

The Kumari

Girl-Child as Living Goddess

by Nancy Pearson Arcellana

Worship of the female energy is a rare occurrence in today's male-dominated world. But in Nepal, the worship and adoration of a girl-child as a living goddess known as the *Kumari* continues to this day, giving Nepal a special position in the religious history of the world.

According to Dhooswan Sayami, author of "Kumari: The Cult of Living Goddess" in *The Lotus & the Flame: An Account on Nepalese Culture*, this great human goddess, in the form of a girl-child, is the real mistress and protectress of the country. The king rules only as her trustee and in accordance to a mandate. The king shows every respect to this girl-child and gets the *Tika* from her hand. The tika is the mixture of paint (red) and food given as offering in the puja (worship) to the Goddess/God.

It is the common belief that the manner in which the child goddess reacts or responds to the king during the ceremony for the kumarijatra, where she puts the *Tika* on the king's head, forecasts the conditions of the country for the coming year. The country awaits with baited breath while the child goddess performs this duty and people believe that it is not good for the Kumari to laugh or cry too much. In fact, she should smile but not show her teeth.

The Kumari is also an important part of the coronation ceremony and all the festivals in the Kathmandu Valley. The Kumarijatra is one of the very important phases of

An adult's hand supports the headdress, which is too heavy for the child goddess' head to carry.

Indrajatra—a week long festival—so much so that it dominates this popular festival. People make the journey to Kathmandu to receive a blessing from the Kumari.

During special festivals, the child goddess is dressed in elaborate costume and bejeweled for her ride in a horse drawn chariot which takes her through the old city of Nepal.

A Life of Isolation

Only during these special occasions is the Kumari allowed outside of her temple. Rarely does the child goddess show herself to her devotees. It is also not possible to take photographs of her which can be done only by official



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government photographers or during the festivals when she appears in public.

The Kumari lives in a world of isolation. She is cut off from all contact with her

parents, home and society. She lives only with a caretaker family. The caretaker family is the *de facto* mistress of the Kumari's abode and the actual beneficiary of the generous gifts given to the child goddess. The child is naturally unaware of the material value of the precious gems and jewels bestowed upon her.

The Kumari's caretaker family, which also comes from the same line as the child goddess, is also the

one who decides what gifts the child goddess should receive. When the child goddess relinquishes her duties to another child, the caretaker family may give her

“We Dreamt of Becoming Nuclear Physicists”

A Nepalese woman looks back at her childhood.

There is a sense of tranquility all around Angur, a woman almost 65 years old. The tranquility is a testament to her faith and the outlook she has had on her life. Born in 1932, Angur is the second daughter—and therefore most unwelcome addition—in her family. Her mother and father had to tend to the fields so they left Angur in the care of an aunt when she was barely five months old.

Upon their return, Angur's parents found their second daughter barely alive. Her father was so grief stricken by her condition that she became his pet from that day onwards, even when a son was born 13 months later.

Angur was brought up in an extended family household—her parents, brothers, sisters and the family of an uncle. They were nine altogether. In those days, which unfortunately are not so different

from today, only the boys received an education. A private tutor gave the boys their lessons while the girls listened in the background.

One day, the tutor asked the boys questions about their English lessons that they couldn't answer. To the tutor's surprise, the girls answered the questions. Their mother happened to overhear the tutor scolding the boys and praising the girls. When the father learned of the incident, instead of scolding the boys further, he allowed the girls to study along with the boys.

Angur grew up in a time when children were married at very young ages. Today, the law requires a young girl to be 14 before she is allowed to marry although child marriages are not uncommon in Nepal's rural areas. At the age of 10, Angur was introduced to a boy of 11 and asked if she liked him. She remembers thinking to herself that he

a memento of her time as Kumari. The girl, however, is not allowed to take all her valuable gifts with her.

Origins of the Kumari

The Kumari is said to be one of the manifestations of Adi Shakti Durga, one of the thirty three million gods and goddesses in the Hindu faith. In one of the rare dances, Adi Shakti Durga is represented as killing a *Daitya* (devil) by giving him poison after enchanting him with her beauty, youth and dance. Durga sculptures on the palace of the Kumari and the child goddess's role in the Durgapuja festival also attest to this belief.

But within the context of Nepalese society where women are not given the same rights and privileges as men, how did this practice of worshipping a girl-child begin?

According to one of the stories in the Vamsavalis regarding the origin of the Kumari, the rulers of Nepal were given the privilege of a regular audience with the

which was not to be seen by women. But it is said that the daughter of the king happened to look at the talisman one day.

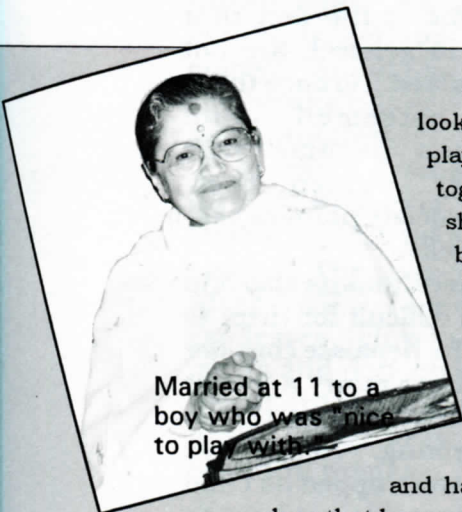
As a result, the king was deprived of the divine audience with the goddess. In his dream, however, the goddess advised the king that she would be going inside the body of a Sakya (Buddhist) girl. This began the custom of selecting the Kumari from the Sakyas.

According to Dhoo Swan Sayami, the Sakyas trace themselves back to Buddha, the

lion of the Sakyas. In the last decade of the 14th century A.D., a Malla king, Jayasthiti Malla reorganised Nepalese society. There were a large

The Kumari lives in a world of isolation

patron goddess, Taleja Bhavani, with whom the king, Trilokya Malla, used to play dice. This king had a diamond *Jantra* (talisman),



looked like "a nice boy to play with" and they spoke together easily. Little did she know that the young boy was being chosen as her husband. They were married one year later. Angur had remembered seeing her sister's wedding at the age of seven

and had asked herself, "Why does that happen?" Today, recalling her own wedding day, Angur says "that was one of my happy days. I never cried when I was married. They were giving me presents, honoring me, decorating me."

Angur and her husband lived separately for the first years of their marriage. But her mother-in-law, who had been widowed at the age of 15, was keen to have a grandson. So, when Angur turned 14, her husband came to live with her. "My husband would

go to school and when he came back he would teach me. He would be my teacher. He taught me mathematics, history, and geography. He taught me English and other things I sought to know." In a rather wistful way, Angur says, "We dreamt a beautiful dream...to be the first nuclear physicists." It was a dream that her husband did succeed in becoming. But for Angur, it was a dream that she was not allowed to fulfill, simply because she was born a female. She was not allowed into the laboratories and therefore could not continue in the sciences along with her husband. She was instead forced to take up humanities, which led her to political science and eventually to law. Although she has clearly excelled and was happy with what she did, Angur's eyes still carry the tears of longing for that long ago dream.

When will the time come when the fluke of nature and the whims of society's rules stop preventing girls from achieving their true dreams?

by N.P. Arcellana

number of Banras (goldsmiths) who could not be fit into the orthodox Hindu class system because they were Buddhists. Being Buddhists, they belonged to no Hindu caste. In addition, since they claimed to be decendants of the Buddha and were to be venerated (*bandana*) by all others, they were given the new caste name of Bandy-Banra (the Sakyas of modern times).

Choosing the Kumari

Sakya families "rotate" among themselves the privileged position of being the family from which the Kumari will be chosen. Given the stringent rules and tests which the Kumari must pass, one wonders if the girl is subjected to rigorous "training" from the moment she is born in order to perform correctly when the time comes for choosing the Kumari.

Choosing the Kumari involves a series of tests. First, the Sakya girl must be between the ages of three and four and without blemish, not even one small scratch. The Nepalese believe that the goddess leaves a girl's body when blood has flown out. This is also why a Kumari remains a living goddess only up to the age of 12, when she nears the age of menstruation or until she actually begins to menstruate, at which time the goddess has most certainly left her body.

The child must also pass the test of bravery. She is put into a dark chamber in

the Hanumandhoka palace. The chamber is filled with the heads of hundreds of sacrificed buffaloes. Adults place candles in such a way where the buffaloes eyes would seem like they were staring at her. The child remains in this room all night and if she does not cry and keeps a cool head, it is believed that she is not afraid and is thus fit to be a living goddess.

If the girl passes all these tests, she is taken to Kumarichhen, the palace of

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Kumari, and installed there as the human goddess on a special throne. From that point on, the girl-child is given the respect and honor of a divinity.

After Divinity, What Next?

Nepal's current Kumari was chosen at the age of four and has just reached the age of seven. She will most likely continue to serve for at least another four years before a new Kumari is chosen. As she nears the age of menstruation, she will be returned to society as an "ordinary" human being. What then will become of her?

In ages past, the child goddess was not even given any education during her stay in the Kumari's palace. Only recently was a tutor designated to provide the child goddess with some education.

But after being in such an honored place and worshipped by the king and society, the state gives the dethroned Kumari a meager monthly stipend of only 1,000 rupees (less than US\$ 20)—a terribly small compensation compared to the importance once given to her.

There may be, however, a very practical reason for such a small stipend from the Nepalese government. For one, there are hundreds of former Kumaris ranging from young to old; one former Kumari is now 75. But the bottomline is the fact that women, in general, are not highly valued. So once these highly esteemed child goddesses become just "ordinary" women, their value to society plunges very dramatically.

Former Kumaris also find that it is difficult for them to marry. The Nepalese consider it bad luck to marry a former child goddess. Those who do will die young. Young boys who are worshipped as child gods however do not have to contend with such superstitions or biases against marriage when they come of age.

The superstition against a Kumari marrying came from a legend that tells of a Kumari falling in love with

one of the devils. But the lovers could not be united because a goddess and a devil are not allowed to marry. When the devil became a problem for the other gods, they asked the Kumari to kill her beloved for the sake of her family of gods and goddesses.

The Kumari protests and initially refuses to obey. But the gods compel her to sacrifice her love. In the end, she is forced to kill the devil. But as a testimony to her love and faithfulness, she swore that she will never be married to another.

One Nepalese woman says this is why, like the devil before them, prospective husbands of former Kumaris are in danger of dying prematurely. At the same time, the legend illustrates how the Kumari is worshipped: as a virgin faithful to her vow never to marry. And if she marries, she breaks this vow to never marry another.

In reality, however, many former Kumaris do find husbands who take the risk against the superstition. After all, these child goddesses, chosen for their purity and perfection, were beautiful children who undoubtedly grew up into beautiful women.

Informal Kumaris

Among the Newari people of Kathmandu, there are other "informal" goddesses also called Kumari. Other cities, such as Baktapur, and other communities have their own Kumari. There is even

one day of the year where 365 Kumaris are honored. The main difference between these "informal" child goddesses and the Kumari is that they do not receive the same kind of national and state recognition as the official child goddess.

Nevertheless, for the Newari people, each girl-child is worshipped as a Kumari until her *Ihi* ceremony when

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she is seven years old. The *Ihi* is a ceremony where the girl-child is married to the Bel Fruit to ensure her purity and begin her initiation into her caste. This initiation period is brought to completion by another ceremony when the Kumari is married to the sun.

It is not easy to approach those who were once a Kumari. There are many who wish to interview them, including foreigners willing to pay sizable fees for an interview. This has made it difficult for

women in Nepal who are trying to research the experiences and effects of the Kumari system on the women themselves. The Nepalese women cannot provide money for interviews even though they realize that the former kumaris are only seeking ways to supplement their incomes.

Women researchers hope to be able to provide a venue where women who were former child goddesses can share among themselves their experiences as a Kumari and gain support from each other. In the process, maybe they can help Nepalese women better understand the phenomenon of girl-child adoration in the midst of the general disregard for the rights and status of women in Nepal.

This understanding can also help women find ways to utilize this popular belief system in the power of female energy to help empower today's women.

But most importantly, this could help bring positive changes to the everyday lives of the ordinary girl-child and the women that they become. ♪

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