

Living goddesses: Court inquiry into ancient Nepalese tradition

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Things seem to be looking up for Nepal. On November 21, the government signed a peace accord with Maoist rebels, thus ending an 11-year conflict that claimed the lives of more than 13,000 people. Also in 2006, King Gyanendra, fearing that he might be forced to abdicate, relinquished the absolute power he had seized in 2005 and reinstated multiparty democracy in the Himalayan country.

Having visited Nepal's palace of the Royal Kumari of Kathmandu—a "living goddess"—I was particularly interested in news that the country's supreme court has ordered an inquiry to determine whether Nepal's centuries-old living-goddess tradition violates the rights of young girls. The court instructed the culture ministry to "establish a committee and prepare a report in three months."

Hinduism is Nepal's dominant religion, but Buddhism also has a strong influence there, and often the practices of the two faiths are conflated in distinctive ways. A girl selected at the age of four or five to be a Kumari (virgin goddess) must come from the Shakya Buddhist caste, yet she is believed to be a reincarnation of the Hindu mother-goddess Taleju Bhawani, protector of the state. And she is worshiped by both Hindus and Buddhists. There are several "lesser" Kumaris in other parts of Nepal, but the one ensconced in the capital city of Kathmandu is the primary one. Indeed, her annual blessing of the king is believed to be essential if his reign is to succeed.

Among the rigorous criteria for Kumari status: The young girl must possess 32 physical "perfections," including excellent health, a sturdy body, unblemished skin, very black hair and eyes, attractive hands and feet, small genitalia, a clear voice, no body odor and all her teeth. Her family must be of good repute and noted for its piety. Moreover, her horoscope must jibe with that of the king. If a candidate meets these criteria, she is then subjected to a terrifying ordeal. She is thrust into a

darkened room awash with the blood of more than 100 smelly, decapitated buffalo. Men wearing grotesque demon-masks dance amid the carcasses, make loud noises and try to frighten the girl, who must walk clockwise through the room. If she screams, panics or faints, she is disqualified. The child who shows little or no fear and remains the calmest becomes the Kumari.

Though given the privileges and perquisites of royalty, the new goddess leads a largely sequestered life and is deprived of anything resembling a normal childhood—including contact with her family. For untold years the Kumaris received no education, since they were deemed omniscient. In recent times they have been given some tutoring in reading and writing but still do not attend a regular school. Goddesshood lasts only until the girl reaches puberty, at which time she becomes a “mere mortal” again and is returned to the family she hardly knows. She can lose Kumari status even earlier if she becomes seriously ill, loses a tooth or just bleeds a bit from a minor cut.

A Kumari is trained to take part in daily religious rituals, and on occasion the child holds audiences for a few select devotees; she is supposed to remain quiet and immobile on her canopied throne, so any gesture or facial expression of hers is interpreted as an omen—sometimes good, sometimes bad. The goddess is paraded around on a highly decorated palanquin at four or five yearly events, and at the September festival of Indra Jatra she is worshiped by the king himself. She is forbidden to let her feet touch the ground.

At regular intervals the Kumari is put on display for tourists (and devout locals) at an ornately trimmed second-floor window of her palace. The day I visited, she stood there for a short time, silent and motionless, dressed in an elaborate crimson brocade gown. A “third eye” was drawn on her forehead, and her eyes were heavily edged with kohl. She wore a lot of gold jewelry, as I recall. The crowd was kept at a distance (which was fine with me; I felt uncomfortable just being there).

Photography was forbidden, but one could buy an official photo of the goddess.

Having fallen from grace, as it were, former goddesses often feel a sense of abandonment and, lacking social skills, have great difficulty adjusting to ordinary life and relating to their families and other people. Alien to domesticity, they generally have a hard time finding a husband—and they aren’t helped by the still-persisting legend that a man who marries a former Kumari will die an early death.

The concept of cultural relativism as advanced by many anthropologists and others has much merit—to a point. The world's peoples should be sensitive about each other's customs and traditions, and respect and honor them. But there is a point at which basic human rights transcend cultural particularities. Customs that violate those rights are inherently and ethically wrong. Among such customs are honor slayings (chiefly but not exclusively in Arab countries) and genital mutilation (chiefly but not exclusively in African countries). I would add to the list Nepal's unique form of child abuse. I am delighted that it is Nepalese people who are now questioning it. (And doesn't this tradition have some similarities with our tradition of child beauty contests? Aren't they exploitive too? The rouged and gowned youngster "goddess" in Kathmandu reminded me of the late JonBenet Ramsey.)

Can Nepal's living-goddess tradition be reformed and humanized rather than abolished altogether? I am skeptical, but some Nepalese think it can. In any case, the tradition is not likely to go away without a fight. As one writer says of the Kumaris, "The superstition that 'without them, the country is lost' still retains its death grip on Nepal's Hindu-Buddhist society." And the living goddess is a huge selling point for tourism, adding to "Nepal's image as a land of mystery," as one tour guide puts it.