

CORALYNN DAVIS

*Bucknell University*

*Lewisburg, PA*

“Listen, Rama’s Wife!”  
Maithil Women’s Perspectives  
and Practices in the Festival of *Sāmā Cakevā*

**Abstract**

As a female-only festival in a significantly gender-segregated society, *sāmā cakevā* provides a window into Maithil women’s understandings of their society and the sacred, cultural subjectivities, moral frameworks, and projects of self-construction. The festival reminds us that to read male-female relations under patriarchal social formations as a dichotomy between the empowered and the disempowered ignores the porous boundaries between the two in which negotiations and tradeoffs create a symbiotic reliance. Specifically, the festival names two oppositional camps—the male world of law and the female world of relationships—and then creates a male character, the brother, who moves between the two, loyal to each, betraying, in a sense, each, but demonstrating, by his movements, the currents and avenues of power. This article makes available to other scholars of South Asian culture and society an extended description and analysis of this distinctive festival, while also contributing to the scholarly discussion of women’s expressive traditions.

**Keywords:** women’s festival—South Asia—brother-sister relations

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SONG #1\*

Mother, the month of *kārtik* has arrived.  
Now Sāmā is again incarnated.  
Hey, Coralynn,<sup>1</sup> sister, without crying  
Write a letter for me to my brother.  
Hey *hazām*,<sup>2</sup> also send my letter.  
Deliver it into Rāju brother's hand.  
As soon as Binu brother has read the letter,  
The horses will be ready.<sup>3</sup>

Hey, brother, buy me some *sindur*<sup>4</sup> powder.  
Buy it in the Hājipur bazaar.  
Buy me a *tikali*<sup>5</sup> from the Darbanga bazaar.  
Hey brother, also buy a Sāmā figurine in the Janakpur bazaar.

Hey, mother, the *sindur* looks good in brother's wife's hair.  
Hey brother, the *tikali* looks good on Kalpana sister's forehead.  
Hey brother, Sāmā looks good in Coralynn sister's hand.<sup>6</sup>

This song both remarks on and marks the start of *sāmā cakevā*, an annual festival held only in the Maithil-speaking regions of northern Bihār, India, and the southeastern Tarāi of Nepal.<sup>7</sup> Historians, linguists and literary scholars (particularly Indian scholars) have created a substantial literature on this region; yet, contemporary Maithil culture and society in Nepal have received very little attention from ethnographers and from scholars of women's verbal expressive forms.<sup>8</sup> Recent ethnographic work on Nepal's Tarāi region has tended to focus, instead, on Tharus and on populations living in the central and western Tarāi.

Maithils share with other South Asian groups many beliefs, values and practices,<sup>9</sup> but *sāmā cakevā*, a multifaceted festival filled with story, song, and play, is unique to Maithil society; an informal survey of leading South Asian folklorists who have not worked among Maithils revealed no familiarity with the festival, nor with the story that constitutes its base narrative. My purposes

in this article are two: First, I wish to make available to other scholars of South Asian culture and society an extended description and analysis of this distinctive festival. Second, I aim to contribute to the scholarly discussion of women's expressive traditions. The festival demonstrates the ways Maithil women create a communicative space among themselves that permits articulations of their gendered perspectives on social and sacred worlds. As a female-only festival in a significantly gender-segregated society, *sāmā cakevā* provides a window into Maithil women's cultural subjectivities, moral frameworks, self-understandings and projects of self-construction. The festival reminds us that to read male/female relations under patriarchal social formations as a dichotomy between the empowered and the disempowered ignores the porous boundaries between the two in which negotiations and tradeoffs create a symbiotic reliance. Specifically, the festival names two oppositional camps—the male world of law and the female world of relationships—and then creates a male character, the brother, who moves between the two, loyal to each, betraying, in a sense, each, but demonstrating, by his movements, the currents and avenues of power.

#### SITUATING MAITHIL WOMEN'S EXPRESSIVE TRADITIONS

I begin by offering some background information on the operation of gender in Maithil culture and society with particular reference to the place of religious practice in Maithil women's lives. I first encountered *sāmā cakevā* during a fifteen-month sojourn in Nepal in 1994–1995, during which I conducted ethnographic research in and around the Tarāi town of Janakpur. Janakpur is a commercial and pilgrimage center located in the heart of Mithila, a region named for the ancient kingdom that is said to have flourished in its place. No longer a political entity but rather a cultural and linguistic region blending into neighboring regions (HENRY 1998, 415–17), Mithila expands to the Himalaya foothills to the north, Ganges river to the south, the Gandaki and Kosi rivers to the west and east, respectively (BURGHART 1993, 763). Mithila boasts a great literary tradition and is renowned for its part in the Hindu epic *Rāmāyana*. According to this epic, Sītā, daughter of King Janak (after which the town is named) and eventual wife of Rāma, was born in Janakpur. Sītā and Rāma are widely considered to be *the* ideal couple in Hinduism—Rāma as handsome, noble husband and brave warrior, and Sītā as a model of chasteness and wifely devotion. The figure of Sāmā, the wayward daughter of Lord Krishna whose story forms the centerpiece of the *sāmā cakevā* festival, provides a very different model than does Sītā of feminine qualities.<sup>10</sup> (To avoid confusion, throughout the remainder of article, I will use *sāmā cakevā* or *sāmā* to refer to the festival, and Sāmā and Cakevā as proper names referring to the characters in the story associated with the festival.)

Nepal is officially a Hindu kingdom, despite the wealth of religious variation found among its population. And although Nepal has seen dramatic formal political reform and subsequent turmoil in the past fifteen years,<sup>11</sup> its citizens who are Hindu, high caste, and male still are significantly privileged over their counterparts in myriad formal and informal ways. Some of these privileges, for instance the privilege of inheritance based on gender, are currently being fought in the courts, and others, especially ethnic and caste privilege, are being fought in the political arena. Directly and indirectly, state-sponsored Hinduism treats Nepali women as legal and social dependents, sexual threats to patriliney, and (spiritually) polluting/polluted entities.

Among Maithil people in the Janakpur area, such cultural constructions pre-date the incorporation of Maithil society into the Nepali state and national society, and the two social formations have been mutually reinforcing in some ways. Added to these constructions is the Maithil practice of *pardā*, in local parlance, *ghogh tānab* (literally “to pull a veil”), meaning in this cultural context to draw the trail of one’s sari or shawl over one’s face. The *pardā* system in the Janakpur area most affects behavior of and toward recently married women and quite clearly concerns the assurance of appropriation of these women’s procreative capacities for their husbands’ patrilines. Ideally, it entails the social, verbal, and spatial/visual isolation of in-married women from non-household males and from males senior in kinship status to the husbands of those women. Although I have been repeatedly told that the constraints and burdens for daughters-in-law have loosened and lightened up in the current generation, I did meet women in the mid-1990s who reported that after marriage they had not left the household courtyard (except perhaps in order to travel chaperoned to their natal homes) in more than a decade, and who had never spoken with their husband’s elder brother with whom they shared common living space. These practices, particularly those involving space, generally do loosen over the years of an individual’s married life and especially for those women who successfully procreate patrilineally appropriate males (that is, have sons by their husbands). Poorer, lower caste, and less-landed households (commonly overlapping categories) are generally less capable of obtaining this ideal of practice than their high caste and better-off counterparts. Those of higher social classes are at once more capable of enacting *pardā* and potentially less dependent financially—but not socially—upon the “chastity” of their women; it is, therefore, difficult to generalize about a direct correlation between social class and *pardā*.<sup>12</sup>

While Maithil Brahman males sometimes refer to *pardā* as a valued marker of Maithil culture that distinguishes them from and makes them superior to their *pahāDi* (hill-dwelling) counterparts in Nepal, whose cultural traditions they describe as “broken” (*bigral*), popular media and development discourse, including feminist-inflected media and development discourse, tends to characterize

Nepali Hindu culture and society, and Maithil culture and society especially, as particularly oppressive to women. Both these Brahmanic and (women's) developmentalist kinds of portrayals have functioned historically to cloak the existence of other views and practices, such as the strategic behavior of women, culturally and socially specific contradictions and tensions in the gender order, alternative extant gender practices and cultural constructions, non-patriarchal axes of domination, and non-patrilineal solidarities such as those among related and non-related females and among cross-sex siblings. As I hope to demonstrate, attention to the practice of *sāmā cakevā* can help widen the view of Maithil understandings of gender and culture by revealing some of these other views and practices submerged in Maithil Brahman, masculinist, and development discourses.

Evidence for the exclusion of Maithil women's perspectives and concerns in dominating discourses includes the inattention to *sāmā cakevā* in other discussions of folklore and festivals in the Tarāi. According to Indian sociologist Sohan Ram Yadav, in his 1984 treatise on feudalism and rural formation in Nepal, and especially in the Tarāi region, the folktales and songs of Tarāi peasants provide a means of "cathetic outlet" in lives he treats as completely circumscribed by caste, kinship, and the village community (YADAV 1984, 173–74). Yadav describes the various annual festivals of the Tarāi, including information on the centrality of women to the festivals and the worship of local deities. Worship, he writes, "is celebrated with moderately delicious food and a get-together of womenfolk" (174). He strangely fails to mention the place of *sāmā cakevā* in that annual cycle of festival and worship. Perhaps this omission is due to the fact that *sāmā cakevā* is performed in the absence of men (except on the last day) and does not include the link between agriculture and women's fertility among its central themes, a connection he sees as the organizing principle of worship and cognition among people in the Tarāi (YADAV 1984, 173–82). Similarly, Ram Dayal RAKESH's survey of Maithil folktales, most of which were elicited from men, does not include the *sāmā cakevā* story among his *Folk Tales from Mithila* (1996), although in a separate text he provides a brief outline of the festival accompanied by a few songs and song fragments, and states that "according to people" a story about the festival exists in the *Padmapurana* (RAKESH 1998 [2056], 150), one of the great sacred Hindu texts. (One of the storytellers with whom I have worked also intimated that the story is referenced in the scriptures [*sāstra*].)

Yet, women's religious stories and practices complement male and priestly rituals, which tend to be more codified and which are sometimes accorded more importance, particularly by men and (male) priests. The central place of religiosity in Maithil women's lives is itself culturally elaborated (compare NARAYAN 1997, 128); indeed, as Inge Baumgarten has demonstrated, some female religious stories themselves emphasize

the necessity and righteousness of the female religious attitude and stress that women should retain them, despite the difficulties. Such stories portray, for example, extraordinary women whose stubbornness and insistence on the continuation of a religious practice endures and removes all obstacles and problems on the part of the family or husband. It is the faithful attitude and truly consistent practice of the woman protagonist which helps her go through all kinds of torture but to come out in the end either unharmed or altered, refined or rehabilitated (BAUMGARTEN 1997, 175).

In the variation of the *sāmā* story I have included below, it is exactly this religious faithfulness that is questioned, with subsequent torturous results and ultimate rehabilitation. In other variations, the question of the heroine Sāmā's devoteness is not even raised, while in none of the variations I have encountered is Sāmā celebrated for her behavior as a wife or mother (compare LESLIE 1991). Yet in them all, Sāmā's lack of feminine restraint results in a series of tribulations out of which she emerges as an object of devotion for Maithil girls and women.

A large literature has developed in the last two decades on South Asian women's expressive traditions, including song, story, art, and ritual. While some of this work focuses primarily on the ways dominant (patriarchal) forms and understandings of femininity are reinforced through women's ritual and religious lives (for example, LESLIE 1989)—even with “small deviations” (LESLIE ed., 1991, 3), and in self-serving ways (PEARSON 1996)—much of the current literature stresses that South Asian verbal arts constitute a form of discourse in a field of competing discourses and variety of contexts (for example, MARCH 2003, RAHEJA, ed., 2003). These works suggest, for instance, that women's songs are a place to articulate criticism and bawdiness not articulable in everyday speech or in mixed-sex settings (RAHEJA and GOLD 1994; SKINNER, HOLLAND, and ADHIKARI 1994; SRIVASTAVA 1991). A number feminist anthropologists of South Asia have also pointed to such forms of expression as a location for indirect commentary on the singer or teller's own individual life (for example, NARAYAN 1997, WADLEY 1994) in contexts where direct speech or other registers of articulation are not possible. (As is the case with *sāmā cakevā*, due to the varying degree and details of gender segregation in South Asian societies generally, in a great many instances women's religious and expressive practices take place in the absence of men.)<sup>13</sup> Raheja and Gold suggest that we understand such articulations not as a form of resistance, subversion, or inversion, but as evidence of the coexistence of contradictory perspectives available in differing moral registers (RAHEJA and GOLD 1994; also see KUMAR 1994). Thus, what HOLLAND and SKINNER (1995) have called cultural “contestation” and “critical commentary,” RAHEJA and GOLD (1994, 182) refer to as cultural “dissensus.”

Ahearn has argued persuasively that discourses contained within limited registers (such as those available in women's festivals) at one historical moment may become more widely actionable when material conditions change, creating the possibility of a shift in the balance of power or agency (AHEARN 1994, 1998, 2002). And while "the correct" interpretation of any particular event (such as a festival) or utterance, is never definitely knowable, she suggests, the analyst's task is to "rule out unlikely interpretations, thereby allowing scholars to attend to the narrower set of more probable meanings" (AHEARN 1998, 79), by attending to as many types of information as possible, such as ethnographic, ritual, spatial, temporal, intertextual, and textual (78). In describing the festival of *sāmā cakevā* and exploring the meanings produced therein, I have made an effort to include all such forms of information.

Scholars have recognized and delineated a number of genres of South Asian women's song, storytelling, and religious practice, both localized and generalizable across the region (BROWN 1996; FLUECKIGER 1996; HENRY 1998; MARCH 2002; NARAYAN 1989 and 1997; PEARSON 1996; RAHEJA, ed., 2003; RAHEJA and GOLD 1994). South Asian women participate in daily, weekly, monthly, and annual practices—some within their homes and some in public settings, some with males present and some without—and each such practice can be seen as multi-functional in nature. The only significant ethnography of Maithil-speaking women's religious practices of which I am aware is the unpublished doctoral dissertation of Inge BAUMGARTEN (1997), which focuses on the lives of Brahman women living in the town of Janakpur and in nearby villages. In this manuscript, Baumgarten distinguishes between daily worship, weekly fasts, and "exceptional" fasts and vows, on the one hand, and "special festivals of the year," on the other. *Sāmā cakevā*, described within four pages of BAUMGARTEN's dissertation (195–98), is addressed as one of three annual festivals "which are of prime concern to Maithil Brahman women and which will be helpful in highlighting the typical female ideas of the religious performance" (189).

#### SĀMĀ CAKEVĀ: WEAVING RITUALIZATION, PLAY, STORY, AND SONG

A global analysis of the varied components of the *sāmā cakevā* festival provides insights into important cultural themes and dilemmas from Maithil women's perspectives. *Sāmā* may be divided for analytical purposes into four basic components: storytelling, singing, figurine play/story enactment, and other ritualized activity. The *sāmā cakevā* story itself is one of the key components. Despite the fact that no particular moment-of-telling is designated for it during the festival, it is understood to be the narrative basis for the figurine play that is an integral part of the festival activity. Particular songs—such as the one at the outset of the article—are a further component, and are sung during the evenings of the

festival period, some of them at particular ritualized moments. Story enactment using mud and clay figurines occurs during and after singing. Other activities include the making of the figurines, the creation of sacred space for worshipping and playing with the figurines, and the worshipful feeding of brothers and casting out of the figurines on the last day of the festival. The singing, playing, storytelling, and other action is so conceptually and temporally intertwined in the festival that I have chosen to mimic this intertwining in the present essay, in order to invite readers, also, to experience some of the impact of the “multi-modal” nature of the festival. I also alternate between general description and narration of events observed by or reported to me, in order that the reader’s awareness of the construction of knowledge might remain at the fore.

Ritualized practice in the mode of play constitutes one central component of the *sāmā cakevā* festival. Catherine BELL’s notion of “ritualization” (1992) is useful in designating and describing much of the festival action, which, as the opening song for this essay indicates, takes place during the *vikramaditya* calendar month of *kārtik* (October/November), after the summer rains have ceased and during a season that includes other major festivals. Bell suggests that rather than using an “etic” approach to dividing up human action into ritual, on the one hand, and profane/mundane, on the other, we would do well to take our cue from actors themselves, asking if and how they make such distinctions. In Maithil women’s practices, certain acts that bring them into communion with gods entail procedures whose function is to purify the practitioners’ bodies and minds (for example, bathing, fasting) or to demarcate sacred/purified space by drawing (through demarcating a space by drawing geometric designs using rice powder and other colored powder on the floor, for instance) in which the gods may dwell for the duration of the practice. Bathing and drawing are basic preparations for *sāmā* play. The action includes, as well, the worshipful feeding of idols of deified/mythologized figures and the distribution and eating of blessed foods. All of these actions are common practices under the rubric of what Maithil people (and many other South Asian Hindus) designate as *pujā*, usually glossed as worship and involving propitiation of the gods.

Thus, I designate *sāmā* festival activities as ritualized. Even as I do so, however, I find it important to emphasize that in the context of Maithil society and its discourse, the sacred and the profane, the secular and religious can never be fully disentangled. Indeed, rather than speaking of disentangling, it would be more accurate to say that the Western dualities of sacred versus profane and secular versus religious do not apply (KOROM 1999). This is quite evident in the case of Maithil women (and especially high caste women), “who organize the time and place of their household and everyday lives by paying attention to supernatural beings, deities and forces” (BAUMGARTEN 1997, 173). Maithil (married) women’s lives ideally entail daily worship, as well as frequent religious fasts



and domestic festivals. They create space and atmosphere for the presence of the divine by purifying (by smearing with mud and dung, a process called *lipab*) and drawing on the walls and floors of their homes. As Inge Baumgarten asserts, from the point of view of Brahman women especially, “these activities constitute a basic part of the conjugal responsibilities of married women. They serve a twofold purpose: first, securing the well-being of the husband and his family and helping perpetuate the family line and tradition; and second, forming a coherent complex of how women see themselves as Brahman women” (1997, 173).<sup>14</sup> Thus, such activities are very much a part of Maithil women’s everyday lives, rather than some cordoned-off mode of life called religion.

Interestingly, unlike many other festivals and ritualized practices for which the verbs *manab* (observe/respect) or *karab* (do, as in do worship—*pūjā karab*) are used, Maithil people employ the verb *khelab* (to play) when speaking of *sāmā cakevā*. One says, for instance, *hamsab sāmā khel rahal chhi*—We are playing *sāmā*. What accounts for this linguistic distinction? First, the girls and women who participate in the *sāmā* festival enact the story of *sāmā cakevā* using mud or clay figurines representing the various characters. (See last line of second stanza in the opening song, where the brother is asked to acquire such a figurine for his sister so that she might play *sāmā*.) This activity, in particular, is called play, *khelab*, the same verb used when referring to children’s make believe activities and to the board games played by adult males, and used here to refer to the manipulation of the figurines in a way that acts out the story in a ritualized context (compare KOROM 1999).

A second usage of the verb *khelab* applies, as well, to the *sāmā* festival context. *Khelab* is also the verb used to describe works and deeds of deities in earthly and other realms, human enactments of the activities of deities, and spirit possession (KOROM 1999). Thus, as Frank Korom asserts in the culturally close Bengali context, “human and divine activities become inextricably enmeshed” in Hindu religious traditions, “making it difficult to separate ‘play’ from ‘ritual’” (KOROM 1999, 145). In the case of *sāmā cakevā*, we might say that the story describes the play of the gods (a metaphor also familiar in the ancient Western tradition), while in the festival people play out that sacred play in rule-governed fashion and do so because the story makes evident why they should. Thus in *sāmā cakevā*, play no longer stands for something else (as in “make believe”) but becomes indicative of itself, “action generating action” (KOROM 1999, 149).

One evening in mid-November (near the end of *kārtik*) of 1994, Saraswati (a pseudonym), a twenty-year old neighbor who I had hired to tutor me in Maithili, invited me and a Peace Corps Volunteer to her home to experience *sāmā cakevā* for the first time. We had been hearing girls singing at different homes in our neighborhood for the last few nights. Saraswati and the elder of her two younger sisters had spent a whole day sculpting and painting clay figurines. The figurines,

Saraswati told us, represented characters and events in stories, some of which are referred to in songs that are particular to this festival. Amidst the little figurines arranged in a *Dālu* basket<sup>15</sup> on the dirt floor of their newly constructed brick home, Saraswati and one of her sisters pointed out several characters: boy and girl deities, a woman with a baby, a wicked man named Chugalā whose long hair would be, they told us, set on fire during the course of play, several people sitting and eating sweets, and the Vrinda forest, which was represented by a little clay-handled switch. Saraswati and her sisters had used rice powder and water to paint the clay of the figurines white, with red and green paint forming facial features, clothing, and other identifying markings (see FIGURE 1). Once all the figurines had been painted and arranged in the basket, the three sisters began to sing the song with which I began this essay. The names called in the song refer to those females currently present and to their brothers. “Mother, the month of *kārtik* has arrived. Now *Sāmā* is again incarnated...”

In this song, a married woman entreats her brother as provider of gifts bought in the marketplace, gifts that she will use at her natal home during the period when she is there playing *sāmā cakevā*. The principle narrative figure of the song solicits help from her sister (fictive or actual kin), as well as from her brother, in order that she might return home for the *sāmā* festival. She instructs her sister (calling my name, in this case, but it could have been the name of any female present at the time of the singing) not to cry. Maithil women are expected to cry (but not to complain in everyday speech) at the hardships of life peculiar to them as women, especially at the departure of out-marrying daughters; and yet they are also expected to encourage each other not to cry on such occasions.<sup>16</sup> The mention of crying in this song may index the fact that a woman’s life, in its profound dependency, is difficult to endure. The song’s protagonist is unable to provide for herself (metonymically provide herself with these few items) by going to the bazaar. She depends on her brother for material well-being as well as public escort. Through the naming of “sisters” actually present at the time of the singing and their “brothers,” singers bring all those named into the sacred circle of the play, a play that indexes the drama of real life, as well. Through this and other means, the sacred and profane, the human and godly, are continually superimposed in the festival’s song and story.

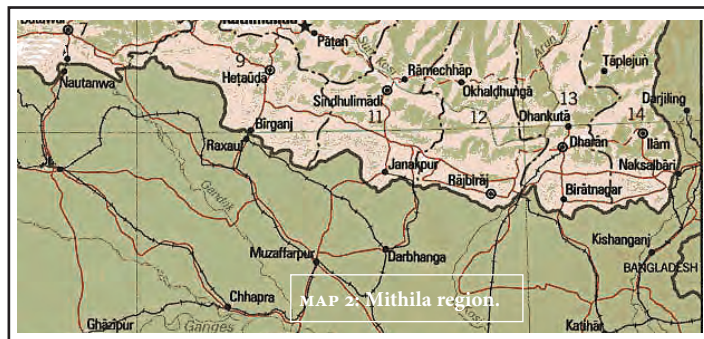
On that particular evening, Saraswati and her sisters sang two or three songs in a row, a central theme of which was relations between sisters and brothers. All three, even Saraswati’s shy youngest sister, sang very loudly, in a low pitch, and just a bit off key—which seemed of no concern whatsoever. Then the basket in which they had placed the figurines along with a little oil lamp, was carried outside. We all “fed” (*khuāyab*) the figurines, by sprinkling over them first grain and then grass. Next, while singing again, the sisters set Chugalā’s hair and the Vrinda forest (these being two of the figurines whose significance is

described below) on fire and patted the fire out with their fingers, lighting and dowsing several times in succession. The whole *khel* (play), was finished for that evening in half an hour or so. Saraswati explained that in the village the occasion of *sāmā cakevā* was much more festive—more figurines, more girls singing together, more people, women and girls watching.<sup>17</sup> Even after I had returned across the footpath to my flat at the end of the evening, I could hear the singing still going on at other houses nearby (FIGURE 2).

THE STORY OF SĀMĀ CAKEVĀ:  
VARIATIONS AND THEMATIC CONSIDERATIONS

I participated more fully in the *sāmā cakevā* festival at Saraswati's home the following year. I also recorded the singing of *sāmā* songs by other women of various castes in other locations and participated again in 2003 on a return research trip, this time videotaping some of the activities, as well. The *sāmā* festival rests on a peculiar story involving the play of gods. I have elicited and recorded four tellings of this story and have also encountered two other published versions (BAUMGARTEN 1997 and RAKESH 1998). Here I will present an edited version of the story as told to me by a brahman woman in her thirties who had returned from her conjugal home to her natal home in a village about fifteen kilometers outside of Janakpur, in order to participate in important family celebrations.<sup>18</sup> This woman was the younger sister of the husband of a woman who shared with me numerous folkstories over the course of several months in 2003 and 2004. I have not acquired permission to use her name (although I did acquire permission to use her story) and so in this article will call her Nanadi, the term of address for husband's younger sister. Nanadi's *sāmā* story is one of the more typical in its details of those I have come across, which is one of the reasons I have chosen it for this article. I follow her story with a discussion of three of the cultural concerns it engages and in doing so make brief reference to other variations of the story that I have encountered. Elsewhere I have written in greater detail about variations in the tellings of the story of *sāmā cakevā*; about how, taken together, these variations allow us to grapple complexly with the cultural themes raised; and especially about how the variations found in the tellings relate to the life concerns and experiences of their individual storytellers (DAVIS, unpublished manuscript).<sup>19</sup>

Among us we have Krishna god, no? Lord Krishna had a daughter named Sāmā and a son named Sāmb. As a child, Sāmā went to the temples in the Vrinda forest everyday, in order to serve the sages. All the things needed to be done for prayer in the temple—picking flowers, washing all the prayer utensils—she went to do everything evening and morning. Sāmā had great devotion in her heart towards god, and so every evening she went there to



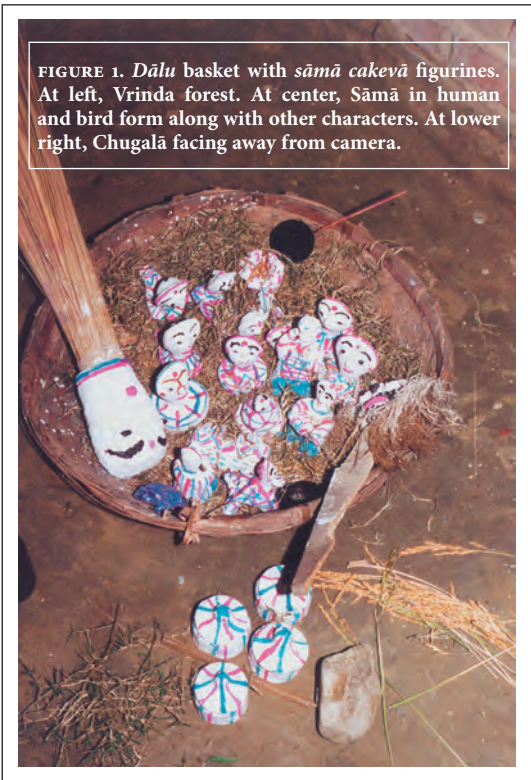




FIGURE 3. Saraswati and her sister making *sāmā cakevā* figurines.



FIGURE 4. Saraswati with her sisters, mother, and a neighbor, feeding the figurines on the final day of the festival.



**FIGURE 5.** Saraswati and her female relations feeding her brother on the final day of the festival.



**FIGURE 6.** Saraswati's brother breaking the Sāmā (bird) figurine on the final day of the festival.

work. She also played with her peers and friends. She did it all, though she was still a child; thus she did very good work. After she was married, she continued to roam freely at the sages' hermitages in the forest.

Then one day Chugalā, who was one of the sages, went to Lord Krishna and poisoned his ears by saying "Your daughter comes to the forest, and when she comes she does naughty things." He poisoned Lord Krishna's ears by saying "your daughter who comes does not come with a good heart. She comes with bad intentions and plays in the temple." This is how he poisoned his ears. Consequently Lord Krishna summoned Sāmā and asked her, "Why do you go to the temple?" But he did not listen to her words and cursed his own daughter, saying "You go there and do wrong deeds; because of that I give you a curse: you will become a bird." After that, Sāmā's husband Cakevā, who could not bear to be separated from her, also came to Lord Krishna and said "If you have cursed her this way then curse me, too. My wife is such, so I too will become a bird." Thus they both became birds and began wading in the water and feeding on the plants in the forest.

When Sāmā's brother Sāmb learned of what happened, he became very sad and began to pray to Lord Krishna, imploring him "You have turned my sister and brother-in-law into birds. What can be done to return them to their human form? You have been informed wrongly. She has done no wrong in this matter. With the desire to serve god she went everyday to perform the works of prayer and for entertainment. She played morning and night, the way children do. The way unmarried and married girls behave when at their natal home, that is how she behaved. After listening to all this, the god felt regret and replied, "All right. There is a solution to this matter." Thus Sāmb meditated that his sister and brother-in-law might be rid of the curse. After meditating twelve years, as Lord Krishna had told him to, then Sāmā and Cakevā came back to their own form. Lord Krishna himself said that the people who play *sāmā cakevā* each year will be liberated [*mukti bhēt jait*].<sup>20</sup> Thus people play *sāmā* every year. When people play *sāmā*, then Sāmā gives them blessings. Even after the daughters go away to their marital homes [that is, have been wed], even the very old ones return to their natal homes to play. It is good to play in the house [of one's parents]. So it is said.

Nanadi's telling of the *sāmā cakevā* story brings to light a number of inter-related themes. In order to facilitate interpretation of the practices of the festival itself, it will be instructive to first briefly discuss three such themes: sexual propriety, gossip and retribution, and brother-sister relations.

Of all variations on the story that I have heard or read, this particular variation makes least explicit and clear to a cultural outsider what it is about the



nature of Sāmā's behavior that leads Chugalā to tell on her and Krishna to be so upset. In the story as told by Inge Baumgarten, "the theme of the story is the secret love between Krishna's daughter Sama and a wise sage" (BAUMGARTEN 1994, 196). In another variation I recorded, the storyteller portrayed Sāmā and Cakevā as half-siblings (having different mothers) who were socializing with one another "inappropriately." She said "whether they were actually in love, no one knows"; but Chugalā characterized them as such to Krishna in that variation of the story. In yet another variation, as told to me by a third woman, Krishna is angered when told by Chugalā of the relationship between Sāmā and Cakevā, who in this particular version is the son of one of the sages of Vrinda forest. Collectively, these other tellings of the story make clear that Krishna curses his daughter Sāmā because of her alleged (sexual) impropriety.

In the original language of the latter two variations (the former, Baumgarten's, having been presented only in English), the verb used to characterize the relationship between Sāmā and Cakevā is *milab*, which means denotatively "to mix." In contexts of human behavior, *milab* refers to social interaction or mixing, and in the case of cross-sex mixing implies courtship and the possibility of sexual relations. In Maithil society, it takes only a suggestion of sexual impropriety on the part of girls and women to cause material effects. This makes sense in light of the fact that females in Hindu societies, as the objects of exchange among patrilineages, present an ongoing threat to those lineages and their patriarchal configurations (ACHARYA 1981; ALLEN 1982; BENNETT 1983; GELLNER 1991; GRAY 1980; RAHEJA and GOLD 1994; TRAWICK 1992). In a society such as this where women's male children are the necessary ingredient for the continuance of their husbands' patrilines—which themselves organize access to the most basic resources and social identities—women's sexuality is treated as a potential threat to social order itself (BENNETT 1983), and is thus subject to great external and internalized constraint. Thus, for instance, the family of a girl who is *rumored* to chat with a stranger in the marketplace might find it difficult to make a marriage match for her or even for her siblings. Senior males in the patriline, and most especially fathers, are the principle players in the negotiations over whom their daughters will marry; and it is critical that they marry outside of the patriline but into a family whose social status (class and caste being the primary considerations) is minimally that of their own.

In the *sāmā* story, then—even in Nanadi's subtle version—Maithil audiences immediately understand why Krishna would react with such distress to the information provided by Chugalā.<sup>21</sup> Sāmā's alleged behavior is socially inappropriate because it indicates that her sexuality is not under control—she is "roaming freely." In all of the other variations I have encountered, Sāmā's liaisons are inappropriate due to the social identities of the parties involved, as well

as to their self-chosen nature. Thus, Krishna's upset has at once to do with family honor (*ijjat*), patriarchal control, social status, and patrilineal integrity.

One of the features of the *sāmā* story is that while the brother is inclined to support his sister regardless of what Chugalā says (indeed even when, as in other variations of the story, Sāmā really has proven unchaste), Sāmā's father curses his daughter on the sole basis of what Chugalā said and by willfully disregarding his daughter's explanation. Why are the words of Chugalā so much more powerful than those of Sāmā in her father's eyes? And yet, why is Chugalā teased so gleefully—as in the following song—and punished mercilessly by girls and women who participate in the festival?

## SONG #2

Eh, Chugalā! What manner do you have, what manner do you have?  
Habit like a heron, habit like a heron.

From your ass was falling thin, thin water  
As you ran to the cotton field, cotton field.

The cotton said, "eat the manure, eat the manure!"  
Your wife said, "eat my shit, eat my shit!"

From the grain bin [*kothi*] bel fruit rolled down, bel fruit fell down.  
Chugalā's wife thought, what of mine has fallen?

Just like *kus* grass, Chugalā is a liar, Chugalā is a liar.  
Just as sandalwood incense is burned, so is the stick in Chugalā's hand.  
Wherever my father and brother are, there the work of Chugalā can be found.  
Eh, Chugalā! I will grasp you by your hair [*tiki*] and pull on your mustache!

This song is rather typical of a number of bawdy and raucous songs that make fun of Chugalā and are sung while burning Chugalā's hair during the *sāmā* festival. Here Chugalā is portrayed as practicing filthy habits (like a heron that wades in muddy water and eats therefrom), having dysentery, and eating the waste of cows and even of his own wife. Both he and his wife are sexually put down, she for her drooping breasts and he for his shriveling "stick." Like *kus* grass that looks attractive but whose blades can cut your hands, Chugalā will lie behind your back, and for this he is teased and corporally punished.

In all tellings of the story I have encountered, Chugalā is described as a wicked man. Chugalā is the incarnation (*pratirup*) of an ancient figure named Chudak (RAKESH 1998 [2056], 152). According to Inge Baumgarten, the word *chugalā* literally means rumor monger (BAUMGARTEN 1997, 197). The spread of rumors, or gossip, is a form of talk that provides the most effective social control of behavior in Maithil society. Through talk about others in the community,

Maithil people form collective and individual judgments about one another, form and break and alter relations, and construct selves.

We would do well to remember that the lives of Maithil girls and women are particularly constrained by the practice of talk; more than anything else, it is the threat of negative talk that effectively constrains Maithil females' sexuality, movement, social interaction, and verbal communications. It is talk that provides for the potential and real punishment—sometimes to the point of banishment—for their desired and sometimes chosen behavior. Indeed, though the song above appears to link the figure of Chugalā with the male world of brothers and fathers, women themselves are primary contributors to gossip, and may place themselves on the side of good and right by pointing to faults in the behavior of *other* women. For them, therefore, talk operates as a double-edged sword; it can radically affect the degree of security and value with which they and others of their gender live.

Thus, at least as important as whether Sāmā has in fact misbehaved is that she has been rumored to have done so, and Krishna initially responds on this basis, disregarding any evidence to the contrary. Whether through fault of her own behavior or that of the wicked Chugalā, Sāmā is cast out of the celestial order by Krishna, the patriarch of that order. Before Krishna casts his daughter out, she is already in the habit of roaming in the forest. Here the forest (*jangal* or *ban*)—commonly a metaphor for a dangerous, ruleless, or relationless state<sup>22</sup>—may signal a status behaviorally out-of-bounds, free from the restrictions but also the protections of a harsh, punishing society, represented by Chugalā as linked to male familial authority, where social opprobrium can result in the forfeiture of social personhood, as represented by the transformation of Sāmā into a bird and her outcasting. It may be that *sāmā cakevā*, a festival clearly enjoyed and enacted in a same-sex context, provides a space for the expression of frustration over the constraint of social opprobrium based on talk—a moment when females get to mock a society always at the ready to judge them, and a moment when this system of opprobrium is set on fire and destroyed with abandon.<sup>23</sup>

So, Sāmā is cast out of sacred society and into the forest where she flits around, ungrounded (in both physical and social senses) and yet unfettered (by patrilineal tenets), for twelve years; until, that is, her brother helps her back into physically and socially human form. Here we can begin to glean the importance and ambiguity of brother-sister relations in Maithil society. Brothers are in some ways positioned to mediate women's relations with their natal and conjugal households and mitigate the excesses of patriarchal oppression faced by their sisters in such forms as material deprivation, corporal punishment, and restriction of movement. At the same time, brothers are very much invested in the privileges bestowed on them as men in patriarchal formations.

What exactly are Maithil females communicating to one another in *sāmā cakevā* about relationships with their brothers? Ties to brothers are of enormous import to Maithil women, as to their Hindu and Hinduized Nepali and Indian counterparts (BENNETT 1983; NUCKOLLS 1993; PETERSON 1988; SEYMOUR 1993, 47–49; TRAWICK 1992, 170–78; WADLEY 1976 and 1994, 43–45 and 57).<sup>24</sup> These ties are subject to multiple ritualizations, including festivals already mentioned here<sup>25</sup> and particular forms of prestation (RAHEJA and GOLD 1994, 88–92). Emotional closeness between brothers and sisters in childhood, and the role of mediation and support of brothers for their sisters in adulthood are generally idealized.

In Nanadi's telling of the *sāmā cakevā* story that I recorded, the brother figure fits this idealization well. Because he cares for his sister so much, he devotes twelve years of his life to winning her release from her curse, standing up to their father's authority to do so. (In the variation I recorded where Sāmā's lover is also her half brother, the brother is also cursed by Krishna, the two males (fraternal and paternal) being pitted against one another more clearly.) In another *sāmā* story I recorded, Sāmā's relationship with her brother is further elaborated. In this latter variation, the brother Sāmb at once protects and confines his sister by preventing her from going hunting with him. Though she is upset by the constraint, he pleases her by hunting and killing a tiger for her, going to great lengths to bring her what she wants from the outside, male, world and thereby demonstrating his devotion and provisionary inclinations toward her. In the song with which I opened this essay, in parallel fashion, brothers provide items for their sisters from the marketplace. In both cases, such assistance functions as compensation for the acceptance of subordination, constraint in movement and activity on the part of women. Sāmā perpetuates this filial intervention through her own promise to bless the brothers of those who play *sāmā*. In a sense, then, festival participants such as the women who shared with me their stories also extend the viability of the stance of cross-sex sibling and non-patrilineally sound liaisons against the dominant patriarchal lineage-based system of marital exchange. But, as becomes yet clearer upon consideration of the ritual of the festival, they do so by capitulating to the worship of their brothers on whom they must depend.

#### SĀMĀ CAKEVĀ: RITUALIZATION AND SONG

*Sāmā cakevā* is celebrated by women and girls over a fourteen-day period. It is timed to end on *ṣṛnīmā*, the monthly evening of the full moon. Maithil women I talked to agreed and my observations confirmed that people of all Hindu castes in Mithila play *sāmā cakevā*, and one woman told me that among local Tharus (who have partly assimilated into Maithil culture), as with Maithils,

married women return to their natal homes for the festival. In fact, this return to one's natal home (*naihar*) for married women is one of the things that distinguishes this festival from two other festivals involving brother worship celebrated by Maithil women as part of the annual cycle: *raksā bandhan* (protective bond) and *bhardutiya* (second day of the brother). For these latter two festivals, brothers visit their sisters in their conjugal homes (BAUMGARTEN 1997).<sup>26</sup> One of the most pleasurable aspects of *sāmā cakevā* according to Maithil women is that it affords them a relatively rare opportunity to return to their natal communities.<sup>27</sup>

Two women told me that girls without brothers do not join in the play, since such activity for brotherless girls is said to be *udāsh*, sad. After all, in some of the songs, one is supposed to insert the name of one's own brothers (as illustrated in the song whose text opened this article). Yet due to the salient practice of extending and fictive kinship, almost everyone has someone they can call upon socio-structurally as "brother." As such, for instance, though I had neither present nor absent "blood" brothers, I was able to join with Saraswati's *māy* (mother) and *bahinsab* (younger sisters) in the song, play, and ritualization. The notion that girls lacking brothers are not supposed to play is interesting, because, according to at least some versions of the story that form the mythical foundation for the festival, Sāmā promises to bring brothers to brotherless girls who worship her in the prescribed way. Thus, even people unfortunate enough to have no brothers to support them are able to participate in the sacred order brought to life in the festival.

Usually a day or two prior to the start of the festival, those who will participate begin to make the mud figurines that will be used in the story's enactment. (Figurines may also be bought in the marketplace, circumventing this first step, as indicated in the opening song.)<sup>28</sup> The figurines of the main protagonists, Sāmā, Sāmb, and Cakevā include only the head resting on a short pedestal/stand that keeps them from toppling over (FIGURE 3). Sāmā is also sculpted in the form of a bird (recalling the story plot). These figurines are just a few inches tall. Other important figurines include the Vrinda forest—represented by a mud or clay knob on a foot-long straw switch, and Chugalā—represented by a round mud or clay head with long straw or twine hair. Other small figurines represent minor characters sometimes mentioned in the *sāmā* story: a market woman, a dog, and friends or additional brothers of the protagonists who keep them company on their journey. (The inclusion of these secondary figurines is of less importance and their creation has seemed to me to be at the whim of the participants.) The figurines may be painted to indicate facial features and clothing by using rice and vermilion powders mixed with water, and/or, as a more recent phenomenon for those who can afford it, paints bought in the marketplace.

The creation of the figurines is an enjoyable and unsolemn process. Such is the mood, in fact, for all but the last evening of the festival.

On each of twelve evenings in succession, girls and women join in the courtyards of their natal families and neighbors to play *sāmā cakevā*. The festival begins with the singing of songs associated with the festival. Senior women tend to know more songs than their juniors and pass them down through the practice of singing with the younger generations. Also, women from different natal villages and of different castes tend to know slightly different versions of the same songs, and such differences, as well as the collective remembering of half-forgotten lyrics, may be the topic of conversation between singings. I have presented examples of three principle types of songs sung in the festival: those that address brother-sister relations, those in which Chugalā is taunted, and those dealing with the transfer of a woman from her natal to conjugal home.

What follows is the text of a song sung by girls and women while carrying baskets full of figurines out into the courtyard and sitting down there in a circle to play *sāmā cakevā*. Text in brackets {} identifies the imagined narrator of each stanza.<sup>29</sup>

## SONG #3

{girl:}

I had gone to play *sāmā*, Mother,  
to elder brother's ward.

I lost my toe-ring, Mother.

And a thief stole the *sāmā* figurine basket.

{girl's brother:}

Bring me a bit of straw, younger sister.

And light it on fire.

If you can recognize who the thief was,  
then recognize him.

Your husband is a big thief.

{girl to her brother:}

Tie his hands behind him and  
have him get down on the ground.

Tie him up with a silk thread.

Kill him with flowers,  
because tears are coming from my eyes.  
However much you hit him, don't forget,  
he is your brother-in-law.

This song elicits one of the most salient themes of the *sāmā* festival—that of brother/sister relations, and addresses a principle of critical importance to Maithil women: that it is a brother’s duty to intervene on behalf of his married sister in cases of abuse or neglect at the hands of her husband or his kin. In the song, this concern is distilled into the figure of the husband, who has stolen the basket meant to hold the *sāmā* figurines. According to Maithil women with whom I spoke, the primary purpose of *sāmā cakevā* is to ensure the longevity of the lives of those brothers whose sisters take part in the festival. It is these brothers who are customarily most responsible for and responsive to the needs of their sisters, after those sisters are married, in cases where their in-laws do not properly attend to those needs. It is said that Sāmā, like married women who take part in the festival, comes to her natal home to show respect for her brothers and that the day she returns to her conjugal home is represented by throwing away the *sāmā* basket and figurines into a river, pond, or field on the final day of the festival.

This third song also alludes to the cultural image of husbands as thieves who “steal” (through arrangement of both families) the daughters/sisters of other lineages from their natal families. And it indexes the structural dilemma of married women who are emotionally and practically positioned between allegiances to and dependencies on their natal and married families. The opening narrative figure in the song exhorts her brother to punish her thief-of-a-husband and yet to do so only with silk and flowers, that is, without really hurting him, for their relations are sealed through the sacred bond of marriage embodied by the sister/wife/narrator herself. The song may index a wife’s potential real affection for her husband, as well. In any case, a complete rift between her brother and husband would potentially leave the woman in a very vulnerable position, indeed.

Customarily, a Maithil woman’s only “rights” within her conjugal household—to sustenance, shelter, and life—are secured through her husband. Virtually all the cases I have heard of brotherly intervention in a sister’s relations with her “in-laws” concerned situations where the sister was not getting (enough) food or shelter, or had been severely or continually physically abused. Brothers (and other male natal household members) may wish to intervene in other matters, for instance to transfer the female to her natal home for festivals like *sāmā* and other ritual occasions. But if the senior members of the conjugal household refuse such a request then those in the natal family are expected to yield.<sup>30</sup>

As so often happens when females transfer personal assets, from natal family to married family, they end up losing control over the objects (such as toe-rings like the one in the song) to their married families, who dispose of them to benefit the household as a whole or its particular members. The inability of the woman in question or her natal family to do anything about it is acknowledged

by the first narrator in the song text through her admonishment to her brother not to really punish her husband; for he is, after all, her husband, the man to whom she is most immediately, thoroughly, and legitimately subordinate. The protagonist simultaneously displays ambivalent allegiance to her brother, by seeking his intervention, and to her husband, by preventing him from being severely physically punished for what she nonetheless recognizes as his misdeed toward her.

After the singing of several songs particular to the *sāmā* festival, the activity continues with the carrying of the basket(s) with the figurines and a little oil lamp from the courtyard within the house to an area just in front of the house. As is done in many women's rituals, in *sāmā cakevā*, spiritually purified space is created on the ground by the making of a drawing called an *aripan* using rice powder. In this space is placed the basket, upon which its figurine occupants are "fed," by sprinkling over them first grain and then *dubhi* (a kind of grass used as an offering), to the accompaniment of more song. This feeding is a common form of deity propitiation. This done, the participants then light the Vrinda forest on fire and dampen it out several times in succession. This play reflects a part of the *sāmā* story that Nanadi failed to tell, in which Chugalā had attempted to burn down Vrinda forest upon learning that Krishna had sent Sāmā and Cakevā there; but Sāmā's prayers result in a rain storm that puts out the fire. Continuing the play by singing amusing songs that make fun of and chastise Chugalā, the participants set fire to his hair and watch it burn. Finally, the fires dampened out for good, the basket is left outside, while the participants return to the inner spaces of their homes. In the morning the basket is brought inside in order to keep its occupants out of the unpleasantness of the hot sun (BAUMGARTEN 1997, 198).

This singing and playing is repeated twelve nights in succession. Males do not take part as singers, players, ritual participants or ratified spectators in any of these activities.<sup>31</sup> They may, however, *hear* the songs and are not strictly barred from sight, since much of the action takes place in front of homes, rather than inside. In my experience, males beyond young childhood showed little interest in the event; it is considered the affair of women and girls, not a business of interest to men and boys (compare NARAYAN 1997, 127).

No play occurs on the thirteenth day. According to Inge BAUMGARTEN's informants, this is "out of respect for the daughter Sama, who is sadly anticipating the departure" (1997, 198). On the evening of day fourteen, the full-moon day, girls and women make offerings of food not only to the clay or mud figurines, but also to their brothers in the flesh. This is the only moment in the festival when males play an active role. First Sāmā and her brother are fed rice pudding (*khīr*), yoghurt (*dahī*), and parched rice (*chiurā*), and then the same "pure" foods are offered to and accepted by the participants' brothers (FIGURES 4 and 5).



This is also the last time the sisters will feed their brothers before returning to their conjugal villages and homes. Once this offering is completed, a brother of each participant breaks all of the figurines or just one of the Sāmā bird character figurines into pieces (FIGURE 6), and all present enjoy the blessed foods (*prasādi*) that have been distributed among them. It is by now after dark and the gathered women and girls (now again in single-sex groups) carry the baskets full of figurines to a river, pond or field (depending on their familial tradition and geographical practicalities),<sup>32</sup> where the figurines are propitiated one more time, provisioned for their “trip,” and simply left.

One may wonder why it is necessary for brothers to break the figurines on the last evening of the festival. Nanadi offered the following explanation: “This means that now he is bidding farewell to Sāmā.... And the breaking of Sāmā means that the Sāmā who was in the form of a bird, and which is made of mud, after breaking that, her previous form is over. The age of her being a bird is over and her age as a human will come; for that he breaks Sāmā.” In response, Dollie Sah, my research assistant in 2003–2004 and a Janakpur native, said that she had heard that when the brother breaks the figurine, he becomes strong. To this, Nanadi responded, “When the brother breaks Sāmā on his thigh, then Sāmā gives him a blessing, since he liberated her from this life.... So when the brother breaks her on this thigh, then his thigh becomes strong. For that [so that he will be strong/flourish] she has given him blessings. For that Sāmā is broken.”

In order to begin from a more structural viewpoint to answer the question of why the *sāmā* figure is broken, one must comprehend the import of cross-sibling relations from Maithil women’s points of view. As we have seen, such relations are of great import and take work to sustain, including the participation in multiple festivals during which the (subordinating) relation is ritualistically reconfirmed, is, indeed, established in the performative sense. One of the functions of *sāmā cakevā*, I would argue, is that it aids women in drawing social energies of their brothers toward themselves and *away from* patriarchal patrilineages. In so doing, however, it also allows for the system of patrilineality to continue by sustaining girls for availability to such patrilineages (through marriage). Thus, in the third song presented here one notes that it is the husband who (at least according to the brother) stole the basket, thereby preventing the protagonist from playing *sāmā*. Likewise, a husband may prevent his wife from returning to her natal home to play *sāmā*, a movement across space that must be facilitated, most often, by a brother. It is a brother, however, who will later end the *sāmā* play by breaking the clay figurine of Sāmā, resulting in the sending off of Sāmā like a bride to her husband’s home. Thus, these male relations in real life circumscribe a woman’s participation in the festival, and ultimately exercise a degree of control over Maithil women’s opportunities to create women-centered discourses on their social worlds. The orientation toward female agency in the face of

patriarchy and toward matrilocality and matrifocal connection in the face of patrilineality evident in the *sāmā* story, in which ambivalent views of relations with fathers, husbands, and brothers are expressed in song and story, are abruptly “broken” or ended by the brother and “discarded” when the bride/sister/Sāmā is sent off to her matrimonial village/the pond/the field/the forest. Such an interpretation finds support in the work of Margaret TRAWICK, who notes that “a daughter may feel herself to be *shattered* by her marriage” (my emphasis) and that in a Tamil village where she was conducting research, she observed that “the clay image of the goddess Mantaiyammāl is broken to pieces on her festival day, which is also her wedding day” (TRAWICK 1992, 167) (my emphasis).<sup>33</sup> Thus, though a sister’s relation to her brother reinforces her connection to her natal identity as sister/daughter, it is this very identity that the brother shatters by sending her off to the more restrictive life of a wife/daughter-in-law in another village.

It seems to me that the breaking of Sāmā is emblematic of the power that brothers hold in their sisters’ lives. On the one hand, it is only through the initiative of the brother that sisters are able to receive help and return to their natal homes in times of serious trouble at their conjugal homes, or, as in the case of *sāmā cakevā*, for festive, enjoyable reunion, and thereby gain temporary release from their roles of wife and daughter-in-law. On the other hand, this is a hierarchical and dependence-laden relation between sister and brother which must be maintained through ritualized subordination such as the feeding of brothers as one propitiates the gods. Thus, what is not ambiguous is that the brother figure is celebrated by the participants in the festival for his support of his sister. While I was told by Maithil women multiple times upon direct inquiry that the principle purpose of the festival is to ensure the long life of brothers—the desire for which in females is linked in part to their own insecurity, especially as married-out sisters—I am convinced that another central function is to acknowledge the vulnerability and ambiguity of allegiance and dependence in women’s lives and to ensure brotherly support across the separation of time and space.

In 1995, I joined a nighttime procession of women—Saraswati, her sisters and mother, and a neighbor woman—in carrying the baskets of figurines we had made and played with in the preceding days to one of the holy ponds in Janakpur. Along the way we met and passed numerous groups of women and girls, all with *sāmā* baskets, some elaborately decorated. *Battī*, little oil lamps, twinkled among the singing women and girls, Sāmā, Sāmb, Cakevā, their brethren, friends, servants, and animals; and cast shimmers over the water.

The following is among those songs sung both at the time of Sāmā’s “departure,” during the procession to the pond or field, and at the actual departure of a bride from her natal home following wedding ceremonies at the bride’s home. This song concerns the moment when the groom and his male relatives come to

get his bride. At that time, a brother of the bride is supposed to accompany her to the outskirts of the village so that he might see her off and admonish the in-laws to treat her well. The event is referred to as *dura gaman*, literally “go far away.”

## SONG #4

{daughter to mother:}

I used to play and race around.

I used to play with baskets.<sup>34</sup>

Then the cart came to take me to my in-laws.

What pitiless person said my day of departure should be set?

What pitiless person fixed my departure day?

What pitiless person accepted the date?

What pitiless person has come to take me to my husband’s home?

{mother to daughter:}

Your pitiless father-in-law said the day should be fixed.

The pitiless priest fixed your day.

Pitiless father accepted your day.

Pitiless husband has come to take you away.

{daughter to friend:}

I was meeting with my friends, one after the other,  
and so it became evening.

And while fixing my hair up into a bun, it became dawn.

Hey, friends, come see me off as I am leaving.

I haven’t even met with my mother yet.

Those who’ve come to take me away and those who have escorted me there  
together have sent me into the forest.

Whatever forest it is, neither mother nor father, nay, no one at all is there.

{to her brother:}

Go back, go back, my own brother!

Explain to mother that she should remain, stoic as a rock.

I will, likewise, having understood in my heart/mind, stay where I am.

In this song, the bride’s new marital home is treated metaphorically as a forest. This metaphor plays on the idea that, like a forest, a new marital home is a strange and inhospitable territory with unknown inhabitants and dangers and unknown means for survival (compare NARAYAN 1997, 175 and 246). This metaphor is found, as well, in the story of *sāmā*, where the connection between the sense of banishment and transfer to the marital home is made more explicit.

In the middle of this particular song performance, which I recorded in 1995, the singer began to weep, possibly reminiscing about her own departure from her natal home for that of her husband, where her life as a new daughter-in-law would have been marked by much work, silence, and restriction of movement, or possibly simply because separation from one's natal family connotes such sadness for women and the tearful expression of that sadness is expected of them. The actual *dura gaman* event entails ritualized wailing/crying on the part of female kin. Only afterwards are these kin expected to become "stoic as a rock" about their separation, as portrayed in the song.<sup>35</sup> Given the special contexts in which it is sung, the lyrics link the departure of a bride from her natal home to the symbolic departure of Sāmā at the end of the *sāmā* festival, and likewise to the actual return to their conjugal homes for those women who had come back to their natal homes for the festival period.

The female in the song obviously does not want to go to what will become her conjugal home. But also it should be understood that eagerness to go would be inappropriate; one is supposed to be reticent and sad to leave.<sup>36</sup> Note that the mother, through her repetition of "pitiless," is in empathetic relation to her daughter. The girl's emphasis is on her relations with her mother and (girl) friends. At her destination she imagines there to be "no one at all," that is, no one to whom she matters, no one who cares about her. All the males, save her brother, are "pitiless" in so far as they are responsible for the "pain of separation" with her mother. But she admonishes herself and her mother to be emotionally stoic at their separation and destiny despite their inner feelings. She asks her brother to communicate this sentiment to her mother; and thus is initiated his role as liaison between his now married sister and her natal female kin (who unlike him are tightly restricted in their mobility). Having completed the feeding and leave-taking of Sāmā and her entourage at the water's edge or in the field, the women and girls return to their homes in relative silence.

The plurality and ambiguity of meaning circulated among women in *sāmā cakevā* should caution one against too celebratory an interpretive response to the "resistant" aspects of this female festival. Complex and socially stratified societies such as that in which *sāmā cakevā* takes place inevitably produce a plurality of situated and situational meanings—meanings whose capacities to influence social ordering are also hierarchical and a matter of historical contingency. Put more metaphorically, societies worship multiple gods: the patriarchal Lord Krishna of this story is different from the flirtatious and capricious lover-god Krishna of other stories, also from the devoted and chaste Sītā, and finally from the heroine Sāmā. Yet, the sacred is worshipped in all of these forms.

LISTEN, RAMA'S WIFE! A CALL FOR MAITHIL WOMEN TO PAY HEED

In conclusion, I present one additional song text and explain how it is emblematic of the function of the *sāmā* festival as a set of communications among women about the structural constraints and possibilities of their lives.

In the fall of 1995, when the *sāmā* festival was already underway, several women at the development project where I was conducting research joined together in singing the following song. This song is to be sung, they informed me, while the girls are carrying the *dālu* baskets with the figurines in it from their courtyards to their verandas, where they will play *sāmā*.

SONG #5

{woman/daughter:}

With my sister, Kalpana, I was carrying the basket.  
Raju brother grabbed away the basket.

Listen, Rama's wife!

Father, you are just sitting there on the stool.  
Your son took my basket.

Listen, Rama's wife!

{father to daughter:}

If, my daughter, I make for you a *dālu* basket,  
If I make for you a *chungara* basket  
Then what will you give your brother in return?

Listen, Rama's wife!

{daughter to father:}

When my brother comes, ask for the *dālu* basket back for me.  
I will, in turn, bring a wife for my brother.

Listen, Rama's wife!

In the *sāmā cakevā* festival, Maithil women call upon each other to listen to what they have to say about self, society, and the sacred. Among scholars of women's expressive traditions in South Asia, concepts of resistance and agency, on the one hand, and marginality and subalterity, on the other, have been intensely debated (ABU-LUGHOD 1990; AHEARN 1998, 2001, 2002; HOLLAND and SKINNER 1995; KUMAR, ed., 1994; NARAYAN 1997; ORTNER 1995; RAHEJA and GOLD 1994; SKINNER, HOLLAND, and ADHIKARI 1994; SPIVAK 1988). In the present context I would reiterate the by now obvious point that Maithil women's

subjectivities and actions are indeed shaped by their social locations, locations that include various forms of subordination on the basis of gender. Yet the fact of their gendered subordination in their society as a whole does not render their standpoints marginal or contrary. Simply put, theirs are the standpoints from which half of the society enacts its lives. Especially since ritual and festival activity is absolutely central to Maithil women's selfhood (BAUMGARTEN 1997) and everyday activity, it would be senseless to think of the understandings rendered therein as somehow ineffective or submerged in daily life. On the contrary, ritualized activity is the stuff of life for Maithil women generally and high caste Maithil women in particular. It is, however, such activity and the standpoints expressed therein that are less understood and articulated by Maithil men, to whom outsiders generally have much greater access, and that have, until quite recently, been marginalized in the tomes of male-centered South Asian scholarship. In the course of this essay, in contrast, I have drawn attention to a number of Maithil women's viewpoints regarding kin relations; socio-spatial orientations; sexual propriety; gossip, social opprobrium, and retribution; and the nature of female divinity.

I remain struck by the ways that elements of the *sāmā* festival show us the complexity of power relations represented by gender positions. In the fifth and last song I presented, a daughter complains to her father that although her brother has stolen the *sāmā* basket from her, he (the father) is doing nothing to help her retrieve it. The father intervenes on his daughter's behalf only with the stipulation that his daughter do something for her brother in return; and she agrees to do so in a way she knows will please her father, namely, by agreeing to bring in a new daughter-in-law for the continuance of her natal patriline and her brother's place in it. (Maithil women hearing and singing the song understand that the daughter will use her connection in her conjugal village to discover eligible brides there for her brother.)

In the song, as in the festival as a whole, it is not brothers who are being addressed by the singers but festival participants themselves. In calling out to Rāma's wife, singers solicit the attention not only of the (Sītā-like) long-suffering wives in their midst, but also of Sītā as *the* daughter of Mithila and by extension all of the daughters of Mithila (HENRY 1998, 423). The messages are circulated by women and girls *for* women and girls.<sup>37</sup> The festival of *sāmā cakevā* is part of what feminists following Deniz Kandiyoti have called the "patriarchal bargain" (KANDIYOTI 1988), by which she meant perks that accompany and make more palatable subordinated gender status. Maithil women get to return to their natal homes where they are free to play and sing with their female kin and neighbors, just as they might be free to roam in the forests unfettered by ideas of sexual and gendered propriety. In exchange, women must be willing (literally and figuratively) to bow down to their brothers, to worship them, and allow them to fix

the parameters of their freedom even as without these same brothers women might enjoy yet less freedom of movement, expression, passion, and play than they in fact do. Without brothers there is no *sāmā* festival; yet it is the brothers who shatter the female-centered world of Sāmā.

In contrast to the ambiguous and bargained relations between a daughter and her natal male kin illustrated in Song #5, a solidarity among Maithil females linked through natal community encompasses all the tales of *sāmā cakevā* in the practice of their telling through song, story, and play. The story of *sāmā cakevā* does more than form the mythological base for the festival. The story comes alive in the play of the figurines *and* is embodied in the players themselves who, in the course of the play, song, and other ritualized behavior, enact and verbalize the sacred characters themselves, effecting a mutual sanctification of god, clay, and social person. By ritual design, practitioners are made to identify with Sāmā, the full circular result of which is worship of the self as a self with Sāmā-like character—or more accurately, with Sāmā-character: the festival action effects an identification of participant with sacred figure.<sup>38</sup> Ironically, the temporary casting out of Sāmā from the sacred realm (in the story) is the very basis for bringing actual Maithil girls and women *into* that sacred realm (through festival participation). And from the participants' standpoint, they, like Sāmā, are imbued with the sacred, and so imbued without necessarily having to denounce their own desires even as those desires may contradict patriarchal and patrilineal norms and prerogatives.

In their multi-layered, polysemic tellings, Maithil women and girls call out to other daughters and wives to listen to what they have to convey about a sacred and social world that they continually remake. Yet, like the broken clay figurine of Sāmā at the close of the game, subjectivities of Maithil women and girls I have presented are fractured. And just as the termination of the festival is effected by male intervention, the desires, values, and standpoints of women and girls ultimately remain framed by patrilineality. Still, the figure of Sāmā, whose worship in natal settings is eagerly anticipated each year, remains a potent model of and for its practitioners. The self-directed and free-moving Sāmā—neither obedient nor necessarily chaste daughter, not dutiful daughter-in-law, not self-sacrificing wife nor devoted mother—in the end wins the devotion of Maithil girls and women every year, reinforcing the connection of married women again and again to their natal families and communities, and especially to other women-folk whom they admonish to listen to their polysemic tales.

Through my examination of the stories, song lyrics, and practices of *sāmā cakevā*, I have attempted to impart a sense of the parameters of possibility and constraint regarding Maithil women's contemporary lives. I have contended that in the practice of *sāmā cakevā*, Maithil women and girls make their own female-centered commentaries to themselves and on themselves and their place

in celestial and earthly realms. These commentaries do not represent a unified morality or feminine ideal. That the perspectives reflected therein are less heard and known by others than are the patrilineal discourses I have also described has everything to do with the structural location, intra- and inter-societal, from which these stories are told. Yet, in that they help describe Maithil women's subjectivities—understandings of themselves and of the world around them (social and cosmological)—these commentaries are critical to interpreting the ways in which Maithil women confront the dilemmas and opportunities of their lives.

## NOTES

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1. The names given in this song are context dependent. They are names of females present at the time of the singing and their brothers. The place names are socially relevant population centers.

2. *Hazām* designates a man of the barber caste, whose members also work as messengers.

3. That is, the horses will be ready to transport the brother to the bazaars.

4. Married women apply vermilion powder to the part of their hair each morning as a designation of their married status.

5. Decorative stick-ons placed in the center of women's foreheads.

6. All of the song texts presented in this article were originally recorded by myself. I worked with a native interpreter to transcribe and then translate them first into Nepali (a language quite close to Maithili in grammar and vocabulary and with which I was more fluent than Maithili itself) and then into English. The English versions were written to be as true as possible to the meaning imparted, as I and the interpreter understood it, rather than for word-for-word or syntactic identity.

7. For transliteration of Maithil words into roman script, I follow TURNER ([1931] 1990), except in the case of retroflexed phonemes, only one of which is (multiply) present in my text and is represented by: D.

8. A notable ethnographic exception is the unpublished dissertation of Inge BAUMGARTEN (1997). Also see the scholarship of Janakpur native and cultural critic Ram Dayal RAKESH (1994, 1996, 1998 [2056]). For insightful work on Maithil women's cultural perspectives as illustrated in their paintings in the region of Madhubani, Bihār, India, see BROWN 1996. On the politics of Maithil identity, see BURKERT 1997.

9. But see HENRY (1998) on some of the unique qualities of Maithil women's song. Henry's research was conducted in the district of Madhubani in the state of Bihar, India.



10. It is worthy of note that in comparison to many other cultural groups in South Asia, Maithils tend to express greater criticism of the hero Rāma for doubting his wife's devotion and for banishing her, pregnant with his child, to the forest, despite the fact that her chastity had been proven by a trial by fire (HENRY 1998, 433–34). Maithil women, in particular, celebrate Sītā less for her chastity and devoted subordination to her husband, and more for her adherence to her dharma (KISHWAR 2001).

11. Over the course of this writing (2003–2004), Nepal has been embroiled in political turmoil involving a Maoist uprising of several years' duration. The parliament was dissolved by the king, political protests were carried out by the cadres and leaders of the main political parties against the "regression" of this king, the prime minister resigned, and, following large popular street protests and their failed suppression, multiparty rule with a new prime minister was reinstalled. The civil conflict continues.

12. For nuanced discussions of the strategic deployment and interpretation of purdah (*pardā*) in North Indian contexts see RAHEJA and GOLD 1994, 47–52 and 164–81; and WADLEY 1994, 52–55. For comparative work on purdah in South Asia, see MEHTA 1981; and PAPANEK and MINAULT 1982.

13. For a contrastive example in a less sexually dichotomous Nepalese cultural group, see MARCH 2003.

14. The *sāmā* stories presented in this article were told by Brahman women. It would be instructive to compare them to those told by lower caste women, a project I expect to undertake in the future. Women of all castes can and do participate in the festival, and know versions of the songs and the story. Some of the songs I recorded were sung together by women of different castes.

15. *Dālu* is the term for baskets of a particular shape made by low-caste artisans in the region. Generally, these are open-topped round baskets of one or two feet in diameter with five- or six-inch-angled sides.

16. A common gesture is for one woman to admonish "hush, hush" (*chup, chup*) while wiping the tears on the face of another woman who is crying.

17. Saraswati's family also owns several small plots of land in their father's village community, a few hours away by bus and foot. Her father had worked at the railroad station in Janakpur, and the family was in the habit of returning to the village frequently to oversee fieldwork and other important matters, take part in festivals, and visit relatives.

18. The story was digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed by my research assistant, Dollie Sah, and translated by Smriti Jaiswal with editing (using the transcription in the original language along with Ms. Jaiswal's translation) by this author.

19. In order for me to give as thick a description as possible of the festival, I find it necessary to re-present two of the thematic points I have addressed in writing elsewhere (Davis, unpublished manuscript).

20. *Mukti* is often glossed as "liberation" or "salvation" and refers in Hindu and Buddhist thinking regarding release from the cycle of birth and death.

21. The ritual tale "Twelve Years of Affliction," told by Urmila Devi Sood in NARAYAN (1997, 109–24), makes for an interesting comparison with the *sāmā cakevā* story. In Sood's story, too, a daughter is cast out by her royal father for choosing an inappropriate mate; and again in this story, the Queen mother makes an intervention on her daughter's behalf.

22. For corroboration of this semantic elaboration of the forest concept in South Asia, see APPADURAI (1996, 83) and THAPAR (2001, xi).

23. Inge BAUMGARTEN has suggested that the Chugalā figure represents a "moral but hard society" and is (yet) treated by participants as a "wicked troublemaker" (1997, 196).

24. A comparison of cross-sex sibling relations, and women's perspectives thereon,

between exogamous (primarily North Indian) and cross-cousin (primarily South Indian) marriage practicing societies in South Asia, would be of great interest, but is beyond the scope of this paper. See Peterson as quoted in TRAWICK 1992, 172–78. For a comparison with Tamang Buddhists who practice cross-cousin marriage see MARCH 2003, 147–51.

25. Rali worship, performed annually by Kangra women in Himachal Pradesh, North India, as described by Brigitte LUCHESI (2002) makes for an interesting comparison with *sāmā cakevā*. Here, also, the focus is on relations among brothers and sisters, and the brother is portrayed as an intermediary between a woman's natal and conjugal families and a bearer of gifts on his sister. (Also in this instance, the kin position of *mama*—mother's brother—is emphasized.) In Luchesi's description, it appears that brothers are exclusively idealized in Rali worship, whereas in my reading of *sāmā cakevā* Maithil women's perceptions of their cross-sex sibling relations appear more complex. Perhaps this difference may be accounted for, in part, by the greater presence of both brothers and priests in Rali worship in comparison to the more bracketed role of brothers and non-participation of priests in *sāmā cakevā*.

26. For descriptions of the range of rituals performed by married women for their brothers in South Asian contexts, see BENNETT 1983, 246–52; LUCHESI 2002; PETERSON 1988; RAHEJA 1988, 176–78; and WADLEY 1994, 57.

27. Married Maithil women may also return home if invited by their fathers or brothers and allowed to by those in their marital household for weddings, to give birth, and on a few other occasions. In their natal homes, married women enjoy greater freedom of movement, leisure, and interaction. Those I spoke to tended to speak warmly and longingly of their sojourns in their natal homes.

28. Mud or clay figurines form an integral part of many South Asian women's festivals and other occasions of worship. See, for instance, LUCHESI 2002 and NARAYAN 1997, 37 and 107. I am unsure how widespread and how new the practice is of buying clay figurines in the marketplace for these uses, nor have I learned under what conditions the marketed figurines are produced.

29. A fragment of this song is found in RAKESH 1998 [2056].

30. The structure of familial relations among Hindus in South Asian settings are described in greater length by a number of scholars, including BENNETT 1983, RAHEJA and GOLD 1994, and WADLEY 1994.

31. The toddler sons of participants are occasionally present but do not actually take part.

32. Saraswati told me that people think if you get rid of the *sāmā* figurines and paraphernalia in your own field, you'll get a better harvest. "But we don't have a field here [at our Janakpur home]," she indicated, "so we take it to the pond."

33. TRAWICK avers that "surely, the break in continuity with the mother is one meaning of the several major myths about females shattered or dismembered as a consequence of marriage of the allied action of males.... A similar idea may lie behind the representation of many village goddesses...as physically plural, though one in spirit, and sometimes also in name" (1992, 167).

34. That is, she used to do whatever she wanted; acting in childish ways, unbecoming behavior in the wife she would later become.

35. For a comparison with songs regarding the departure of the bride for her conjugal home in North Indian contexts, see RAHEJA and GOLD 1994, 99–102.

36. See AHEARN (1994) for a discussion of the authenticity of Nepali women's feelings in association with resistant behavior at weddings.

37. There may be a parallel between the imperative to "listen to the heron's words" in the

songs of women in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan recorded by Gloria Goodwin RAHEJA and Ann Grodzins GOLD (1994), and the directive, “listen, Rāma’s wife,” as articulated in Maithil women’s song. A heron’s speech, suggest RAHEJA and GOLD, “suggests a different moral configuration” involving illicitness and resistance to power (1994, xi). In a separate essay, RAHEJA offers the following account that may shed further light on the invocation of Sītā in the song with which I have closed my essay: “When in 1990 I naively asked several groups of rural women from the dominant landholding Gujar caste whether they aspired to be like Sita, the paragon of wifely virtue and self-sacrifice, my question was greeted with gales of laughter, and a plethora of anecdotes about outwitted husbands and independent strong-willed wives. No one is like Sita nowadays, they said, and they assured me further that no one has any desired [sic] to be a ‘second Sita’” (RAHEJA 1994, 72). Thus far, I am not aware of the use of “listen, Rāma’s wife” as register-altering trope but will be paying attention to that possibility in future research.

38. Carolyn Henning Brown makes a similar argument about the reflection and thereby worship of a sacred, female self in Maithil women’s painting (BROWN 1996).

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