

The 'Vijaya Dashami' ritual in Nepal

Short Essays

ABSTRACT

This article is based on a short ethnography conducted on the 10th day of the Hindu festival 'Vijaya Dashami' in Nepal. Although, symbolism is important, I use a phenomenological approach to demonstrate that this ritual shows reverence not just to religion but social order and kinship. In doing so, I discover that it is 'disorder' or the unconventional aspects of the ritual, that make the ritual a social order. I hope this article encourages a move away from bounded definitions of rituals and ritual 'order', towards fluid understandings of ritual as 'self-organised' and entangled with society and culture, whilst adding to anthropological debates around theory and practice.

keywords: ritual, social order, kinship, phenomenological approach, practice theory

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Worship rites, graduation and marriage— is that what you think of when you think of rituals? Recently, anthropology has highlighted the importance of recognising rituals in the everyday. Rituals can be as 'ordinary' and 'informal' as pouring a cup of coffee every morning, despite being attached to complex and contextual meanings. However, even worship rituals, which are ostensibly about 'formality' in the sense that they are repeatable, predictable and standardised, do indeed change in some respect in order to absorb new forms usually classed as 'informal'. On the 10th day of the Hindu festival 'Vijaya Dashami' on the 15th of October, I participated in a ritual on zoom with my family in Nepal – a familiar ritual nonetheless made unfamiliar through zoom. The picture below shows the materials used in the practice: tikka (a mixture of rice, yoghurt, and red powder), jamara (a household-grown plant), and money and fruit, which I will refer to as 'gifts' for simplicity. Symbolism is explicit here—the gifts symbolise purity, good luck and good virtue, all

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The ‘Vijaya Dashami’ ritual :



Figure 1: Materials used in the practice: tikka (a mixture of rice, yoghurt, and red powder), jamara (a household-grown plant), money and fruit. Own work.

omens of Durga. Elders give these gifts and blessings to younger members repeatedly until the second-youngest member has blessed the youngest. The meaning behind the ritual is religious: a celebration of the Hindu goddess Durga killing a demon, a symbol of victory over sin and deceit (Thapa, 2021). However, the unconventional aspects of the ritual interested me: the disruption to the structure of the proceedings due to Zoom, other informalities and spatial disruption challenged the ritual form. Thus, to understand these unconventional aspects, I focused on a less explicitly talked about, phenomenological approach of bodily gestures, discourse, and uncovered social meanings. I focus on Bell’s ‘practice theory’ to show how ritual reflects and reinforces social order, and Handelman’s ‘ritual in its own right’ to see how ritual creates and strengthens kinship ties. Although I carried out some research, much of my knowledge comes from years of practice. While usually an

insider, Zoom gave me a different perspective of both an insider and an outsider. It is important to note however that due to the spatial disruption, I was limited in my experience in that I was unable to experience all senses.

The ritual

I joined a link to the Zoom session my sister, Cassy, sent through email at 10:10 am. I saw beaming faces—my grandparents, parents, sisters, aunts and cousins, all trying to fit into one screen. ‘Can you see us?’ my grandfather shouted. ‘Yes,’ I replied, excited to see everyone in one room again. They were all dressed in formal attire, men in traditional suits, women in glittery traditional dresses, and children in their newest clothes. The living room looked cleaner than it did when I saw it last. A plastic sheet and a plate of tikka, jamara, and a bunch of fruits in the middle separated four cushions on the floor. The ritual began with my grandparents. They

sat on the cushions and beckoned my dad (the eldest child) and my mum to come to sit on the other side of the plastic sheet. Both my grandparents put tikka on my dad's forehead. They then handed over jamara, fruit and money, which my dad received with two hands. My dad bowed down whilst my grandparents placed their hands on his head and blessed him with their mantras.

*'swastha hos, bigyan hos, dhani hos,
gyani hos'*

they said, which more-or-less translates to:

*'I hope you become healthy, smart,
wealthy and good'*

The same thing occurred with my mum. My dad waited for my mum to receive her blessing, and then they both moved out of the way. The next oldest individual, who was my aunt, replaced them. Next in line was my other aunt, Sandra, who had not yet arrived at the house. There was no acknowledgement of this, and the ritual just moved on. The entire ritual, although repetitive, and seemingly monotonous, was quite informal. Those not on the giving or receiving end of the blessings were chatting away about updates on their personal lives. When it was finally my turn, my grandparents unexpectedly acknowledged this even though I was not physically present. They faced me and used similar bodily gestures of putting tikka on and said the same mantra. I bowed in front of the laptop to accept their blessing even though the tikka ended up back on the plate instead of my forehead. My aunt Sandra arrived a few moments after, and she enacted the same

practices even though it was not her turn. The ritual finally ended with the second-youngest member blessing the youngest. After the ritual, I asked a few questions.

Social Order

Bell says ritual can reflect or reproduce social order through practice (1992:64). Thus, practice is strategic. More specifically to my ethnography, ritual stresses the hierarchy of family based on age. Age structures the ritual where the elders give blessings to the youngers.

Especially around the 10th day, the discourse of the festival is around money. Indeed, a common phrase addressed to youngers is 'you're going to be rich today'. Whilst my grandmother gets the other 'gifts' ready, each participant has to get money (usually fresh notes from the bank) ready to hand to their youngers. Youngers are taught to accept this money with respect, and keep the money safe. A focus on money makes it seem like this ritual aims to teach the young the value of money and earning to attain a higher status (Weber, 2008). However, rituals cannot be reduced to modes of components they include (Rappaport, 1999). Instead, I argue that through the repetition of accepting not just money, but all the gifts combined: the tikka on their foreheads which signifies good virtue, and the bodily gesture of bowing, the young are learning how to respect their elders. Through these bodily senses, even children embody and concretize social norms of respecting elders without adults explicitly teaching them (Clark, 2017: 30).

While Rappaport argues all rituals are formal in that they are more structured than in everyday life, Bell argues that formality is not intrinsic to a ritual (1992).

The 'Vijaya Dashami' ritual :



Figure 2: My cousin bowing down to receive blessings from my grandparents. Own work.

While informally chatting when not on the giving or receiving end of the ritual, even children know that when it is their turn; they quietly and formally carry out the bodily gestures and exchanges they have repeatedly practised before. I argue this very binary of formality is strategic because it emphasises the importance of giving and receiving and, thus, the importance of respecting elders. Altogether, no one actively thinks about these bodily gestures. Bell says, while 'ritual is embedded in misrecognition of what it is doing,' strategies of ritual action construct the social body (Bell, 1992:76). Therefore, the body even unknowingly, reflects and reinforces the hierarchy of the family and, thus, social norms of honouring elders.

Kinship ties

Looking at 'ritual in its own right', I noticed ritual invokes feelings of 'connectedness' that creates and strengthens kinship ties. Handelman describes looking at ritual 'in

its own right' by separating it from the social order and analysing it. He concludes that rituals do not simply reflect social structure but have self-organisation and thus, autonomy (Handelman, 2005). My dad and aunts, although with families and homes of their own, all come together on this day to the home they grew up in. Every family member receives and gives gifts and blessings. They enact the same bodily gestures and have the same tikka on their foreheads. This is an embodiment of family unity that produces feelings of 'connectedness'. Even though Zoom caused a spatial disruption, it still created feelings of 'connectedness', what Handelman (2005) labels 'communitas,' as portrayed in my aunt's statement: 'it feels nice to see everyone. I feel connected like one family again.' Therefore, the body is not just a passive slate receiving societal knowledge but produces feelings of 'connectedness', which strengthens kinship ties. Although everyone now has separate households, families, and obligations, they experience

a unified sense of connectedness unique to this ritual itself. This ritual and the feelings of 'connectedness' and familial unity that come with, created a temporary reality autonomous from wider societal structures and obligations (Handelman, 2005). Thus, perhaps the ritual has self-organised itself to be less about generational expectation and more about kinship, which in itself is a kind of 'social order', in Bell's terms. This explains why no one disputed, let alone acknowledged Sandra arriving late and disrupting the ritual order. 'It doesn't matter as long as she's here' my grandfather says, implying my aunt's presence, thus kinship was more important.

Rappaport emphasises how rituals are irreplaceable (1992). Although family members visit my grandparent's house from time to time, at no other time do members embody this unified 'connectedness' in the same manner. However, my presence on zoom contested this idea of irreplaceability. Whilst not present, the bodily gestures of me bowing and the blessings I received with it allowed me to participate and feel 'connected' like last year. My family members informally chatting to me about personal lives during the ritual only strengthened this feeling of 'connectedness' and hence our kinship ties. Handelman states 'self-organising phenomenal forms have variable capacities to build additional aspects of themselves' (2005:13). This implies that rituals themselves have consciousness and agency and create a separate reality. Thus, although separated through screens within the realities of the pandemic, this ritual self-organised itself to create a new virtual aspect that allowed me to embody feelings of 'connectedness' and restore kinship ties. Whilst the ritual is not replaceable, it is changeable

in that it absorbs new formats and expectations. Perhaps, then, the malleable nature of the ritual itself allowed me to more accurately respect what Handelman would refer to as its 'core DNA,' premised on generating cohesion and blessing within family units.

Conclusion

Although symbolism is important, a phenomenological approach, demonstrated in this ritual, shows reverence not only to religion but also to social order and kinship.

Bell states that ritual reflects and reinforces social order. I show how the exchange of gifts, blessings and bodily gestures reflects and reinforces hierarchies of the family based on age. Further, Handelman encourages looking at ritual 'in its own right'. I show how ritual can be autonomous whereby unified feelings of 'connectedness' strengthen kinship ties.

Thus, the unconventional aspects of the ritual I noticed did not disrupt the ritual or limit its efficacy as it continued to establish social order and strengthen kinship ties. It is important not to essentialise or see rituals, even traditional ones, as bound to convention. Ritual is embedded in society and culture with ever-changing elements.

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