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RITUAL BROTHERHOOD: A COHESIVE FACTOR IN NEPALESE SOCIETY¹

FERDINAND E. OKADA

FICTIVE FORMS of kinship and systems of mutual aid are not unique to Nepal. Even within a single area north and northeast of India such social institutions have been reported as, where a bond is established between two individuals, *ingzong* among the Lepchas of Sikkim² and *Ganye* among Tibetans; another type, also Tibetan, is *Kidu*, a mutual aid society.³ In Nepal the extension of kinship bonds through fictive brotherhood or sisterhood, aside from functioning as a social mechanism for mutual aid, also serves as an important cohesive factor in a society marked by ethnic and linguistic diversity. The Nepalese comprise some ten or twelve major former tribal groups, now structured as castes, of Indo-Aryan or Mongoloid origin. At least nine or ten mutually unintelligible languages of Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman and possibly Munda stocks are spoken, besides a number of derivative dialects. The lingua franca, Nepali,⁴ has its roots in Sanskrit; another important language, possessing its own literature, is Newāri which falls into the Tibeto-Burman group. Hinduism and Buddhism (both Mahayana and Hinayana) are practiced, not only as separate religions but often as a synthesis of the two in certain regions. There are also indications of indigenous religious beliefs.⁵

Several writers have noted the existence in Nepal of a system whereby two individuals, usually unrelated men of the same or different caste, regard each other as brothers, as true as the sons of one father, after participating in an initial ritual. Sanctioned by religion, it is a system which formalizes existing warm interpersonal relationships, encourages the mutual exchange of practical aid in times of stress, and serves to unite individuals of different backgrounds. Aside from

1 This paper, a shorter version of which was presented at the 1956 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, is based on data gathered during five months (December, 1955, to May, 1956) in Nepal. I am indebted to the Department of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, for the sponsorship, and to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research for the financial aid, which made the research possible. I am also grateful to Anand Singh Pradhan of Dehra Dun, India, who acted as interpreter and assistant, and to Drs Harry L. Shapiro, Charles Wagley, and Morton Fried for their helpful comments on this paper.

2 Gorer, 1938.

3 Miller, 1956.

4 Also known as Khaskurā, Gurkhāli and Parbatiyā.

5 Fürer-Haimendorf, 1955; Kawakita, 1955.

Adam, however, other writers have barely made more than passing reference to it. It has been variously called "artificial brotherhood,"⁶ "mit relationship,"⁷ "mith friendship" and "fictitious brotherhood,"⁸ and "blood brotherhood."⁹

I shall use the term "ritual brotherhood" in this paper because certain religious rites must be performed before a relationship which, ideally, is thought of as being almost sacred, is cemented between the participants; upon the completion of which they regard themselves, and are regarded, as actual brothers. Inter-marriage is prohibited between their children, who are now considered as being brothers and sisters (*bhai-bhai*), and the father of one partner is thought of as being equally the father of the other. The term most frequently used to designate this relationship is, in Nepali, *mit lāunu* (literally, "to put on a friend," i.e., to form a friendship) and refers specifically to ritual brotherhood. In ordinary usage the term for "friend" is *sāthi*. This paper will employ "mit" in its restricted meaning and, in accordance with Nepalese custom when referring to the occupational and/or ethnic background of an individual, the term "caste" (*jāt*). A ritual sister is called a *mitini*.

Fourteen men representing nine castes were interviewed, the majority of them several times, in order to gather data for this paper. Five of them were Newārs and two were Brahmins. The following castes had one representative each: Chettrī, Magar, Kāyastha, Rai, Limbū, Sunuwār, and Sherpa. Except for the Buddhist Sherpa, all were Hindus in varying degrees of orthodoxy. Kathmandu in the central valley of Nepal was represented by two Newārs, a Brahmin and a Chettrī, the lowland terai area to the south by the Kāyastha and a Newār, the western hills by a Brahmin and the Magar, and the eastern hills by a Newār, the Sherpa, the Limbū, the Rai, and the Sunuwār. The remaining Newār was born and brought up in India. Most of these castes were tribal divisions peculiar to Nepal. The Kāyastha or writer caste, however, is widespread in northern India, especially in Bengal, and *Chettrī* is probably a corruption of *Kshatriya* denoting the warrior castes of ancient India. The Brahmin, from whose caste come priests, is entitled to the homage of all the castes even though his occupation may be secular. Six of the informants, while they were aware of the system, had no *mit*; the remaining eight had a combined total of sixteen, with one man, the Limbū, accounting for four of them.

It is possible that the practice of ritual brotherhood is waning in urban Kathmandu — three of the four city-born informants had no *mit* and one stated that the custom was dying out — but data indicate that it is still a strong social institu-

6 Adam, 1936, p. 541.

7 Northey and Morris, 1928, p. 102.

8 Vansittart, 1896, p. 153.

9 Bishop, 1952, p. 70.

tion elsewhere in Nepal and that it occurs among the Nepalese who have settled in India. A somewhat similar system among the Lepcha of Sikkim is primarily a ceremonial relationship set up for the purpose of facilitating trade between themselves and such foreigners as Tibetans, Nepalese, and Bhutanese.¹⁰

In Nepal the predominant reason for entering into ritual brotherhood is mutual affection between the participants and their desire to strengthen and formalize the ties of their relationship. Naturally, the advantages of mutual aid are not overlooked but, in the main, the emotional reason is primary. Many informants stated simply, "I liked him," when asked why they had taken on a *mit*, amplifying further with remarks to the effect that they both had similar natures or were alike in looks and in thinking. Most ritual brotherhoods are formed between two young men who have grown up together in the same village or have known each other for several years. Sometimes two young boys who are very close friends will have their relationship formalized through prearrangement by their parents when they reach a certain age. And sometimes two young men who have taken a sudden liking to each other during a chance meeting will decide to become, or be persuaded by their friends or relatives into becoming, ritual brothers.

There are other situations in which personal advantage plays a stronger role. Usually these involve a high caste and/or rich man, who initiates the action, on one side, and a low caste and/or poor man on the other. Though such instances are said to be rare the initiating person may enter into a ritual brotherhood in order to avoid the effects of a bad horoscope or in order to gain prestige in the sight of his neighbors. When misfortune and evil are predicted by his horoscope an individual, especially a rich man, will form a ritual brotherhood with a low caste person, even at times an untouchable, to whom the predicted bad fortune can, at least partially, be shifted. He might pick the sweeper who works for him although the tendency is to select someone he will meet but seldom in the normal course of events. An astrologer confirms whether his choice is suitable and sets a date for the ceremony. Then, too, there is the prestige attached to a man who has a *mit* much lower in caste or much poorer than himself. He gets known in this life as a doer of good deeds and as a man whom position and wealth has not made haughty — thereby improving his chances for a better future life. In both instances the advantage to the low caste or poor partner is mainly material: money, gifts, the privilege of asking his *mit* for help in emergencies or having influence wielded on his behalf and, in addition, the honor of having an important or high caste person as a brother. It is not unknown for an individual to court the favor of a powerful man hoping to be accepted as a *mit*.

¹⁰ Gorer, 1938, p. 119.

In general, however, mutual affection and mutual aid between two men form the basis of a *mit* relationship. For this reason most ritual brothers are at approximately the same age level.¹¹ Moreover, adolescence and early manhood is the time when one acquires a *mit*; the age at the time of the initial ceremony among the informants ran from twelve to "22 or 23" (the particular informant was not sure). In a typical example, one man had two *mit*, both his age, and the respective ceremonies took place when he was 13 and 15 years old. Again, while theoretically a man may have as many ritual brothers as he wishes, practically there is a limit. For a man to have four or five simultaneously is considered to be about the maximum. It is noteworthy that four out of eight informants had only one *mit* each; and one of them, a Newâr, claimed that it was not normal to have a second *mit* unless the first died. Some of Adam's informants told him that they were limited to one only; others said that they could have as many as they liked.¹²

When two men decide to become ritual brothers an auspicious day for the ceremony may be determined by casting a horoscope. It may, however, also be part of the celebrations for religious holidays or weddings or it may take advantage of the presence of a Brahmin priest (*purohit*) and a sacred fire at some rite (as at the end of a mourning period). The tenth, or concluding, day of the festival of Dasahra is sometimes picked because it is always the occasion for feasting and merriment; or, if a relative were getting married, the ceremony for ritual brotherhood may be performed at some time before the feasting begins. It would seem that the selection of these days is in part an economy measure, in part based on a desire to heighten the joyousness of the occasion.

Details of the initial ceremony differ according to circumstance and people involved but a *purohit* usually officiates. Relatives and friends witness the ceremony. The two principals, after removing their shoes and heavy curved knives (*khukuri*), face each other across a sacred fire of special woods in which rice, clarified butter (*ghi*), and honey are burned. They greet each other with the Hindu salutation (*dhok dinu*), each bringing his hands, palms pressed together and fingers pointing up, in front of his face. Money — one to five rupees in silver — is exchanged through the *purohit* and usually such personal possessions as caps, scarves, or rings.¹³ Blades of *dubo* grass may be sprinkled over the two men's heads and sometimes they may garland each other with flowers. Often a dab of rice grains and curd (*tika*) is put on their foreheads. The *purohit* gives a talk

11 In one instance there was a gap of seven years in age between the two *mit*. Otherwise the maximum gap was three years (two instances).

12 Adam, 1936, p. 542.

13 Presentation of a white scarf and a sum of money is necessary to establish a *Ganye* relationship or be accepted as a *Kidu* member (Miller, 1956, pp. 158, 161).

referring to an incident in the Hindu epic *Ramayana* in which Ram, searching for his abducted wife, meets Sugriva who becomes his ritual brother and assists him. He announces that the two men in front of him are brothers from this day on and adjures them to help and protect each other, but adds certain strictures prohibiting them to sit together on the same bed or chair or to touch each other; though they are permitted to meet every day, if they wish, they can talk only at a distance.

A respected old man, especially a Brahmin, may officiate if a *purohit* were not available, or he may be replaced by a Buddhist lama if one or both of the principals are Buddhists. *Ghi* alone may be burned in the absence of a Brahmin *purohit* since only he can make a special sacred fire. Sometimes the two men may make the announcement that they are now brothers. Bathing together in a sacred river or pool may also be a feature of the ceremony. According to one of Adam's informants, an altar is sometimes used:¹⁴ the two men sit in front of a *jagge* which is

. . . a square platform, three feet in length and one foot in height, made of earth and cowdung which [is] sprinkled with Ganga water and flour forming certain lines and figures, among others sun and moon. The ceremony itself consists mainly of an exchange of the two men's pockets or simply of mutual gifts.

The ceremony is followed by a feast. A variety of dishes, meats (even for most Buddhists), rice, fruits, vegetables, are prepared but there is no dish particular to the occasion. Both the new brothers contribute to the feast although when the economic difference between the two is marked, the richer will do most, or all, of the providing, with the tacit understanding that the poorer will reciprocate when he can. Where food restrictions because of caste differences obtain, the lower caste man will provide either raw food which the higher caste brother and his family can cook for themselves or have it cooked by a third person whose caste is high enough so that his partner will not be defiled by accepting cooked food from him. Alcoholic drink may be present depending on the personal tastes and orthodoxy in religion of the people involved.

The ritual brothers are now considered to be related as by blood. Says Adam,¹⁵

The artificial relationship, like adoption, *naturam imitatur*; thus the position of artificial brothers is like that of natural born brothers. An incest barrier between a man or woman and the family of his or her partner is erected. One is no longer allowed to marry one of the relatives of one's *mit* or *mitni*. Even the *mit*'s widow cannot be married. . . . Another consequence is that the fathers of the partners consider them

¹⁴ Adam, 1936, p. 541.

¹⁵ *Idem*, pp. 541-542.

equally as sons. . . . Except for the incest barrier and artificial relationship with the mit's family, no legal obligations or rights seem to arise. Above all there is no inheritance from a man to the family of his mit.

The marriage restrictions are extended to the children and descendants of the two *mit* "for several generations" according to Vansittart.¹⁶ Among the Lepcha intermarriage is forbidden for nine generations.¹⁷ Such prohibitions would be unnecessary if partners of different castes adhered strictly to rules of caste endogamy. There is intermarriage, however, between castes which consider themselves on a more-or-less equal plane. Rai-Limbū, Chettri-Newār, and Sherpa-Tamang marriages occur; Gurungs and Magars have apparently married outside their castes;¹⁸ and Limbū-Lepcha, Rai-Lepcha and Rai-Chettri (one instance) marriages have been recorded in Darjeeling.¹⁹

My data bear out Adam's previous statement that one cannot inherit property from his *mit*, but his remark concerning obligations is contradicted to some extent. A man has a right to ask his *mit* for help although the ideal situation is that both should be on the alert to assist each other without being asked. While it may not be a legal obligation, there is nevertheless a real obligation to come to the aid of a ritual brother, especially in financial matters. Financial assistance in the form of money freely loaned at no interest is apparently the chief obligation and a strong factor in adding to an individual's sense of security in a *mit* relationship.²⁰ A man may contribute food, clothing, and money when his *mit* gets married and, if from another village, will provide food and shelter for a *mit* traveling through. He may help arrange the marriages of his partner's children and look after them to the best of his ability should their father die. Ritual brothers are very definitely obligated to help each other voluntarily in every way they can, particularly in times of crisis, danger, or financial stress.

They also honor each other. Thus a man may give occasional feasts for his *mit*. He must observe thirteen days' mourning (as with any close relative) when his *mit* dies, wearing old clothes and cloth shoes, refraining from shaving and abstaining from salt during this period. He does not address his ritual brother by name or nickname or as "brother" but uses the formal terms *mit-jiu* or *hajur* and employs the respectful forms of the verb in conversation.²¹ One informant held that the

16 Vansittart, 1896, p. 154.

17 Gorer, 1938, p. 119.

20 I was informed that money-lenders in Ilam, Eastern Nepal, charge an interest rate of one anna per rupee per month. This is an annual rate of seventy-five percent.

21 *Jiu* is an honorific suffix. Forms of address in ranking are: *hajur* ("sir" or "your honor"), and three grades of "you," *tapain* (respectful form), *timi* (familiar), and *tan* (for inferiors).

18 Vansittart, 1896, pp. 99-100.

19 Barnouw, 1955, pp. 16-17.

respectful second person *tapain* and the familiar *timi* could be used in addressing a *mit* but there was general disagreement with his statement.

The wife of a ritual brother is avoided. She stays in seclusion if her husband's *mit* comes visiting and he is not allowed to see her nor her ritual sister, should she have one. This prohibition does not hold, however, if he becomes her ritual brother. Adam notes that among the Murmi (also known as the Tamang), "artificial relationship can be established between two married couples and between a single man and a married couple."²² My Limbū informant became the *mit* of a married couple in a single ceremony but he was not allowed to see the wife's face, a curtain being hung between them, until after the rites were concluded. He addresses her as *mitini-jiu*.

In another instance the Kāyastha informant said that, during the course of his *mit's* marriage celebrations, a special day was set aside for the groom's family to meet the bride. On this occasion he went with them and saw the bride in her home, the only time that he has ever seen her.

Bishop states that there is some overt homosexuality between ritual brothers in Nepal:²³

. . . [The Gurkha] maintains the practice of blood brotherhood. This leads to an extended moral code; so that, for example, sexual liaisons between brothers in blood are not very much looked down upon, though they are not so frequent as amongst Sikhs and Pathans.

The explicit prohibition by the *purohit* at the initial ritual of physical contact between ritual brothers certainly suggests a safeguard against the possibility of the occurrence of overt homosexuality. Moreover, a Brahmin, though he was neither a *purohit* nor a *mit*, said that ritual brothers should not meet too often and, on being asked the reason, replied, "Femininity brings contempt." He reiterated that one should avoid his *mit* as one does not wish to be laughed at for being feminine and added that it was thus preferable not to have a good friend as a *mit*.

On the other hand, the prohibition of physical contact (which does break down on occasion, e.g., shaking hands or supporting an exhausted *mit*), examples of ritual brothers not seeing each other too often, and a certain formal (though warm) behavior when they meet — all of which may be safeguards against physical intimacy — were explained by others as being due to caste or economic differences or to a distaste for over-emotional display. I am of the opinion that homosexuality plays but a negligible role, if any, in ritual brotherhood. There is neither

²² Adam, 1936, p. 542.

²³ Bishop, 1952, p. 70.

overt homosexuality nor physical intimacy associated with even the closest of Lepcha ritual relationships.²⁴

In a country as heterogeneous as Nepal, ethnically and linguistically, the fact that individuals of different castes become so close as to regard themselves related by blood is one of the most significant aspects of ritual brotherhood. Says Adam,²⁵

Now, it is remarkable that partners of an artificial brotherhood *may belong to different tribes*, except only the lowest castes (*sanu jat*). It was stated that artificial brotherhood between Gurungs, Magars, Limbus, Rais and Sunwars is quite common, but I learned that artificial brotherhood is also possible between Chetris, and even Brahmans, on one side and castes of middle rank (*matwala*) on the other.

While no actual examples were found, data already presented indicate that there is a form of ritual brotherhood in which a high caste individual may choose even a menial for his brother. Further statements along this line were made by a Brahmin, who said that it was best for a man to choose a *mit* younger than himself and from the lowest caste, and by a Magar of the Rānā (high) subdivision, who named a Damāi (tailor), a Kāmi (ironsmith), and a Sārkhī (worker in leather) as being among those eligible to become the *mit* of a Thāpā or Rānā Magar.

A Sunuwār must apparently always select someone from another caste as his *mit* and a Rai said that Rai-Bhotiya ritual brotherhoods occur. A Limbū can have *mit* from other castes but Vansittart's²⁶ claim that an outsider can be accepted as a Limbū through *mit* relationship with one was emphatically denied by my Limbū informant. The cross-cutting of caste lines is self-evident in the following tabulation of the castes of informants and their respective *mit*.

<i>Caste of informant</i>	<i>Number of mit</i>	<i>Caste of mit</i>			
Brahmin	1	Bhotiya			
Newār	1	Newār			
Newār	1	Newār			
Newār	1	Chettri			
Newār	2	Newār	Rai		
Kāyastha	3	Brahmin	Baniyā	Haluwāi	
Sherpa	3	Sherpa	Thāru	Rai	
Limbū	4	Brahmin	Brahmin	Limbū	Tamang

24 Gorer, 1938, p. 120.

26 Vansittart, 1896, p. 154.

25 Adam, 1936, p. 543. The emphasis is Adam's.

It is difficult to grade on a simple order of social ranking the castes of Nepal because of high and low subdivisions among those representing former tribal groups, changing occupational emphases, and a certain amount of subjectivity among the informants which clouds the picture. For example, some Newārs have a military tradition, making them the equivalent of Chettris, and Newār Buddhist priests of a high subdivision might consider themselves equal to Brahmins (though the Brahmins would not agree). Castes which supply recruits to the British or Indian armies have gained status and, fairly recently, Sherpas have attained some prominence because of their association with mountaineering expeditions. In the table above, the Brahmin-Bhotiya and Brahmin-Limbū relationships show the greatest gap in social status between partners — there is no doubt that Brahmins are high caste, Bhotiyas and Limbūs relatively low. Among others considered low on the social scale are Sunuwārs, Tamangs and Thārus. The Kāyastha (writer) is lower than a Brahmin but higher than a Baniyā (merchant) or Haluwāi (sweet-meat maker).

Aside from social, economic or occupational differences ritual brotherhood cuts across ethnic and linguistic lines. Chettris and Brahmins are, in the main, descendants of Indo-Aryan peoples who migrated into Nepal from India and speak Nepali, an Indo-European language akin to the Hindi of northern India and the Maichili spoken by some Thārus. Bhotiyas are Tibetans who live on both sides of the Nepal-Tibet border and the Sherpas are closely similar to them. Among other Mongoloid peoples are the Rais and, most likely, the Newārs, Limbūs, Tamangs and Magars. At least four of their languages — Bhotiya, Newāri, Limbū, and Magar — are of Tibeto-Burman origin. In essence, a Sherpa is a foreigner to a Thāru, as are a Newār to a Rai and a Limbū to a Tamang.

Religious lines have been crossed in the relationships established by two of the informants: the Hindu Brahmin has a Buddhist Bhotiya *mit* and the Buddhist Sherpa has two Hindu *mit*, a Thāru and a Rai, aside from a third who is a fellow Sherpa and Buddhist. The Brahmin-Bhotiya initial ritual was held in a Buddhist temple in the latter's village. The Sherpa-Sherpa ceremony had a Buddhist lama officiating and *tika* was not a feature; on the other hand, though no *purohit* was present at either of the Sherpa-Thāru and Sherpa-Rai rituals, *tika* was a feature of both and the proceedings were essentially Hindu.

The Nepalese *mit* relationship, the *Ganye* and *Kidu* of the Tibetans and the Lepcha *ingzong* are similar in that they emphasize, to varying degrees, mutual aid among the participants and are social mechanisms for extending kinship bonds either by formalized friendship or fictive kinship. *Kidu*, however, differs from the others in that a bond is not established between sets of two individuals; rather,

a man joins an organized group which functions as a unit. It has a roster of members, officers who serve for one to three years, and a treasury.²⁷ *Kidu* and *Ganye* do not regulate marriage;²⁸ nor, apparently, are they religiously sanctioned. These factors serve to distinguish *Ganye* from *mit* and *ingzong*. It would seem that the fiction of blood relationship is absent from the Tibetan institutions, definitely present in those for Sikkim and Nepal.

Ingzong and *mit*, especially the latter, lay more stress on actual close friendship between the participants than does *Ganye* (where a relationship must be kept up even if hostility develops).²⁹ There is a tendency in *ingzong*, however, for two good friends to formalize their friendship by a partial ceremony which, since religious sanction is lacking, does not entail marriage restrictions or enforce respectful and formal behavior. The advantages are similar to those for *mit* based on mutual affection but a partial-*ingzong* relationship is not very stable and is often allowed to lapse.³⁰ In a true *ingzong*,³¹ accompanied by a full ceremony, the emphasis is not so much on mutual affection as on mutual help in trading (i.e., opportunity for continuous trading and hospitality and protection while away from home). Such a relationship may also be hereditary although a full ceremony is required for each new generation.

In Nepal ritual brotherhood is apparently still a strong social institution. It is sanctioned by religion, generally based on mutual affection, and serves to increase an individual's sense of security by cementing close ties with another human being and providing for mutual help in times of stress. In a country where difficulty of transportation and communication, caste distinctions, religious affiliation and language barriers tend to limit a man to his circle of kindred, ritual brotherhood is an important mechanism in breaking down parochialism and extending a man's social and intellectual awareness beyond his relatives and beyond his own tight community.

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