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The Shaman and the Priest: Ghosts, Death and Ritual Specialists in Tharu Society

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In the cosmology of the Chitwan Tharu, the supernatural world on which human beings and human society depend consists of three classes of beings. They are served by three different types of ritual specialists. The first of these classes are the malevolent spirits or ghosts known as *pret* or *bhut*. Such spirits are the primary cause of ill health or misfortune, and interceding with them lies in the domain of the *guruwa* or *gurau*, a term that may be glossed as shaman. The *gurau* is typically a Tharu villager who has learned his art by apprenticing himself to a master of it. The second class of beings is deities more or less peculiar to indigenous society in Chitwan: that is, they are not usually worshipped by the hill people who have settled among Tharus in their villages. Such godlings or minor deities are innumerable. These may be both local (to a particular village) and shared by Tharu society as a whole. Very often, these godlings are human beings who have become deified after their death. Examples of purely local or village gods are those inhabiting the *bramathan* (the village shrine) and the guardian spirits of the household, who are its most recently deceased ancestors.¹

While the *gurau* has the primary responsibility and technical knowledge for interceding with these deities and spirits, the propitiation of the deities associated with the *bramathan* (who will vary from village to village) is the prerogative of the *jimidar*.² He sacrifices chickens and

doves there on behalf of the village as a whole. He does so twice a month, on the days of the new moon and the full moon. Thus, primary responsibility for the prosperity and well being of the village falls on the shoulders of the *jimidar*, the second type of ritual specialist in Tharu society. Only when a severe crisis affecting the whole village (such as an epidemic of illness or widespread disease in the crops) occurs is a *gurau* (known as a *patharithiya gurau*) summoned to deal with the situation.

Finally, there are the pan-Indic deities, among the more important of whom locally are Vishnu, Sarasvati, Durga, and Lakshmi; conducting their worship is the prerogative of a Brahman, who acts as *purohit* (priest) to a number of Tharu families. The rituals of purification following a death are in the domain of the Brahman and are necessary to the proper balance of the more "shamanistic" aspects of the Tharu cosmology. In that sense, the Brahman (as ritual specialist) plays an essential role in it.

The distinction between Brahmanical and Tharu ritual practices can be made in some other areas of belief. For as long as any Tharu with whom I discussed these matters could remember, the Brahman has been essential to the proper observance of the rituals surrounding a death. This may not have always been the case, however. Certainly, in some other Tharu communities in the Western Tarai Brahmins play no part in Tharu ritual of any kind, but we have no way of knowing the circumstances under which the situation may have changed in Chitwan. It may be that over a period of time, the Brahmins who visited Chitwan in the cold season impressed on Tharus (or at least their *jimidar*) the importance of following prestigious Sanskrit, rather than "*jangali*" practices in these matters. These ideas may gradually have spread then to other segments of the population. This is, for example, what has taken place with respect to the preeminence today of the *kanyadan* ceremony (Guneratne 1994). Whatever the circumstances under

end of Rana rule, but the term has been retained in village usage as an honorific for the descendants of these revenue collectors.

¹When the most senior man in the household dies, he becomes a guardian spirit known as *gan*, who is responsible for preserving the household from robbers. The *gan* occupies the space where the household is most vulnerable to entry, namely the area around doors and windows. The interior of the house is the responsibility of the *tirapul*, who is the spirit of the most recently deceased senior woman. Apart from these two ancestral spirits, the rest of one's ancestors are treated collectively and not individually distinguished, and are collectively worshipped during the Emosa Pavani (Pitr Aunsi in Nepali) on the day of the New Moon in the month of Aswin (September - October).

²*Jimidar* was the term applied to the revenue collectors of former times. This system of revenue collection was abolished after the

which these changes occurred, by the time of the malaria eradication project of the 1950s, even though Tharu society had not been sanskritized to the extent of cremating its dead, the role of the Brahman priest in the rituals of mourning had been well established.

In this paper, I describe the beliefs that Tharus have traditionally had regarding *bhut* and witchcraft.³ I discuss also the role of two ritual specialists — the Tharu *gurau* and the Brahman “priest” — in mediating these beliefs, and the decline in the significance of evil spirits and ghosts in contemporary Tharu cosmology. I shall argue that this decline is the outcome of the material transformation that has taken place in the Chitwan valley in the last 40 years. Two significant aspects of this transformation have shaped the way that Tharus think about *bhut*. The first is the deforestation of most of the valley, except for the protected areas of the national park. The second is the year-round presence of Brahman ritual specialists in Tharu villages.

Malevolent spirits and witchcraft beliefs

Belief in malevolent spirits is widespread throughout India. In northern India and Nepal, the organization of this cosmology is very similar. Extensive descriptions of it, covering every district of Bihar and Bengal may be found in the notes prepared in the 19th century for H.H. Risley’s treatises on the castes and sub-castes of Bengal.⁴ The beliefs described here deal with both male and female ghosts of various kinds, and witches, who are generally women. While British writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to dismiss the Tharu cosmological system as simply a belief in ghosts and witches (Crooke 1896: 396; Williams 1869: 111), Tharu belief in these beings is in no way different from that of other North Indian village people, as a perusal of the descriptive notes in Risley’s papers demonstrates.

Tharus believe in the existence of malevolent spirits known as *bhut*, which have the power to do evil or bring misfortune to human beings. The characteristics of these spirits do not differ very much throughout North India. A *bhut* is essentially the spirit of a human being who has died an untimely death or whose funeral rites have not been performed. People may be too poor to perform the proper

funeral ceremonies or someone might be an orphan with no relatives to conduct the ceremonies at his death (in such a case, anyone may perform these ceremonies to put the *bhut* to rest). Someone may die in a distant place and his family may not know he has died (and thus fail to perform the funeral rites).

Bhut come in many forms; I will give two examples here, of a female and a male. Tharus believe that a woman who precedes her husband in death becomes a *churaini* if her funeral rites are not properly performed. She seeks her husband or another man to accompany her in her wanderings over the earth. Young men who sleep alone are especially vulnerable, for she will seek them out and seduce them, eventually causing their death as they waste away. An example of a male ghost is the *martuki*, the spirit of a man who haunts the place where he came by an accidental or unnatural death. A *martuki* inveigles people to that spot (for example, by playing music) where he kills them.

Malevolent spirits, like the gods and the deities of the Tharu, are primarily creatures of the forest. Before the malaria eradication project of the 1950s, Chitwan was covered with jungle and full of wild animals. The sense of oppressiveness and fear that the jungle can bring is often recalled in conversation by Tharus living today (see also Muller-Böcker, this volume). The consciousness of Tharu was shaped by these conditions, reinforcing their belief in malevolent spirits. The power and prestige of the *gurau* flourished under these conditions, for in a world in which *bhut* were commonplace, the *gurau* played an essential role in protecting both individuals and society. The state’s recognition of this importance is indicated in the *lal mohar* given to Tetu Gurau of Chitwan in 1807. It reads in translation as follows:

To Tetu Gurau, Belaudh *praganna*, Dhanauji village: We bestow upon you as *nankar jagir* the uncultivated, forested and barren lands of Dhanauji village in Belaudh *praganna* and the revenue of the area . . . Cultivate and make the land populous and protect the people from the threats of elephants, tigers, evil spirits, disease and epidemics . . . (Krauskopff and Meyer n.d.: 134).

The commentary on the *lal mohar* quoted above (in Krauskopff and Meyer, *ibid.*) notes of Tharu *gurau* in general that they “were reputed even beyond their own communities. They were said to have tantric magical powers . . . since they could chastise evil forces, they were seen as being the most able to protect a village from the many disturbances threatening its welfare in such an inhospitable land.”

The reason why *bhut* exist, according to the Tharu, is the failure to perform the funeral rites owed them, or to

³The intensity of Tharu beliefs in malevolent spirits has been remarked on by a number of colonial ethnographers; Risley for example noted “the strong fear of evil spirits which continually haunts the tribe” (Risley 1892: 317) and Knowles wrote that the Tharus live “in mortal dread of these ghostly beings, more savage and cruel than the leopards and tigers . . .” (Knowles 1889: 214-215); see also Crooke (1896: 396).

⁴Mss. Eur. E. 295, *Reports on castes and sub-castes of Bengal*, Risley Collection, India Office Library, London.

perform them in the prescribed manner. Funeral rites require the presence of a Brahman priest. Prior to the malaria eradication program, Brahmans were absent from the valley for much of the year for fear of malaria. The funeral rites of those who died during those months then had to be postponed to the winter, the only time of the year that hill people were willing to come down into Chitwan. Consequently, malevolent shades proliferated in the valley.

Tharus also believe in the existence of witches; the female is known as *dain* (*boksi* in Nepali), while male witches, who are much less common, are known as *dai*. A *dai* is very often a *gurau*. There are two sorts of *mantra*, those that do harm and those that protect one from harm. A witch is master of the first, while the *gurau* is master of the second. Sometimes however some *gurau* and some witches, particularly those who pray to the same deity for their powers, may enter into sinister relationships for their mutual benefit. Some *gurau* may have mastered both sorts of *mantra*, in which case they become *dai*. A *dain* makes people sick through the power of her *mantra*. She directs her malevolence at people who have angered her, whom she is incapable of attacking physically. Tharus believe that a *dain* acquires very young children to do her bidding by killing them through the power of her *mantra*. She then retrieves their corpses at night from their burial place and brings them back to life with more *mantra*. The *dain* looks after the child, which is now called a *chaudaha*, and puts it to work to steal rice and other goods for its mistress. What should be noted here is the relationship of the *dain* to the death of small children. Child mortality was very high in Chitwan before the Malaria Eradication Project and witchcraft belief served as an explanation for it. People are much less concerned about *dain* today. Child mortality has dropped very dramatically, and cremation rather than burial has become the norm. If a child is cremated, there is no corpse for the witch to steal and no benefit to her from the murder of children.

Although witchcraft accusations are unknown today, they seem to have occurred in the period immediately preceding the malaria eradication program, although it is impossible to gauge now how widespread such accusations were. If a woman were suspected of being a witch, the *jimidar* would summon a meeting of all the women in the village, young and old, and the witch would be named before them. It was the *gurau*'s responsibility to identify her. The woman would be beaten and her head shaved, except for a knot left on the back of her head to which a bel fruit (*Aegle marmelos*) was tied. She would then be driven out of the village. I was given this account by a Tharu woman during my last visit to my fieldsite, Pipariya⁵, in 1999; but

⁵The name of this village and the names of all individuals mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.

her husband's younger brother could not recall any case of witchcraft accusation in the village during the last 30 years.

What were the options open to a woman who was expelled from the village for witchcraft? If she were very unfortunate, she might die in the jungle or become a wandering ascetic (*jogi*); but she could also move to another village, perhaps by marrying into it. A *gurau* might be willing to marry such a woman, for he would know how to control her power; but ambitious men, who wished to take advantage over her supposed power over the *chaudaha*, might also be tempted into matrimony.

Many people in Tharu society continue to believe in witchcraft and to suspect that their misfortunes may stem from the malevolence of witches, but this belief is impossible to "operationalize" in today's changed social context. My research assistant's wife for example suspects the baneful influence of a witch were her daughters to fall sick for any extended period, and urges her husband to summon the *gurau*. He refuses to do so however, because, as befits his scientific training in Nepal's leading agricultural college, he does not believe in witchcraft. He did tell me, in some puzzlement, that he knew of well-educated young men who believed in witches. Why, he wondered, did they continue to believe stories they heard at their mother's knee when their education and their knowledge of science ought to tell them otherwise?

The *gurau* in Tharu society

The primary ritual responsibility of the *gurau* is to deal with witches and *bhut*. There are two sorts of *gurau*. These are referred to respectively as the *ghar gurau* and the *patharithiya gurau*. The *ghar gurau* is both "family priest" and "doctor"; in fact, one young man translated the term into English as "family doctor." The *patharithiya gurau*, on the other hand, serves an entire village, or a number of villages, and his services are called upon on matters affecting the village as a whole, such as an epidemic. The *patharithiya gurau* may also serve as *ghar gurau* to individual families. While the *gurau* appears to have once performed exorcism rituals, I never heard of or encountered an exorcism ritual performed during my fieldwork in Chitwan.

There is one other category of *gurau*, but it concerns a single individual and plays no role in village life (at least in Eastern Chitwan). This is the *raj gurau* or king's *gurau*. His position in the hierarchy of *gurau* was neatly summed up by Ram Bahadur, the younger of the two *jimidars* in Pipariya. Presumably wishing to make a comparison that would be meaningful to me, he described him as a "Ph.D.

⁶School Leaving Certificate.

gurau". Continuing to use the same metaphor, he described the *ghar gurau* as an "S.L.C.⁶ pass *gurau*" while the *patharithiya* fell somewhere in between.

The gurau of the household

The *gurau* with whom Tharu families most typically interact is the *ghar gurau* — the *gurau* of the household. A household must renew its relationship ("contract") with its *ghar gurau* every year, usually between the months of Phagun and Baishakh. This is done through a ritual known as *guro manave*. Briefly, the household that wishes to initiate or renew a relationship with a *gurau* sends its representatives to his house with a chicken and a bottle of the locally distilled liquor. If the *gurau* agrees to the relationship, he accepts these offerings, and soon thereafter, the household invites him to a meal. On this occasion, depending on the economic status of the household, he may be presented with a *dhoti* (white cloth worn by men) and perhaps some other gifts, although households are not required to do so. If a new relationship is being initiated, the *gurau* will make inquiries at this time of the household as to what sorts of problems and diseases it has suffered from in the past, who its clan deity is, and so forth — information he needs in order to do his part properly.

The calling of a *gurau* is open to anyone who cares to follow it, and entails a period of several years' apprenticeship to one or more practicing *gurau*. According to the *gurau* of Pipariya, a *guruwa* is obliged to take on as a pupil anyone who wishes to learn; he cannot refuse. He also asserted that a pupil was not obliged to do anything in return for the *gurau*. The novice *gurau* had to learn the types of offering appropriate to particular gods, and the form of the worship or *puja* that accompanied it. Thus, Chitrasen Baba⁷ (one of the more important deities for whom, according to some Tharus, the valley is named) requires the sacrifice of a dove, while Ghurigurau and the *gan* (the guardian spirit of the household) require a chicken.

The *gurau* is essentially a healer. When Tharus wish to draw an analogy between the *gurau* and a contemporary institution, they invariably compare him to a medical doctor. As the *gurau* in Pipariya put it, "Before, there weren't any doctors. There were only we *gurau*." The source of illness or physical ailments (such as barrenness in women) may be gods or malevolent spirits (*bhut*). While the *gurau* is the intermediary between human society and that of the supernatural, he intercedes with the gods only in matters pertaining to sickness and barrenness in women. He cannot ask a god for favors such as success in a business enterprise or success in school, for such favors are not granted

by the local deities in Chitwan, or is not in their power to grant.

The *gurau*'s work as a healer is not confined to intercession with gods and spirits to discover the cause of illness; the *gurau* also seeks to cure disease through the medicinal use of roots and herbs and other skills. This aspect (as well as the relationship between ordinary villagers in Nepal and the institutions of modernity) is particularly well illustrated in the following incident. A Tharu boy in Pipariya broke his arm and was taken to Bharatpur hospital. The journey to the hospital was long and painful: a sixty-minute ride in a bumpy bullock cart to the nearest bazaar followed by a journey in a crowded bus into town. Rather than put the boy's arm in plaster right away however, his mother was told to bring him back another day to have it done. As she was unwilling to do this (it would have entailed another long trip to Bharatpur), she decided to summon a *gurau* with a reputation for successfully healing broken bones. A few months earlier, under very similar circumstances, he had successfully set the broken arm of a Tharu woman in the village. (In her case, the hospital had recommended that she go to Kathmandu to have her arm attended to.) This particular *gurau*'s family is said to have been specialists in the art of setting broken bones for generations. In any case, under his ministrations, the child's broken bone was successfully healed.

The summoning of the *gurau* in this instance was not due to a lack of faith in western medicine (after all, taking the boy to hospital, which required subjecting him to the considerable discomfort of the journey there, was the initial response to the situation), but to the callousness or inability to provide service of its practitioners. There is a great deal of faith in Western medicine, and Tharus (and other village people) will go to great lengths and to considerable expense in order to benefit from it. Some of its locally reproducible practices, notably the giving of injections, have even acquired a ritualistic character. The present *jimidar*'s father had brought a schoolteacher from Bihar to the village to teach the village boys. Now retired, he had begun to specialize in giving injections. From time to time, he would come to the house of the older *jimidar* to give him an injection (of a vitamin B solution) in his buttock. A vitamin B tablet would have been as efficacious as an injection, but consuming it would have much less effect psychologically. To swallow a pill smacks too much of the everyday; there is nothing mysterious or specialized about it. A needle and syringe, on the other hand, are not part of the everyday and administering an injection entails a moment of pain that doubtless underscores its ritual efficacy. It is also worth noting that the services of the specialist trained in this sort of ritual — the medical professional — is dispensed with. A Tharu would not dream of encroaching in a similar way on the ritual domain of a *gurau*, or for

⁷Chitra Sen was one of the four sons of Mukunda Sen; see Muller-Böker, this volume.

that matter a Brahman priest. Women are likely to have more faith in the *gurau* than are men, particularly younger men with some education. Both men and women however will have recourse to both doctor and *gurau* to treat illness; in their minds, the two kinds of specialists complement rather than compete with each other.

The patharithiya gurau

The *patharithiya gurau* is chosen by the heads of the village households and is selected for his learning and experience. The household heads meet in a *kachaheri* (a council of the village's household heads) and discuss all the possible options before settling on a choice. Each household will contribute a small sum of money (from one to five rupees in 1991), and the principal household heads (or better still, all of them) will take the money, a chicken and a bottle of liquor and go to the house of the *gurau* agreed upon. They will invite him to be the *patharithiya* of their village. His acceptance of the gifts signifies his assent. The *gurau* however must not assent too readily; if he does so, his *mantra* will be devalued. The delegation will keep pressing him until he either says yes or makes clear he means no.

Once the *patharithiya* has been chosen, he cannot easily be changed. The reason is that only the *patharithiya* knows what he has been saying to the gods; another *gurau* will not know what communication has taken place and may not be able to function effectively. Nor do the villagers want the trouble of selecting another *patharithiya*, as the process is time consuming and expensive. The *patharithiya* of Pipariya village at the time of my initial fieldwork was a very well to do tractor-owning farmer from a village near Sultana, about 90 minutes distant on foot. He was chosen because he was the pupil of his predecessor.

The *patharithiya's* services, as I have said, is invoked for matters affecting the village as a whole. If many in the village population are ill (a common phenomenon in the rainy season, when gastro-intestinal problems are rife) or the crops are being attacked by disease, the household heads may decide to seek the expertise of the *patharithiya gurau*. The village households are divided into a number of groups (there were at least 16 such groups in Pipariya) each consisting of two or three households. Each group takes in turn the responsibility of summoning the *gurau* when his services are required, of hosting him, and making preparations for the ritual (known as *barna*) which he will perform.

The initiative for organizing the event lies with the *jimidar*. If he learns that there is illness in the village or disease among the crops, he will summon the household heads to a *kachaheri* to determine whether the situation

warrants the intervention of the *patharithiya gurau*. If they decide it does, they will then determine which group's turn has come to organize the event.

This group's first responsibility is to ask the *gurau* to perform the *barna*. The *gurau* will set the date for the ritual. The date appears to have little to do with auspiciousness and more to do with the *gurau's* convenience. The only compensation the *gurau* gets for performing the *barna* is to be fed on the day he performs it. The responsibility for feeding him lies with the group that summoned him, but the village as a whole bears the expenses of the meal. Every village household must send a representative to a group entrusted with the task of catching fish for the *gurau*; if they are unable to do so, they must make a financial contribution. In times past, the *raiti*⁸ households shared the cost of a *barna*; today, all households except those of the landless are expected to contribute an equal amount towards the cost.

The ritual of the *barna* often involves the prohibition of meat consumption in the village for a given period of time, generally a few weeks. On one occasion, the *patharithiya gurau* prohibited the consumption of meat as part of a *barna*. Four of the village households however had broken that prohibition: ironically, they were those of the two *jimidar* and of the two village *gurau*. One of the *gurau* had not been at home the day the *patharithiya gurau* pronounced his prohibition, and his family had eaten fish without his knowledge. Where one of the *jimidar* was concerned, his wife had killed a duck the day before the *barna* so that the sick people in the house could have meat. Then the *gurau* forbade the eating of meat, but rather than let it go waste, the *jimidar's* household went ahead and ate the duck. At the next *kachaheri*, the assembled men told the older *jimidar* that as the chief man in the village he should have been the first to set an example. Those households which had violated the prohibition (including that of the two *jimidar*) were then assessed a fine of 20 rupees each.⁹

The relationship a Tharu has with his *ghar gurau* is a personal one; where the *patharithiya* is concerned, he must act as a member of a community. However, for this to

⁸The term *raiti* refers to the tenants of the state, who held land under *raikar* tenure; they enjoyed full citizenship of the village, unlike their *bahariya* or servants, who did not participate in the processes outlined here. See Guneratne 1996.

⁹The money collected in this way is kept by one of the villagers, who maintains accounts. This money is used for expenses involving the whole village, such as buying a *khasi* (gelded goat) for a feast, or to feed the *patharithiya*. The penalty for refusing to pay the fine was ostracization; the threat of such a penalty was undoubtedly more serious in the days when the *jimidar* was the petty ruler of the village, but is probably unenforceable today.

happen, the *jimidar* must take the initiative; summoning a *kachaheri* is his prerogative. Without a *kachaheri*, the maintenance of communal action is impossible. The *jimidar*'s importance here recalls the time when he was the most stable element in the village's population, for most *raiti* and *bahariya*, as I have shown elsewhere, were a transient population (Guneratne 1996).

The forces that may transform the role played by the *gurau* in Tharu ritual life are both internal and external to their society. A Tharu *jimidar* who withdraws from his responsibility to the village community — by not summoning a *kachaheri* or by giving up worship of the Bramathan — will effectively bring about the disappearance of the *patharithiya gurau* from the field of village ritual and the erosion of the village as a moral community. This has happened in at least one village, Sultana, which has given up the custom of retaining a *patharithiya*.

Belief in the efficacy of the *gurau* is in decline among Tharu generally (but less so among women than among men). Nor are young men interested in taking up the calling. The *patharithiya gurau* of Pipariya had four students, none younger than about forty and at least one considerably older. The *gurau*'s son, a young man in his twenties, expressed no desire to take up his father's calling, "Because a *gurau* never gets to sleep" (because he is constantly called away to attend to sick people). In general, the calling of the *gurau* is seen by young men today as archaic and not very relevant to the needs of the society they live in. Women, whose lives are more rooted in the village and who are relatively less exposed to outside influences may think differently, but women apparently never become *gurau*.

There is then a declining recruitment to the calling of *gurau*. None of the young men I knew in Pipariya had the remotest interest in becoming a *gurau*, and those who had been to high school and college (admittedly, a very small number) professed skepticism of the work of *gurau* in general. One *gurau* summed up what I believe is the broader view of the *gurau*'s role today in these terms:

In the old days when the work of the *gurau* was being done, when medicines were being given . . . at that time there was confidence in the *gurau*. Those who were ill believed in the *gurau*. What's it like now? These days now, it's a different time (*arkai jabana bhayo*). You have to get the *guruwa*, but you also have to bring the doctor's medicine . . . The doctor does his work. If [the patient] becomes bent and twisted, one has to say that our *bhut-baital* are responsible and they [the doctors] can't do this. Then the *gurau* comes in useful. These days there is use to be had from both sides. The *gurau* by himself is useless, the doctor by himself is useless

Death and the Brahman

The Tharu believe that when a person dies she becomes a *bhut* who will remain near the place she knew in life and do harm to the living unless she is properly propitiated and sent on her way into the next world in a timely fashion with the appropriate and necessary rituals.¹⁰ The service of a Brahman priest is necessary to accomplish this process successfully. The *gurau* on the other hand plays no role in funeral rituals. While traditionally this has been the most significant role the Brahman has played in Tharu ritual life, since the eradication of malaria Brahmans have become an indispensable part of other rituals and life cycle rites — most notably, marriage — in which they formerly played no role. I shall describe here the practices through which the Tharu deal with death and the part played by the Brahman in them. The structure of the set of rituals and practices described below gives the Brahman a critical role. Even though it is the *gurau* who deals with the manifestations of *bhut*, it is the Brahman who, by his performance of the fire ceremony and his acceptance of gifts, can ensure that the dead never become *bhut* in the first place. The *gurau* is able to manage and control *bhut*, but the ritual over which the Brahman presides prevents their emergence or lays them to rest.

The most significant change that has taken place in the funeral customs of the Tharu has been in the manner of disposal of a corpse: from burial to cremation. Cremation is a practice that has become widely established in Tharu society only in the last fifteen to twenty years.¹¹ Before that it was characteristic only of *jimidari* and other well-to-do families and even then was probably limited to important individuals. Cremation was probably at one time a marker of social status but like the *kanyadan* ceremony, it has rapidly spread to the rest of the population. Like so many other changes in Tharu society, the permanent presence of Brahmans and the fear of appearing backward and "jangali" before them have played some part in this trans-

¹⁰There are some *bhut*, however, who cannot be put to rest in this way. The Tharu believe that if a witch dies, he or she will continue to haunt the living as *bhut*. Also, the soul of someone who has been unsuccessful in some endeavor in life may, because of its dissatisfaction, remain as *bhut*.

¹¹The Japanese anthropologist Kiyatomo Mikame, who, based on fieldwork in the village of Sultana in 1979 has written the only other description available in English of Chitwan Tharu funerary rites, notes that "Burial *bhut* [referring here to *bhut* associated with graveyards] are scattered along a river to the south of the village. A grave is about two meters by one meter and can be recognized easily because the surface is a little higher than the surrounding area, which is pasture land. Children fear these burial places, never approaching them but going round, shouting *bhut, bhut!*" (Mikame 1990: 138).

formation. Based on his fieldwork in Sultana in 1979 and 1980, the Japanese anthropologist Kiyotomo Mikame writes, “[cremation] has recently been adopted from the *Pahariya*, the Hindus surrounding the Tharu. Be that as it may, burial is still common in the village” (1990: 138). It is ironic that this change has taken place concurrently with the extensive deforestation of the Chitwan valley, which has made wood for every purpose (including cremation) scarce. At the cremation described below, some of the men had to leave midway to cut down a tree for more wood, only to be berated by a soldier from the army post in Sauraha for felling the tree without permission.¹²

My knowledge of Tharu funeral rituals is based mostly on observations made during the funerals of two old women in the village and discussions with a number of Tharus, particularly Indrani, the wife of the *jimidar* Ram Bahadur. One of the deceased was the mother of my neighbor Bikana Mahato; she died of tuberculosis. The other was the mother of a man named Defu Lal. I did not witness her cremation, but I had a description of it from my research assistant Surendra, who attended it, as the dead woman was the sister-in-law of his wife’s mother. I was however present at the ceremonies on the 13th day after her cremation that marked an end to the period of mourning.

Bikana’s mother had been ill for a long time and died during the night. As soon as it was daylight, a party of men from the village, her husband’s kinsmen, carried the dead woman to the riverbank on a makeshift stretcher, on which had been spread a quilt (*sirak*). A white sheet, called a *kaparkot*, which someone had covered with flowers and sprinkled over with red *abir* powder, covered her. Also on the stretcher were her x-rays and medicines: everything the doctor had given her for her illness, all of which were to be consigned to the flames. An axe was placed on her chest and a sickle under her head. A cart followed the procession, carrying wood for the funeral pyre.¹³

The old woman’s body was placed on the riverbank while the men unloaded the cart. They arranged the wood carefully to a height of about two feet. The body was then lifted up by about half a dozen men who placed it on the pyre with the feet pointing towards the river and the head towards the mountains to the north. They removed everything that Bikana’s mother had on her — her clothes, the quilt, the white cloth — and draped a fresh, new white cloth over her body. Mustard oil was rubbed on her feet, face

and hands. Then more wood was placed around the body until she was completely covered. The items that had been removed — her clothes, the quilt — were cast on to the river where they floated away downstream; her x-rays and medicines remained with her. After all this had been completed, most of the men and boys present lit torches of jute stems and elephant grass and then proceeded to circumnavigate the pyre clockwise three times.¹⁴ They then set fire to it, thrusting their torches in among the firewood. The entire process, from the time the cortege arrived at the riverbank to the time the pyre was lit took about 15 to 20 minutes.

After the cremation is over, if any portion of the corpse has not completely burned (and given the chronic shortage of wood, this is probably not uncommon), it must be retrieved from the ashes and bundled up in a white cloth along with some milled rice, chilies and some coins. Bikana and his brothers took such a bundle out to midstream and placed it in the water.¹⁵ Before this was done, however, the village carpenter, who is Bikana’s father’s brother, broke off a small piece of the charred flesh and put it in a container made of a short piece of bamboo stem, which he then stopped up. On the day of Magh Sankranti, this will be taken to Dev Ghat and deposited in the Narayani River, which flows down to join the Ganga (Ganges) on the plains of India. Meanwhile, the other men present, having doused the embers of the pyre, proceeded to dispose of the debris of the cremation in the river.

The final act of the cremation was then performed. A figure representing the dead person was crudely made with sand on the riverbank: a head with two arms outstretched. Two banana leaves were placed on the hands and the woman’s sons placed fried paddy (some of which had popped from the heat of frying) on these leaves. Milk from a small bottle was then poured over this offering. The milk represents the mother’s milk with which the woman nourished her children during life. Before they made this offering to their mother’s spirit, her sons bathed in the river and dressed themselves in clean white dhotis. All the other members of the funeral party also bathed at this time. The cremation was over by 11 o’clock, three and a half hours after the funeral party left the village. People began to return to the village; Bikana, as he walked along, made

¹⁴In the ritual as it is performed by high caste Hindus, the pyre is perambulated *counter*-clockwise; see Bennett (1983: 99). The Tharu ritual also departs from the ritual described by Bennett in that no Brahmin priest is present.

¹⁵In Bennett’s description of cremation among high-caste Nepalese, a small portion of the flesh of the corpse is removed and buried in the riverbank for the demon who eats corpses, to satisfy it and so prevent it from troubling the bereaved family (1983:99).

¹²The army is responsible for protecting the national park.

¹³When a man dies, before his corpse is taken out of his house to the riverbank, his wife, if she is living, will take up a flaming torch of jute, and make a few passes with it over his mouth, in order to invoke his spirit not to visit her as a *bhut*.

marks on the ground with the hoe that he carried. This was to enable the spirit of the dead woman to find her way back to her house. There she will be given to eat and drink during the 13 days of formal mourning that must take place before she can depart to the *svarga-lok*.

Once the funeral party has returned to the village, they congregate at the dead women's house where they are fed. The men of the *patidar* into which the woman married are given to eat on banana leaves, probably because it is traditional and helps to distinguish this occasion from ordinary meals. Most people eat these days on large metal plates readily available in the bazaar. In addition to their own leaf plates, a smaller strip of a banana leaf is placed before the men of the bereaved *patidar*. The women who serve the food first place a small portion of it on this smaller leaf; this is the dead woman's portion. The men are served rice, vegetables cooked without salt, and milk. Before eating, each man takes a little water and sprinkles it on this portion, offering the food to the spirit of the deceased. After this has been done, the dead woman's portions are retrieved by a couple of young girls who take them away to be disposed of. Only after this rite has been completed will the men begin to eat.

The period of mourning

Like other Hindus, Tharus observe a period of thirteen days of mourning for a woman and twelve days for a man. This period of mourning, culminating in a ritual to remove the pollution incurred is called the *kaj* (in Nepali, *kriya*). It usually begins on the day of the death. The commencement of the *kaj* may be delayed if one is poor and cannot afford it (the expenses are mostly those associated with prestations to the *purohit*), which would leave one vulnerable to the visitation of *bhut*. The burden of mourning in this case was borne by Bikana's brother, who cooked and ate separately from the rest of the household to ensure that it would not be polluted by contact with him. Nor can the person undergoing mourning in this way engage in any work which was the reason that Bikana did not observe mourning himself; as head of the household he was responsible for managing its affairs. Usually, only one person, known as *kartahana*, observes mourning; I will refer to the *kartahana* as the chief mourner.

The chief mourner is polluted for thirteen days (twelve if the deceased is a man), and is ceremonially purified on the last day by an elaborate ritual conducted by a Brahman priest. The Tharu do not have the custom of *barakhi* and *masik sraddh*, in which monthly rites are observed for a year following the death to assist the dead person's soul in its journey to the next world (Bennett 1983: 107-08). Their immediate responsibility to the dead ends with the completion of the formal period of mourning.

The chief mourner dresses himself in clean white garments and wears around his chest a *janai* or sacred thread. During this period, he isolates himself from contact with the rest of the village and his household; he becomes polluted for that period, lives in a room separate from the main house and must prepare his meals separately. He must avoid salt, chillies and turmeric as well as mustard oil (for which he substitutes *ghiu* or clarified butter); these are all basic ingredients in Tharu cooking. He may eat garlic, ginger, and root vegetables such as potatoes, and *cokha* made without salt and oil.¹⁶ Food may not be boiled. If the chief mourner is the son of the dead woman, he may not drink milk. He is allowed to eat only once each day. The dead person's soul keeps him company and shares in the food he cooks, until it finally departs early in the morning following the purification rituals of the final day.

When someone dies, kinsmen, including women who have married out, are notified. Women who are so notified are supposed to return to the villages of their kinfolk, bringing with them a *boka* (ungelded goat). Early in the morning on the last day of the *kaj*, her kinsmen sacrifice one of these goats to the dead person. Tharus believe she will take the sacrifice with her as she leaves her household for the last time. Some of the more sanskritized Tharu families, such as that of Ram Bahadur, do not practice this custom because they feel it an inappropriate thing to do at a time of death; they substitute plantains and yogurt instead. The rest of the goats are butchered and eaten at the feast that concludes the *kaj*.

Rituals of Purification

Early on the morning of the 13th day, preparations had been made for the ceremony to end the formal period of mourning for Defu Lal's mother. On the threshing floor behind his house, grass mats and a blanket had been spread, around which a few men were squatting; they were waiting for the *purohit* to turn up. Items to be used in the ritual had been laid out on the ground. These included leaves of the peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) and lotus leaves, a basket containing a leaf cup filled with yogurt, bananas, and twine, and another containing white cloth and a leaf container which contained little balls made of flour, and a little metal bowl.

At about 8:30 the *purohit*, Ghimire, arrived. He and the men then set out in a group to the riverbank, taking with them the items mentioned above and a hoe, as well as a small branch broken off from a peepal tree. At the riverbank, the hoe was used to dig a small hole in the damp

¹⁶*Cokha* is a type of food made by grinding or mashing potatoes or some other kind of vegetable and mixing it into a ball with oil, salt and chillies.

soil about two feet from the water's edge. A pot of rice was placed in this hole and the peepal branch anchored in place behind it with a large rock. A clay lamp was placed next to the pot of rice. Once these preparations were complete, the Brahman sat himself down in front of this arrangement on a grass mat. In front of him were placed the various items enumerated earlier, including the yogurt and the balls of flour; next to him was a small pile of banana leaves.

The sapinda sraddh. At the riverbank, under the guidance of the priest, the chief mourner performs a ritual intended to transform the deceased from a *bhut* into an ancestor spirit (*pitri*).¹⁷ The chief mourner, who had now completed the thirteen days of ritual pollution, stripped down to a loincloth and bathed in the river. Around his body was tied the sacred thread, which he had worn during the 13 days of mourning. After he completed the bath, he approached the Brahman and squatted in front of him, while the priest lit the oil lamp. Ghimire then poured some flour onto a banana leaf set in front of Defu Lal, who kneaded the flour into ten little balls using water from a metal pot. A third man started a fire next to the priest. The funeral party meanwhile was squatting on the riverbank while a Mardaniya (a man of barber caste) was busy shaving them one by one. All the hair is generally removed except a little knot at the top. The male relatives of the deceased shaved their heads on this occasion, although younger men are increasingly reluctant to submit to this and instead compromise by having their hair trimmed.

The chief mourner is given a ring made of *kus* grass by the priest to signify that he has now shed the pollution of death; he places this on a finger of his right hand. Thirty-one balls of flour dough are placed in the chief mourner's cupped hands by Ghimire, and he then places them on the banana leaf. This offering is followed by a handful of coins and a clump of leaves tied together. The Brahman then gives the mourner a little lighted taper, and a stick of incense, with which he makes passes around the banana leaf. The incense is then stuck into the side of the pit across from the peepal branch. The priest then instructs the mourner to take up this entire bundle wrapped in the banana leaf and carry it on his right shoulder into the river in which he abandons it while dipping his body into the water. The chief mourner then returns to his earlier position in front of the priest. The ritual described above is repeated, this time with the ten balls of flour. A little milk is sprinkled over the various items on the banana leaf before it is bundled up

¹⁷While this and other rituals surrounding the death are based on texts, there are variations from region to region and culture to culture. See Bennett (1983: 105-107) for an account of the *sapinda sraddh* as performed by high castes in the hills of Nepal.

and placed in the river. The bundle floats away down the river, but before it has gone very far, the contents sink into the water and only the leaf floats on. The chief mourner then has his own head shaved. He is given a new white cloth by the Brahman, which he dons; the old cloth is discarded in the river. Then he repeats the earlier ritual twice more. He kneads a mixture of flour, yogurt and water into five little balls which he places on the banana leaf, along with peepal leaves; this is then bundled up and left in the water as before. The chief mourner repeats this action with flattened rice (*ciura*) in a leaf basket wrapped in a white cloth.

One more act remains to be done before the rituals performed at the riverbank are complete. The mourner must push earth into the pit dug at the river's edge, using his head and hands, until he has covered the pit; the pot of rice it contains is retrieved before the hole is filled in. The branch of the peepal tree is now firmly anchored near the edge of the river. The base of this branch is sprinkled with water from the *lohota*, and the clay oil lamp is placed at its foot. The mourner washes his head and hands in the river.

All those who accompanied the priest and the mourner to the riverbank must wash themselves in the river before returning home. Someone had bought along a radio, and this had been playing softly throughout the activities by the riverbank. Men and women, as they finish bathing, move away from the river in small groups. Shaving the head, trimming one's fingernails, bathing, and putting on fresh clothes all symbolize the transformation of one's condition from impure to pure.

The suddha santi ritual. In preparation for the fire worship ceremony that will mark the termination of the mourning period, a *jagya* or ritual space had been constructed in the courtyard of Defu Lal's house. Its sole occupants were Defu Lal (as chief mourner) and the Brahman priest Ghimire. The Brahman sat on the open side facing into the enclosure, while Defu Lal sat facing him. Between the two was a small fire. On either side were banana leaves piled with uncooked rice, on which were placed a few bananas. To the priest's right was a basket of marigolds, which flower during this season. The chief mourner was also surrounded by banana leaves piled with grain. The ceremony itself was very brief, and followed by a series of prestations to the Brahman, whose elaborateness and cost is typically commensurate with the resources and social standing of the household concerned. The purpose of these prestations is to provide the deceased with all the goods she will need in her next life. In this instance, the household was one of the better off in the village, owning four *bigha* (about 2.7 hectares) of land and having two of its male members employed in salaried jobs.

The following items were gifted to the priest. The first

item brought into the enclosure (by removing the wall of the *jagya* behind the chief mourner) was a rope bed. Along with the bed were gifted various items of bedding: a mat, a pillow and a quilt, a mattress and a blanket. All these items are gifted to the priest in the name of the dead person, who will have use of these items in the next world. Other items of use to the dead person are given to the priest: a pair of slippers, a plate, a metal pot, a spatula, a clay pot, various other cooking utensils, a blouse and a saree (if the deceased were male, a man's clothes would have been given), white cloth, turmeric, bananas, oil. The priest received all the uncooked rice used in the fire ceremony. He was also given a female calf, worth about 500 to 600 rupees (the total value of the gifts would have come to a few thousand rupees). All these items were from the dead woman's son's household. Her daughter also made gifts to the priest, but these were much more modest in scope, contained on four winnowing trays brought forward by women; items of food (potatoes, roots, chillies), colored cloth, rock salt, and cash.

After the prestations to the Brahman had been completed, the Mardaniya who had earlier shaved heads by the riverbank came forward to receive *tika* from the chief mourner, from whom he also received flowers and cash.

Once the gifts had been made, the Brahman began to recite verses in Sanskrit, while Defu Lal took a handful of colored rice (*akset*) and threw it on the gifts. All the members of his household then touched the bedstead (on which the various gifts had been piled) while the priest continued to recite, to signify that the gifts had come from all of them. The chief mourner then made a gift of cash, which was placed on the bedstead. The Brahman asked if there was more money and continued to recite in Sanskrit from a book. When he ceased reciting, the onlookers, who had fished out their change at his prompt, threw it onto the bed. At this point, other individuals brought forward winnowing trays filled with items to be gifted, and each gift was treated in the same way, by being sprinkled with marigold petals and colored rice while the priest continued to recite. The sprinkling of these items on the gifts is said to contribute to the spectacle, and make it more pleasing (*ramailo*) for those who both watch and participate.

At the end of these proceedings, the Brahman gives *tika* to all those present who come forward to receive it, beginning with the chief mourner who receives yellow *tika*; he receives coins in return. Yellow *tika* made from turmeric paste (called *setho* (white) *tika*) is also given to widows; all others receive red *tika*. As he gives *tika*, he also pours a few drops of cow's urine from a metal *lohota* by his side into a folded leaf and gives it to each person to drink. Only members of the dead person's *kul*, who have

come for the funeral, partake of this; it affirms their kinship.

The *kanha kathke* ritual. After the fire ceremony and the prestations to the Brahman are over, a ritual ending the *kaj* is performed. A woman brings out a winnowing tray covered with a banana leaf on which a large quantity of food — dal, rice, vegetables, pickles, yogurt and other food-stuffs — is placed, together with a little clay container of rice liquor.¹⁸ The chief mourner places a long bamboo pole known as a *bahina* on the floor outside the door (which has earlier been smeared with cowdung to purify it), and an axe next to it. (This is the same axe that accompanied his mother to her cremation.) He stands with one leg on the bamboo pole and the other on the axe, holding the clay pot of liquor in one hand and a *lohota* of water in the other, his hands crossed in front of him. He faces away from the nanglo, which has been placed behind him. Then another man poses the following question to the chief mourner, repeating it three times and receiving the same response each time:

"Is the *kriya* over?" (*kanha kath utarala?*)

"*Utarala*", he replies (It's over).

After he has answered in the affirmative for the third time, the chief mourner throws the contents of the two vessels over each shoulder onto the nanglo. He then wraps up everything on the nanglo in a banana leaf and puts it into an old basket, which already contains the remains of the earthen stove on which he had been cooking for the last twelve days. He carries this to the river and tosses it in. The burden of the *kaj* is now completely lifted; he may reenter into full intercourse with society at large. While he must refrain from drinking milk for a year, he no longer need observe the other food prohibitions.

This ritual completes the process of purification of the chief mourner. All that remains is to re integrate the chief mourner into society by reestablishing his commensality with his fellows. This is accomplished through a meal known as the called *bhadarko bhat*; this is also the last meal the *pitri* will eat in her home. That she shares in it makes all who partake of it polluted; they must bathe on the morning after to purify themselves. Because women of the dead person's *patidar* may not cook, a *kachaheri* is called to arrange for the feast, and the work is relegated to women of other households. One or more women, known as *bansiya*, are appointed to cook rice, and others, known as *khajalahari*, do other work related to the feast. Mikame adds a third to this list, the *ghathoriya*, "a man whose work

¹⁸The items are as comprehensive as possible because if anything is missing, the soul of the dead person will not be able to eat it in its next birth.

is to go for the guests to attend the dinner, and to prepare for the dinner" (1990: 148). The *khajalahari* and the other workers are fed, but are not paid for their contribution to the formal rituals of mourning. The chief mourner and the men of his *patidar*, along with various other visitors, seat themselves in a circle in his courtyard and are served cooked rice, *ghiu* (clarified butter), vegetables and other foods on plates made of lotus leaves. The chief mourner must be the first person to eat; he takes five mouthfuls, and then the rest of the party may begin to eat.

The departure of the pitri

The *pitri* departs this world for heaven (*svarga-lok*) early in the morning following the final day of the *kaj*. She takes with her the calf that was presented to the Brahman on the previous day, as well as all of the other items given to him. The Brahman leaves everything outside for one night so that the *pitri* may take them; only after the *pitri* has gone does the Brahman take them home with him. The *jimidar's* wife laughed when she told me this; how can the *pitri* take anything with it, she asked. "It's Ghimire *baje* who gets everything" and the woman who was sitting listening to our conversation in the courtyard laughed with her.¹⁹ The *pitri*, meanwhile, holds on to the animal's tail, and it carries her across the ocean to the *svarga lok*, where she will lose all knowledge of her earthly existence. Once there, she will eventually be reincarnated; if her *karma* has been good, she will soon be reborn as a human being.

On the day before the *pitri* leaves, a separate bed is prepared for it in an outlying building of the main house, such as the granary, where it can rest and observe the night's festivities. This is usually the room that was occupied by the chief mourner. A plate of food and a *lohota* of water are left there for the spirit. In the case of Defu Lal's mother, dust was scattered on the floor around the bed so that her footprints would show, evidence of her presence.

The *pitri* is entertained on her last night with her kinfolk with music. A couple of musicians are brought in to play traditional Tharu songs and music. This is one occasion on which Hindi film music and musical styles, which have infiltrated into many other aspects of Tharu life, are deemed inappropriate. People gather round to listen to them and *raksi* (rice liquor) flows liberally. This goes on until morning. The *pitri* takes her ease on the bed prepared for her, enjoying the music until it is time for her to depart, which she does around 4 a.m. This is the auspicious time to bathe and cleanse oneself of the pollution incurred by

¹⁹Prestations to funeral priests are typically explained in the anthropological literature as a transfer of pollution or inauspiciousness (Parry 1994; Raheja 1988). This does not seem to be the way that Chitwan Tharus and even the Brahman understand it; such explanations were never vouchsafed to me.

the previous night's meal. Very early in the morning, after it is supposed to have left, people go into the *pitri's* room. If the food is untouched, the people who performed during the night will eat it. If a mouse has been at the food, Indrani observed, people would say that it is the *pitri* who has eaten it. Money has also been left on the bed for the *pitri* to give to the performers and they help themselves to this.

Later that morning, everyone in the village — but usually just the household heads — are bidden to a meal, which is referred to by the term *basiyaka bhat*. Those who attend bring with them some milled rice and one rupee or whatever they can afford, which is given to the household that has been in mourning. This is a contribution towards the expenses of the funeral.

CONCLUSION

In the first half of this paper, I discussed Tharu belief in the malevolent spirits of the dead and the Tharu ritual specialist's role in controlling these beings. I followed that by describing the series of rituals through which the emergence of malevolent spirits is channeled in the proper direction. That is, at death the deceased becomes a ghost, but through the timely performance of the proper funerary rites, it may be prevented from roaming the world bringing misfortune on to the living and its journey into the afterlife facilitated. The Brahman is essential to this process because he alone possesses the knowledge to conduct the ritual properly and because he is the proper intermediary through whom the gifts intended for the spirit's afterlife may be presented to her. The essence of these prestations belongs to the spirit; the Brahman keeps their material residue.

I have also noted that Tharu beliefs in the pervasiveness of malevolent spirits seem to be in decline. While the intensity of Tharu beliefs in these beings has been remarked on by many ethnographers since the nineteenth century, they do not unduly trouble Tharus in contemporary Chitwan. The decline of the role of these beings in the Tharu cosmology is indexed by the decline in the prestige and ritual importance of the *gurau* and the lack of interest among young men to pursue the *gurau's* calling. A complex of reasons is responsible for this transformation, and they stem from the malaria eradication project. Before that, the Tharu lived in small villages hemmed in by a vast forest, having to cope with the depredations of wild animals. The project opened the valley to intensive settlement and because of that, the destruction of the forest cover that had made it a prime hunting preserve for the Ranas. Today, only a third of the valley is forested, and almost all of that forest lies within the national park. The traditional cosmology of the Tharu is closely bound up with the existence of forest. Tharus believe for instance that the destruction of the forest has weakened their traditional gods, who drew their strength from the jungle. The clearing of the

jungle and the intensive settlement of the valley has removed the conditions under which belief in *bhut* thrived; but just as importantly, the year round presence of the Brahman priest, which the malaria eradication project made possible, allowed for the timely performance of the rituals that kept the proliferation of *bhut* in check. Tharus have seen hill people and even some of their own number build their homes in areas known to be pathway of *bhut*, suffering no adverse consequences of any kind. *Bhut* are less likely to trouble people today, and that fact has resulted in an erosion in the position and influence of the *gurau*. He is no longer needed to keep a multitude of malevolent spirits at bay in the long months when funeral rites cannot be performed.

As I have pointed out, the presence of the Brahman is necessary, on the final day of the *kaj*, to perform the fire ceremony and accept *dan* (prestations) on behalf of the *pitri*. Before the malaria eradication project, Brahmans would come into Chitwan only during the cold season — the months of Kartik, Mansir, Poush and Magh (mid-October to mid-February). For that reason, there were long delays between the time of death and the time of the *kaj*. The well-to-do were able to carry out the funeral rites as soon as the Brahman arrived in the village, but the poor had first to amass the resources to do so and two to three years might pass before they could organize a *kaj*. During this period, between death and the successful conclusion of the *kaj*, the Tharu believe that the *pitri* cannot enter *svargalok*. The *pitri* therefore becomes a *pret* or a *bhut* that wanders the earth, waiting for the proper rites to be performed that will give it rest. *Bhut* are said to have been very common in those days. Indrani recalled that there was one in the river at Chitrasari (where the main shrine to Chitra Sen is located) when she came to Pipariya as a bride, which made people fearful of going there. The *gurau* of Pipariya claimed too that a *bhut* used to haunt the road between the village and the adjacent hamlet of Merauli. If *bhut* impinge less strongly on the consciousness of Tharus today, it is partly because the year round presence of the Brahman means that the *kaj* can promptly be attended to. The balance of ritual power has shifted in the direction of the Brahman and the cultural tradition he represents, as Tharu society has become more Nepalized (and thus hinduized). The *gurau* on the other hand, like the tiger, has become a threatened species in Chitwan.

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