bells, like the ones at all of the hindu temples, were attached to them and created a chorus of sounds as the hopped in circles around the table and on their own axis. The circular motions were reminiscent of a wholistic one-ness, and of the movements of the planets.

Witchdoctors in their finery dancing and chanting



After spending some time at the table with incense burning and the witchdoctors dancing, the village walked as one towards the holy waterfall. The procession of jet black tikkaed people travelled across the mountain, through very narrow and perilous –excuses for – paths was impressive, and felt like a sort of exodus.. The trek took an hour, and there was no apparent logistical sense in waiting for everyone in the village and going together. The travel felt like a part of the ritual; enduring the same hardships and discomfort of travel, in the rain seemed to bring us together, creating a sense of community, like members of a sports team might experience. Receiving the Tamang tikka, a black circle of coal on your forehead just above your eyebrows, felt like a form of acceptance into the Tamang cast, a physical mark of being accepted into the community. The shared experience of the trek was embodied in the shared mark of the cast.

The boy volunteers were invited to dance in the circle with the other people. All of the teenagers and kids and adults came together in a circle chanting “sche sche!” to the rhythm of the drums. The mood was of excited celebration. I joined in the end (no other girls were invited to the circle) and followed the jumping pattern. Giving oneself over the ritual, following moves inveted by someone else, in a sense giving up agency and freedom, diminishing a sense of self to feel interconnected to the group, like our interconnected arms around each other.

We queue up to the wall where the holy water was pouring down and were doused in water and rice. WPeople were drenching themselves in water at it and refilling water bottles. The pus to get to the holy well was frantic.

Janaipurnima is a Hindu festival, and the villagers of Tamang Dhodeni are Buddhist. The assumed attendance of the Buddhists to Hindu festivals is casual and representative of the friendly relationship between the two religions. As an Irish person of catholic background travelling with a northern Irish person of protestant background, the carefree mixing of the two comparatively more different religions, without any sort of tension, is impressive and makes “The Troubles” we grew up hearing about seem ridiculous.



II. Wedding: Kinship

Bim, 20, got engaged when I had been living in the village about two weeks. Sange said that it was normal to get married at 20 or 21 and that now that he was 19, he was getting a lot of pressure to find a wife. Asking about Bim’s marriage to Bima (the similarity of their names is a coincidence) revealed aspects of the Tamang cast system I had not fully grasped before. Tamang people are a cast, and have their own language. Children grown up with Tamang and learn Nepali at school. The two languages are completely different, different scripts even. The whole village we lived in are Tamang,

and therefore have the same second name (Tamang). There are people in different villages, all over the country that belong to the Tamang cast. Sange explained that within the Tamang cast there are subcasts (Ortner calls these clans). The clans also have names, and are like families, although often people don't actually know how they are related, the affiliation is so distant. They treat each other as a big family, they call each other "brother and sister" (this is not that significant as Nepalese people call nearly everyone "little brother" or "older sister" etc.) and cannot marry. Sange was of the Dong clan, and so was Bima (from a different village), so he would not be able to marry her. And his friend and colleague Bim, by marrying Bima became his brother in law.

The sexism that would be a leitmotiv throughout the rest of our trip greeted us at the airport in the form of a sign:

"Matthew McConkey

And maev".

Driving to the hotel Kathmandu whizzed past the window. Or exploded out of the window into our worries.

Kathmandu is big, boisterous and dirty. There is garbage everywhere, you are assailed by a flurry of advertisement, in the worst condition.

Homes spill out onto the street, the inside of shops and the filthy street outside are not distinguishable. Fascination and sadness.

Moped, bikes, cars, the odd herd of cows.

They stare. The people seem to be doing nothing, sitting in nervous immobility.

It is a relief to get to the hotel, it is comfortable and adorable.

School girls with uniforms and uniformly plaited braids along the sides of their heads play and laugh on the walk home from school.

The universality found in the unfamiliar.

My journal is an account of what I wrote, not of what I did. And although I tried to be thorough, there were days when I was tired, or uninspired. The events of these days due to simple human exhaustion and laziness will not be documented accurately. "too tired to have deep thoughts"

Generalising. Matthew "I know it's terrible but I don't know if I'll be able to trust Nepalese people ever again" Sangu "he is a hindu"