Dashain in Kathmandu – celebrating the good and the food

The victory of good over evil has to be celebrated. This milestone in Hindu epics is honoured with the celebration of the Dashain festival at the beginning of autumn. With the up-coming of the most important festival in Nepal, some memories of Christmas appear unavoidably: people rushing around to get their shopping done at the last minute, then the big moment, when everybody leaves the great city to go back to the peaceful village to spend some days together with the family. The first change that struck me, were the deserted streets all over Kathmandu, open spaces instead of the everyday chaos of people, bicycles, and just about any machine that can move.

On the first day of Dashain, every family puts some rice, wheat and other cereals into a bowl filled with sand. Each morning during the puja, the daily worship of the gods, the sand is sprinkled with some holy water. The cereals sprout at an impressive speed, and after a few days the bowl has turned into a bright green miniature field, a good omen for a prosperous life.

For me, Dashain began, when Gokul, our driver at the office, suddenly showed up with two goats in the back of the big UN truck. After grazing for a while on the lawn in front of the building, the goats were transformed into the office's Dashain feast. As part of the ceremony, some of their blood as well as some pieces of fur were offered to the god inside the vehicles. As fire is seen as god, the driving force of a car is its proper god living in the engine. If the god's thirst is quenched once a year during the festival, it will not demand any more blood throughout the year, thus the vehicle will be safe. And the driver will ply Kathmandu's busy roads with more ease and calm.

The goat feast, together with a amazing variety of dishes of course, was just the appetizer of Dashain. The following day, I was invited to Rajana's house, where I had my first Newari cooking course. The Newari people are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley and known for their diverse cuisine. My first attempts to make bara, sort of a lentil cookie, completely failed. As Rajana's mother

Lo que sucedió en el capítulo anterior:

El Bäschtu fue mandado a Nepal con la tarea de volver meada en fertilizante. De camino para la revolución de la mierda topó con una u otra aventura; descubriendo la vida en su nuevo mundillo, acogido por la gran familia nepalí. Al parecer del último capítulo, se estaba iniciando el festival de Dashain, y el Bäschtu fue llevado a conocer a la diosa Kali siempre hambrienta de sangre fresca (véase Namaste I – 2065 Asoj).

What happened in the previous chapter:

Bäschtu was sent to Nepal with the task of turning pee into fertilizer. On the way to the crap revolution, he encountered one or the other adventure: discovering the lifestyle in his new world, and enjoying a great welcome by the Nepalese family. At the issue of the last chapter, the Dashain festival was about to begin, and Bäschtu was taken along to meet the blood-thirsty goddess Kali (see Namaste I – 2065 Asoj).
had figured out that I was not able to cook Newari food, she decided that I would better just eat it. And eat a lot. Practicing my hand eating techniques, while sitting on the kitchen floor, I tasted all the delicious food that mama kept on piling onto my plate. Tasty dishes were followed by even tastier dishes. All accompanied by homemade rice beer and brandy. I think, after having spent half the day eating I understood that a simple „thank you, I have had enough“ is not sufficient to prevent a hospitable Nepalese from serving more food, but you really have to state „stop! that's it!“.

A short stroll to the temple around the corner was just enough to digest, before mum served more goodies. Nepalese actually only eat meat very rarely, but this one time a year, during Dashain, the abundance counts. Dashain is the time, when everybody finds back to his or her family. And thanks to the overwhelming Nepalese hospitality, I was treated like a family member once more.
Dashain in Lubhu – tea, blessings, tea, feast, tea...

After this introduction to Dashain in Kathmandu, Raju, my Nepali brother, took me to his family's house in Lubhu at the rim of the Kathmandu Valley. We left the continuous concert of honking cars, roaring trucks or buzzing motorbikes behind us, and took some retreat in the quietness of the village, at just a couple of kilometres from the city centre. It seemed like somebody had just slowed down the earth's spinning.

People sitting in front of their houses, drinking tea, enjoying the autumn sun. Friendly houses made of clay from the very spot they stand on, instead of cold concrete dominating the city's face. We were received with a blessing from his father and immediately a cup of tea was put in front of us.

I then got the chance to participate in the preparation of the feast from the very beginning. As an European used to buying his steak nicely wrapped at the supermarket, I learned how to do the „dirty work“ myself. I held the goat, when Raju's brother chopped off its head, I helped „shaving“ its fur and then preparing each and every part for the further use.

Between the meals, we had to go for a walk up to the teahouse, to the next village's teahouse or just across the fields. During Dashain, the great family gathering once a year, one gets an update on the cousin's wedding ceremony or the aunt's new job. While the elder discuss the latest political issues in New Nepal, the younger ones prefer to talk about their plans to emigrate, hoping for a better future in the West.

And the smallest of all spend their days playing on the „ping“, the traditional swing mounted exclusively during Dashain. Four bamboo stems are erected to a pyramid shaped structure. At a height of almost ten meters, a beam keeps this wobbly edifice together and two strings of braided rice straw hold the actual swing, ready for some audacious „extreme-swinging".
The actual main event during the ten-day long Dashain festival is the tikka ceremony on the seventh day. It starts with the family’s eldest giving the blessing to the younger ones by sticking a mix of rice and red powder, the tikka, on their forehead. Together with the tikka, the younger ones also receive the cereal sprouts sown on the first day of Dashain, which have reached a considerable height by now and radiate the fresh green of thriving nature. The red tikka together with the green sprouts blend in with the women’s red dresses worn for this special occasion and the radiant green of the landscape covered with a blanket of rice about to be harvested.

In Raju’s family, his father initiated the tikka ceremony with everybody seated on the porch in front of the old village house. From the eldest to the youngest, everybody got his or her turn to receive the blessing. After the father, the mother moved along the row of people awaiting the blessing. One after another, from eldest to the youngest, then got the opportunity to express his best wishes for the coming year to the younger ones. The family integrated me into this carousel of prayer murmur, tikka paste and food offerings; with my rice and colour powder spot on the forehead, I added my share of tikka paste above the children’s big curious eyes. By the end, Unesh, as the family’s youngest and the last one in the row, had his forehead plastered with tikka.

After the immediate relatives had received their blessing for the future, the extended family started to trickle in at the house, from the cousins at the beginning, to the far away aunt’s uncle’s grandson’s cousins, whose exact relation to the family nobody exactly knew. Everybody had a big dish of rice, a potpourri of vegetables and some snacks of the goat’s meat.

To complete the succession of big meals and blessings, Dr. Roshan, our boss invited the entire office staff to his Dashain celebration. As somehow also the office belongs to the family, the boss’ mother gave us the blessing. Later, we were seated in long rows on carpets rolled out on the floor. A battalion of cooks armed with big pots served the seated company all kind of goodies from the Newar kitchen. Every time, I thought the collection of possible dishes had been exhausted, the cooks’ parade appeared with new delicacies.
Después del gran festival de Dashain, nos quedaban nada más que dos semanas para digerir las numerosas comilonas y acostumbrarnos a la vida cotidiana, antes que empezaran de nuevo las fiestas con la celebración de Tihar. Esta vez, en comparación con Dashain, lo que más llenaba los platos, no fue la carne, sino todas las variedades posibles de frutas. Después de los rebaños de cabras llegados al valle desde el altiplano tibetano, llegaban camiones llenos de frutas desde las llanuras tropicales incluso desde la India. Una madrugada, me fui a Kalimati, el mercado principal de Katmandú, donde entre miles de carros de mano, de bici-puestos, o sea enteros puestos de mercado en dos ruedas, de coches, de top-mantas, parecía que rodaban las naranjas, fluían las manzanas y caminaban los plátanos en todas direcciones. Tanto movimiento que ni el ojo más advertido podía seguir las actividades en esta hormiguea urbana. El caos inspirador de la Katmandú cotidiana fue aún superado en esta euforia preparativa de la fiesta de las luces.

Tihar sigue a un programa muy exacto con cada día dedicado a la reflexión sobre un aspecto importante de la vida: el primero, el cuervo, el mensajero; el segundo, el perro, el guardián; el tercero, la vaca, la riqueza, el cuarto, el propio alma y cuerpo; y el quinto, lxs hermanxs. De esta manera, cada día tiene su protagonista que recibe una atención particular. Un día al año, los cuervos que pueblan las ciudades reciben un plato de comida, los perros igualmente al día siguiente, hasta las vacas que andan por las calles como si fueran nada más que otro habitante de esta ciudad cuya diversidad no conoce límites. O, como los hindú creen, una reencarnación de la misma Laksmi, la diosa de la riqueza.

Aquél día, a la señora Laksmi, en su forma invisible, le gusta también pasearse por las casas que abran sus puertas para obtener su bendición. Como Laksmi odia la oscuridad, hay que facilitarle el camino con miles de luces. De repente, en medio de la ciudad, me encontré en una mar de velitas de manteca y cascadas de luz que bajaban las escaleras de las casas, enseñándole a la diosa cada paso que tenga que hacer para traer la fortuna a cada hogar.

En mi casa, Laksmi había llegado con la máquina de tiempo. Raju y Jayanti se habían comprado una Laksmi eléctrica, una estam-
pita con enchufe, que parecía con la diosa en medio de una tormenta de colores. Si dicen que en mi barrio hay más templos que casas, más dioses que mortales, y más días de fiestas en un año que el año tiene días, uno tiene que inventar algo nuevo, para que su invitación a la diosa no pase inapercibida. Así con Laksmi del siglo XXI en medio de la mesa del salón, nos pusimos a ofrendarle plátanos, dulces, arroz y algunos billetes de rupias.

La casa donde yo vivía las primeras semanas en Nepal me invitó para la celebración de la Ma Puja al día siguiente. Dentro de la gran familia nepalí que une este país, cada uno de los grupos étnicos o cada una de las castas tiene sus rituales particulares. Para el pueblo newari, los habitantes indígenas del valle de Katmandú, la Ma Puja es el homenaje a la propia alma y al propio cuerpo. Desde la madrugada, toda la familia llevaba preparando los ingredientes de la ceremonia, dibujando unos grandes mándalas de polvo rojo y amarillo en el suelo de la cocina y componiendo unos platos de ofrendas para los dioses habitantes de las almas. Una vez la familia entera sentada en una fila, Roshana, la madre, empezó el espectáculo con la ducha de arroz. Luego repartiendo pescado, frutas, dulces, daba la vuelta entre las personas, los dibujos de colores y las lucecitas de manteca esparcidas en la cocina, el corazón de la casa.

Al quinto día llega la tikka de los hermanos, o en su sentido original, del hermano pequeño. Para esta ocasión Raju me llevó nuevamente a su casa de campo en Lubhu, donde ya habíamos celebrado Dashain con comilonas eternas y tikkas para toda la familia. Como Raju no tiene hermana „propia” (así se llaman en nepalí lxs hermanxs de los mismos padres para distinguirlos de lxs hermanxs „normales” que al cabo de la cuenta sería toda la humanidad), su prima tenía que tomarse el papel de la hermana y ponerles la tikka a los hermanos. Para la casta de los Chetri, la Bhai Tikka tiene una forma particular de siete puntos de colores distintos desde lo alto de la frente hasta la nariz. Pues, para acabar esta obra de arte un en la frente de cada uno, los colores terminan en cada sitio, menos donde deberían.

Así, se acabaron las fiestas, al menos por un momento, yo siendo el hermano pequeño de Raju. La familia se juntó otra vez para una de estas comidas que nunca se terminan, seguida por un día de tomar té por allí y por allá y gozar del mundo.

Tikka for brothers, sisters, and the whole family.

Tikka para los hermanos, las hermanas y toda la familia.