A Study of Contemporary Newar Domesticity in Post-Earthquake Kathmandu

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Introduction

In visiting Kathmandu two months after the 2016 earthquakes, it was my original intent to study the ways in which Newar Buddhists were responding to the ubiquitous domestic displacement, a project informed by what I had learned about their traditional habits of domesticity and domestic religious practices. In these exacerbated and tragic conditions, it was my hope that certain basic qualities about these customs would be emphasized – the essential and imperative aspects that remain when all else is lost into disorder – or else that I would learn something about the adaptability of these customs in what were exceptional circumstances.

While I was able to document, to a very modest extent, various reactions and adaptations by Newars to the domestic disruptions, I was also led to consider the dialogue between "tradition" and "modernity." For example, I found certain continuities in the types of concerns that influenced "traditional" styles of domestic architecture and their contemporary re-modification. In like manner for the domestic rituals did I perceive on the part of my interlocutors a prioritization that saw a final purpose in the rituals beneath the elaborate grammar of ritual taught by the Vajrācārya priest. What I have documented is not the singular response to an extraordinary occurrence. The tragic losses that the recent earthquake effected, and the current state of uncertainty and impermanence that follows such an event, are without question abnormal in their scale and scope; but not so in quality. Natural disasters brought by earthquake, monsoon, landslide etc., impoverishment, civic unrest, governmental ineffectuality, the conflicts of modernity, all of these forces have been continuously and consistently affecting daily domestic, familial, and ritual life long before the spring of 2015.

What follows is partly a discussion of the terms "tradition" and "modern" in the context of Newars and of Nepal, in lieu of the many changes since 1951. I attempt in this essay to see through the rhetoric of modernization as a unique form of change, by isolating the impulses and motivations that influence what appear at first sight as radical shifts in lifestyle.

Home and the Newā Chemĕ[1]

Anyone who has visited the bustling laneways of a Kathmandu residential neighbourhood, who has experienced first-hand the incredible closeness of people spilling out of the low-ceilinged shops, selling anything from metal ware to raw meat, mingling with the fruit and vegetable vendors who have secured themselves a narrow patch on the beaten dirt road or on the bottom ledge of a small shrine around which devotees circumambulate throughout the day; anyone who is familiar with the sights, smells, and sounds of these busy cramped thoroughfares, will immediately understand the hierarchy of space in a Newar home. Indeed, even without the modern annoyances of honking taxis and motorbikes that cloud the air with exhaust and press the pedestrians in their path even closer together, such alleyways would have been just as bustling and diverse a scene. It is therefore no surprise that the more private and restricted spaces in many *newā chemĕ* are placed at graduated separation from the hurly-burly, in a vertical structure of often four or five stories.

My primers on this subject were the two foundational works on Newar architecture: *The Traditional Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley* by Wolfgang Korn, and *Newar Towns and Buildings* by Gutschow, Kölver and Shresthacarya. For Korn, "traditional" adopts two different though related shades of meaning. It is both an element that has existed for a considerable period of time and an element that is by all appearances unique to Nepal, the Kathmandu Valley, or Newars, depending on the context. In his description of "The Newari House," he speaks in generalizations and of commonalities, in an attempt to create a "standard" upon which real houses may be compared and understood.[2] The later work by Gutschow et al. is a more exhaustive catalogue; and as a glossary of both architectural decoration and terminology gives a sense of the subject's diversity and resistance to simplification. Gutschow et al. describe their section drawing as a "typical house."[3] What is absent from both works is an indication of precisely *who* these hypothetical houses are typical or standard for? How such domestic structures would differ depending on caste, class, or profession is not clearly explained. This is an issue which Robert Levy touches upon in his monumental work on Bhaktapur, titled "Mesocosm." In this, he writes : "The ideal Newar urban house is built, repaired, and lived in by the middle and upper *thars*, and those members of the lower *thars*[4] who can now find the money for it. The poor, notably the Po(n), live in much simpler ones, often single-story thatched houses. The *ideal traditional* Newar house consists of four, and occasionally five, stories [emphasis mine]."[5] The understanding here is that the houses offered by Korn and Gutschow et al. are those aspired to by all (hence, ideal) but only attainable by the upper

[1] "house, residence, home." Ulrike Kölver and Iswarananda Shreshtacarya, *A Dictionary of Contemporary Newari* (Bonn: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag, 1994), 101.
[2] Wolfgang Korn, *The Traditional Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley* (Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1979), 18-23.
[3] Gutschow et al., *Newar Towns*, 135.
[4] "clan, lineage, sub-caste." Kölver, *Newari*, 148.
[5] Robert Levy, *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 188.

ranks of caste or class; and furthermore, that this "ideal" is rooted in practices that have been (or are thought to have been) followed for a considerable period of time. Likewise does Levy write elsewhere in *Macrocosm*: "…from the upper strata of farmers and above, people are more liable to live in larger households, with more complexly nucleated household structures, and in close contact with closely related households. Most middle farming families and the levels below them tend to separate quickly into smaller and physically separated units as brothers marry. It would seem this has various consequences for other aspects of social organization, and for the differential developmental and family experience of people of both high and low status."[6] It follows that my observations of housing and home life are at most only relevant to the middle to upper class Newars.

What I am concerned with in this essay is the organization of the Newar home, understood both architecturally and symbolically, and studied both according to the "ideal" described in the aforementioned literature and in the actual houses I managed to visit. Wolfang Korn has written that "a characteristic and universal feature of this design is the vertical room arrangement, which is not dependant on the size of the house."[7]A very general overview of this vertical progression is as follows. The ground floor is often occupied by a store and/or the storage of anything of little value such as firewood that is not at risk of being stolen. The middle floors are comprised of the sleeping, reception, and living quarters. These are the floors that most visitors may enter, but only if they are of equal or higher caste to that of the host family. At the uppermost and most private levels are the kitchen, the *dhyaḥ kvathā*,[8] and occasionally a terrace. There is a tendency for homes to be built in rectangular clusters around a small courtyard (*cuka*) with a well (*tuṃ*) and shrine, and each of these clusters might be comprised of one's relatives (*phuki*[9]) or people within the same *jāt*.[10] Just as with the upper floors of the home, these small courtyards are places of relative quiet and greater personal space.

The Newā Cheṁ in situ

Nonetheless, it is difficult to find *in situ* residential quarters that conform to the above generalizations. As Todd Lewis has remarked, "The residential environments of Kathmandu vary tremendously…In some places, neighbours are all relatives of the same caste; in other areas, they are all strangers, some from different ethnic groups…buildings are an extraordinary montage of materials and styles…Fewer buildings in the traditional style endure and Kathmandu's houses push higher than elsewhere."[11] While this is true in regards to the external form of the neighbourhoods and individual domestic construction, it may not be as relevant to the spatial and symbolic organization of the home. David Gellner has attested that "these broad associations, shared by all Newars alike, have survived the considerable modifications in the details of the organization of

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[6] Levy, *Mesocosm,* 112.
[7] Korn, *Architecture,* 18.
[8] A room for ritual and prayer, see p. 8.
[9] "1. relatives (by blood), family. 2. lineage, ancestors." Kölver, *Newari*, 222.
[10] "caste, tribe, nation." Kölver, *Newari*, 110.
[11] Todd Lewis, "Buddhist Merchants in Kathmandu: The Asan Twāḥ Market and Urāy Social Organization," in *Contested Hierarchies: A Collaborative Ethnography of Caste in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal*, ed. David Gellner and Declan Quigley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 42.

space consequent on the emergence of modern housing styles and the use of modern building techniques." My objective here is not to mark discrepancies between the idealized drawings found in the academic literature and those to be found actually standing in. Instead, I want to dig a little deeper and consider the impulses or considerations which led Newar householders to privilege verticality.

Korn writes that "security considerations, and the need to use as little irrigable land for building purposes, caused the Newari house to be vertically orientated."[12] There is nothing uniquely Newar in this statement, comparable to many other pre-modern societies. The hill-towns of medieval Italy such as San Gimignano are one such example that spring to mind, where limited space within the defensive walls forced those who could to build upwards. Kathmandu, like San Gimignano, has now devoured these old boundaries, and residential communities spill out over the fertile soil of erstwhile rice fields. Due to modern modes of transportation, the irrigable farmland within the Valley, so important to the inhabitants for centuries and in many respects responsible for the growth of this civilization, is no longer necessary. Instead, a ceaseless convoy of what appear as *Mad Max* inspired trucks with colourful painted designs carry produce from the Tarai in the south. Concurrently, those families who in the past had the wealth to, and for reasons of security desired to, build four-story homes now have largely relocated to sub-urban gated communities with their own security systems. It may therefore be said that whatever the symbolic functions – socially or ritually – the vertical house served, the pragmatic reasons have changed.

This essay is the product of 36 days spent in Nepal in July and August of 2015, primarily in Kathmandu. During this time, I was associated mainly with the Sthāpit *jāt*[13] and the nuclear family of a Sthāpit friend of mine who I had met in Canada. There are certain obvious challenges in researching domestic spaces, where privacy is concerned. This was exacerbated by the brevity of my stay, the scarcity of local contacts, and my limited language acquisition. I therefore managed to visit only half-a-dozen Newar households, and any observations and conclusions I draw from these experiences are for this reason specific and thus narrowed. In addition to my formal research-driven trip to the neighbourhood of Bhimsenthan that I discuss below, I visited a total of five other Newar houses. These are as follows:

1. The home of the Sthāpit family with whom I was in closest contact, located in Jyatha, Kathmandu, and built some fifty-odd years ago. This was vacated post-earthquake on account of significant cracking in the cement walls.
2. The single storey ground floor "flat" in Putalisadak, Kathmandu, where the above-mentioned family had relocated, and formerly the home of the widowed sister of the eldest Sthāpit male.
3. The first storey flat of the above-mentioned sister, just up the block.

[12] Korn, *Architecture,* 18.
[13] There is no commonly used Newar word to designate a person's surname. I was told that *jāt* is generally preferred to *thar*, although both are technically Nepali words.

4. The house of a nurse in Lalitpur, who had administered care to the mother of the eldest Sthāpit female some years prior.
5. The house of my Nepali language instructor, in Kuleshwor, Kathmandu.

Into these homes I entered not as a researcher, as I did in Bhimsenthan,[14] but simply as a guest paying a visit or sharing a meal. On each occasion I was given a tour of the house, and it is not clear to me if this service was habitual (i.e. would be given to any new guest) or was performed on account of my being a foreigner. In showing me their homes, with the exception of the *dhyaḥ kvathā*, I was aware of no other rooms that were off limits to me.[15] For example, in all but one of the houses was I shown into the kitchen, and in the case of the exception it could very well have been deemed not of interest in the general tour rather than a question of exclusivity. My being urged not to bring my finished plate into the kitchen seemed to come more from a sense of hospitality than exclusivity, and seemed to be part of the habitual social performance played out between guests and hosts, a conflict between the host's desire to serve and guest's desire to not appear to demand service.

In four of the five homes, everyday meals were eaten in a small room off the side of the kitchen and separated only partially by a counter top or some such piece of furniture. That being said, although the kitchen was never in my experience at the highest level of the home (for houses vertical in orientation), it was never near the door, being either a few floors up or at the far back of the home (if horizontal in orientation, or of only one floor). It is likely that traditional rules and restrictions regarding the kitchen arise only in the case of feasts, where other customs such as sitting on the floor, dining in a different room, and hierarchical ordering are observed.

Just as I was expecting I probably would not be taken to the upper floors, my hosts would be keen to show me their terrace. These were more or less the same in the majority of houses I visited and was quite a little oasis, seemingly miles away from the hurried streets below. Generally there would be a wide assortment of potted plants on one or two levels, along with the water tank and drying laundry and at least one occasion a small shrine. The floors of the terrace would cleverly skirt around the *dhyaḥ kvathā*, which would generally be on the same level as the lower terrace and would never be below the upper terrace if there was one. On this level, some houses would also have a meditation room, such as at the home of the nurse in Lalitpur. His meditation room was characteristic of others I saw later. This was a small windowless room with a wooden cabinet against one wall. Within the cabinet were five small statuettes of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, locked away behind glass, and in front of these were five coffers intended for offerings. Like the *dhyaḥ kvathā*, I was told that these meditation rooms should not have a floor above them, although the prescription is not as severe

[14] This is only true in part. Even in the Bhimsenthan scenario, my visit was effected through the beneficence of a Sthāpit relation, such that it could be argued that here too my visit was social, with the notable difference that its purpose was expressly on my behalf.
[15] Once again, I cannot say whether this would be so for all visitors i.e. low caste.

as with the former. The reason that I was given for this was that no one should step over the gods. Interestingly, there appeared to be no restriction upon who could enter these mediation rooms.

Current Trends in Domesticity[16]

In the Kathmandu Valley, and Kathmandu in particular, a series of trends are changing the composition of the old urban neighbourhoods. Even before the earthquake, middle to upper-class families had begun to leave their homes in the center of the city and resettle in suburban gated communities, attracted by greater security, fresher air, and amenities such as swimming pools. The old Kathmandu neighbourhoods are dissolving as families grow and the household is forced to splinter into more manageable units. The question is whether there is anything essentially new in this trend? As mentioned, one of the attractions of these new sub-urban subdivisions is increased security. In the case of the Sthāpit family, the mother was desirous to relocate in order that she could feel comfortable leaving the city for periods of time while the house was empty, something she would not have considered doing with their former house in Jyatha. Speaking with an old potter in Bhaktapur, I was told that whereas in the past the potters would simply go to the nearby hills to procure raw clay, they were now forced to buy the clay from elsewhere, because of new building-zone bylaws and the suburbanization of the valley.

As often occurs in cities when there is a quick increase in population density, urban real estate is become divided into smaller and smaller portions. Moving into these ever-shrinking spaces are provincials who I was told come to the capital not for job opportunities, as I had expected, but rather seeking better climate, especially for those people coming from the Tarai. The old large homes are being segmented into separate small apartments for these rural immigrants, or else they are turned into hotels. The construction and real estate companies that put up the new suburbs only offer certain models from which a family can choose, allowing for only minimal individualization on the part of the family.

It could very well be that these will become the houses that will become the new model for tradition. But how different are they from the old houses in the city? For this comparison, I am only able to offer one particular comparison, between the Sthāpit house in Jyatha and that which they are in the process of building in Dhāphāsi, immediately north of Kathmandu. Even this comparison is problematic, given that the Jyatha home is itself a product of a new consumer culture and economic opportunities.[17] Nonetheless, some comparison between these two and the "ideal" houses of Korn and Gutschow et. al will lead to some interesting insights. Firstly, there are the aspects from the Jyatha and hypothesized homes that are translated in the Dhāphāsi model: the terrace and north-facing cluster of meditation, *pujā*, and store-rooms on the upper-most floor, and the

[16] My source for most of this information were informal conversations with various Newars. It should also be noted that the trend discussed above is not exclusively Newar, but the relative commercial success and real-estate holdings in Kathmandu mean that many are Newar.

[17] The paternal grandfather (*āju*) of my friend opened three hotels in the early 1990s, in Kathmandu, Lumbini, and Pokhara respectively.

central courtyard construction reminiscent of a *bāhāḥ*. On the other hand, the kitchen and dining room are located on the ground floor, counter to precedent, with the later quite close to the entranceway. Can we make sense of this based on the principles hitherto discussed that influenced previous arrangement of domestic space? Though unsubstantiated, it is tempting to hypothesize that the greater space and clearer division of the property line effect the same separation from the public space that floor elevation did formerly. The decision to keep the *pujā* and meditation rooms on the upper floor follows the prescription against walking above the gods.

The Influence of the Earthquake

In the months following the earthquake, when from time to time subterranean tremors still shook the cityscape like the rumble of a subway line, the fears of those who had lived through the event exerted some influence over the paradigm of vertical-orientation. In short, the earthquake has made many people frightened of living too high up. It has become imperative to stay low to the ground, particularly at night, so as to be better able to leave the building quickly in the case of another tremor.[18] I was told that for many years now a Kathmandu bylaw had prohibited building above 4 floors. This rule was evidently ubiquitously disregarded, by families who either for status or space (or both) built upwards into the Kathmandu skyline. That said, the current fear of heights is not an irrational one. The World Bank Project Data Sheet for Nepal Housing Reconstruction reports that:

> "*[the] rapid and unplanned urbanization in the Kathmandu Valley has significantly increased its risk to earthquakes. The population of the Kathmandu Valley has increased dramatically, from 1.5 million in 2001 to 2.5 million in 2011 when the latest census was conducted. The necessary construction of housing and infrastructure to support this increased population has taken place without proper implementation of the 1994 building code and its seismic provisions. In fact the ubiquitous practice of incremental expansion of buildings over time is often the norm, a practice that significantly increases building vulnerability to earthquakes."*[19]

At the same time, the old *bāhāḥ* style of a central rectangular courtyard surrounded by generally two-storied buildings was put to great use in the weeks following the earthquake, and I heard stories of great numbers of people congregating in these courtyards under tents as the earth continued to rumble and shake.

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[18] On one occasion I visited a certain Kathmandu cinema, which I was told had once been the best in Kathmandu, but that in recent years had been outstripped by cinemas with more modern technologies. After the earthquake however, no one wanted to continue visiting these newer cinemas because they were all located on higher stories; so that this cinema, with only two stories, is now experiencing a renaissance of patronage, to the extent that that same evening a former Miss Nepal was in attendance.

[19] "Nepal Earthquake Housing Reconstruction Project," The World Bank, June 18, 2015, http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2015/06/25/090224b082f88b43/1_0/Rendered/PDF/Nepal000Earthq0construction0Project.pdf

Newar Caste

Despite the scholarship already published on the topic of the newar caste system, it remains important to hear from Newars themselves how they view caste, both their own and the system. My interlocutors in Bhimsenthan told me their perspective as follows (I paraphrase):

> Within the Buddhist Newars, there are three major groupings: there is the Vajrācārya *jāt*, who are the priests; the Śākya *jāt*, who are the descendants of the historical Buddha[20]; and the *Urāy*, within which are included basically everyone else, a total of approximately 10-12 *jāt*. Although in general society the differences between these groups is more or less lost, within Newar society these distinctions are still very relevant, as regarding intermarriage, differences in daily prayers etc.
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> Originally in the Valley there were just Buddhism and Śaivism. Between the two religions there is much cross-influence, to the extent that there are even some gods that are worshiped by both groups. It is this ambiguity of boundary between the two that has allowed both to get along so well on a popular level. The easiest way to discern between the two during ritual is by which priest is involved, with a Vajrācārya officiating the Newar Buddhists and a Newar Brahmin priest (the Jośi *jāt*) for the Newar Śaivas.

This summary that was related conversationally of a complex social structure is roughly comparable with the more exhaustive written accounts of researchers such as Gellner. Two aspects of this conversation are worthy of note. The first is the confessed ignorance in regards to what other *jāt* do for their daily prayers. I was told that these would be in some respects different, but in what ways or why they were not able to explain. I was instructed to speak with a Vajrācārya, who would know the ritual responsibilities of each. The secondly is that they lumped everyone not a Vajrācārya or Śākya into the Urāy caste, and it is not clear to me in hindsight if this was because the term Urāy has come to mean essentially a Newar lay Buddhist or that they considered other, conceivably lower, castes (Maharjan for instance) as not worthy of mention. What was clear. however, was a sense of isolation within the broader Newar framework, a linear relationship with the family's Vajrācārya being the notable inter-caste relationship, and a general attitude of "we know what we have to do, and that is

[20] This is a claim made by the Śākya caste and is of course contested on historiographic lines. That being said, this simple statement by my interlocutors is evidence that it is a claim accepted as fact by at least some Newars.

enough." From this perspective, it is easy to understand why most Newars are not involved in Newar nationalism, as noted by Gellner.[21]

I have omitted this house from my discussion of domestic architecture and spatial organization simply because it was the only occasion when I was not offered a tour of the house as a matter of course. Instead, I was lead into a small sitting room on the first floor (one storey up), which faced onto the street. My visit was explained by my being a student of Buddhism and interested in learning more about Newar Buddhism specifically, and it is possible that this introduction was responsible for the unique reception.

Relative to the five other Newar homes described above, the house in Bhimsenthan was constructed of older materials and had the appearance of being more lived in. Though I did not explicitly ask, the residents and the interior of the home gave the impression of belonging to a lower economic class.

Newar Domestic Religion

Prior to our visit, there had been some doubt on the part of my assistants as to what sort of response I would receive to my questions. It was expected that the responses from my interlocutors would be blunt and straightforward, and on our way to Bhimsenthan I was encouraged to come up with broader questions that might open up the conversation. These concerns proved to be unfounded, as quite the opposite proved to be true. Initially, only the men of the family congregated in the reception room to speak with me. One of my assistants, noticing this, rounded up the women, explaining to me that these were the ones who tended to be more involved with everyday rituals.

To begin with, I found people very willing to talk at length with me, such that my only need for more general questions came once I had exhausted my more specific ones and my interlocutors still wanted to continue speaking! Furthermore, my questions prompted quite a lot of discussions between people before a more concise response was finally filtered through to me via my translator. It appeared as if people were taking advantage of the opportunity to think philosophically about religious practices that, being so integral to their daily lives, would not otherwise attract attention for reflection. Presenting their religious lives to an outsider seem to force them to some extent to assume the outsider's perspective. This is a condensed version of what I was told:

> The most important daily prayers for the Buddhist Newar family are those performed once a day in the morning, called the *nhikaḥ pujā*. These morning prayers are performed in the *dhyaḥ kvathā*, a room always situated at the very top of the house and into which only the 'family' are allowed entrance. In addition to the *dhyaḥ kvathā*, some houses will have a

[21] Gellner, *Monk*, 15.

second room to house the *āgaḥ dhyaḥ*.[22] This is the sculpture of the *guthi* deity, and it is so exclusive that only certain people within the *guthi* are allowed to see and be seen by it. For those persons in the household that are allowed to enter the *āgaḥ kvathā*, it is here that they will perform their *nhikaḥ pujā*. All families will have an *āgaḥ dhyaḥ*, but for some it will not be within their own home, either being in the home of a close relative or else at a temple.

In addition to these enclosed rooms that maintain their sacredness, there are other ways to create temporary sacred spaces in the home, such as the recitation of prayers around a waterspout, or drawing with certain types of flour upon the floor in front of the devotee.

The kitchen is generally not on the ground floor and is often set next to the *dhyaḥ kvathā*, yet kept very much separate in order to prevent against becoming polluted by *cipa*; but just as often is the *dhyaḥ kvathā* even further up.

The most important part of the *nhikaḥ pujā*. is simply to say the prayers, with or without the prayer beads. Of secondary importance, although still commonly done, is to have uncooked rice and pure water as offerings. Of tertiary importance, but still part of what most people do, are the offerings of a flower, pigment, incense, and a type of standing clay lamp called a *devā*.

The purpose of the *nhikaḥ pujā*. is simply to "think of god." The prayer recited is the mantra that is given to one as a child by a priest and thereupon memorized. When you are given your mantra, you are told that it is to be kept secret and not shared with anyone. Many people had memories from childhood of having their mantra whispered to them, and written on a small piece of paper that would later be eaten. Despite all the secrecy, by adulthood it is generally known the mantra is in fact the same for everyone.

As mentioned previously, I was encouraged by my interlocutors in Bhimsenthan to speak with a Vajrācārya priest, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the *nhikaḥ pujā*, as it is performed by other *jāt* or castes. "There are," writes Gellner, "no institutional means for overseeing doctrine, and the unity and uniformity of Newar Buddhism are ensured by loyalty to the Vajrācāryas' rituals rather than to doctrine."[23] To this end, I was fortunate enough to interview Nitesh Vajrācārya. Along with his father, Nitesh is the priest for the Sthapit family with whom I was closest connected. What I learned from him is as follows:

[22] *āgaḥ*, 1. inner sacred place, room where an image of a deity is kept, accessible only to initiates; 2. mystery, secret. – *āgaḥ kvathā*, room of a *guthi* god – *āgaḥ dhyaḥ*, secret god or goddess, patron deity. Kölver, *Newari*, 12.

[23] Gellner, *Monk*, 114.

There are six main gods in Vajrayana Buddhism, each with their own priests who, as part of their *nhikaḥ puja*, perform certain prayers for their allocated god, in addition to their regular prayers.

The *nhikaḥ pujā* is ideally performed immediately upon rising from bed and is a time of reflection. More than simply thinking of god, it is an opportunity for introspection and reflection upon one's actions during the previous day, mapped onto the five precepts of Buddhist ethics (Nep. *pañcaśil*). By taking stock of the previous day before entering into the day to come, one attempts to improve on past transgressions and make any changes that are necessary in one's ethical life.

As a rule, before the *nhikaḥ pujā* one is supposed to take a full bath and put on clean clothes (even clothes intended to be worn exclusively in the *dhyaḥ kvathā*), but this is generally no longer done. In place of the full bath, a washing of the hands is symbolically sufficient; and anyways, one is not expected to be particularly dirty first thing in the morning. In this *pujā*, the Urāy pray to all the gods in general, although there will commonly only be statues of Buddha, Ganesh, Saraswati and Basundhara. In a manner reciprocal to the washing of the devotee, a small bowl of clean water (*laḥ*) is set down on the floor at the beginning of the *pujā* that symbolically represents the bathing of the gods and in doing so also purifies the room. Following the completion of the *pujā*, the la has become blessed through contact with the gods and is now known as *jala*.[24]

Along with be situated at the uppermost level of the home, the *dhyaḥ kvathā* should be placed at the north-east corner, an auspicious direction, whereas the kitchen should be placed at the south-west (though not necessarily on a different floor). Rather than any connection between the two spaces, Nitesh instead stressed their opposition. The kitchen is a smelly, busy, noisy, and polluted space, in contrast to the meditative, transcendental, purified space of the *dhyaḥ kvathā*.

I had noted from my conversations in Bhimsenthan that the people who had helped me to organize the meetings insisted that the women of the house be present as well as the men. When I asked Nitesh about this he told me that generally nowadays when it comes to the daily practices, the women are more religiously observant than the men. The men are more occupied with work commitments and obligations outside of the home, whereas frequently the women have more time available for religious practice both within the home and outside of it. Doctrinally, men and woman are equal and Nitesh stressed how many of the most important gods and *pujā* are female or directed towards females. As regards the children, their religious instruction is the

[24] Interestingly, in the process of this ritual, what was formerly given a Newar name (*laḥ*) is subsequently given a Sanskrit name (*jala*, Nep. *jal*).

responsibility of the family. Beyond that, young Newars learn about the various gods and festivals from books. This is corroborated once more by Gellner. "Ritual is taught to young Vajrācāryas by their fathers or uncles, or by a learned teacher chosen for the purpose. They are made to memorize the Sanskrit utterances accompanying each ritual gesture or act. Doctrine is only taught in an ad hoc way, so that the practising priest can answer casual questions about the ritual asked by the laity. The laity receives no explicit teaching on doctrine. Laymen and women, particularly women, are taught by their mothers to make basic offerings. All other learning is a matter of personal choice ... By contrast, at different levels according to background and gender, a basic minimum knowledge of ritual was explicitly taught in the family."[25]

The *dhyaḥ kvathā* is far and away the most exclusive room in the house, and on no occasion was I given the opportunity to go inside one. More than anything else, this room defines the boundaries of the family, and ritually ties each of its members to a place. Six years ago, the eldest son of the Sthāpit family that I was connected with married a woman from the Śaiva Newar Jośi *jāt*. Unlike his parents' marriage, his had not been arranged, and the difference in caste had ruffled a few feathers and complicated some of the wedding rituals. Since then, however, his wife has become very much a part of the family and has taken on many of the traditional roles of the daughter-in-law (*bhau*), such as being in charge of much of the cooking. Since then, she has a given birth to a daughter, who is doted upon by everyone in the family, the grandparents in particular. Yet despite all this, it had been only recently that the *bhau* had been at last allowed to enter the family's *dhyaḥ kvathā* and become a part of the ritual family. Before this, she had had to perform her *nhikaḥ pujā* in the dry goods storeroom. This more severe restriction was on account of the presence therein of the family's *āgaḥ dhyaḥ*. In any case, the *dhyaḥ kvathā* is such an exclusive space that even the ties of marriage and childbearing are secondary in defining who is part of one's family. As an extension of this delimitation, during the *sagaṃ pujā* that was performed before leaving for a family trip to Lumbini, when all the travelers were made to stand in a line according to family hierarchy and receive the blessing from the head ritual female of the family (*nāki*), the *bhau* was given inferior status to her own daughter and was higher only than myself. The *dhyaḥ kvathā* also ties one to the home, the home as a space at the center of one's ritual life. Even though the family had been forced to vacate their former home in Jyatha and move into the apartment flat of the father's eldest sister in Putalisadak, every morning at dawn without the fail he and his wife, the two ritual heads of the family, would return for their *nhikaḥ pujā* at their former home. This will only become unnecessary once they have established their new permanent home, within in a year or so. Ritually speaking and aside from any emotional connections, one's family is defined by who is allowed into the *dhyaḥ kvathā*, while one's home is wherever one's *dhyaḥ kvathā* is to be found.

Pujā in a Dangerous Time

[25] Gellner, *Monk*, 116.

When the earthquake hit Bhimsenthan, many people were at home preparing for the second day of the *guthi* prayers, which were consequently not carried out. Most of the families in Bhimsenthan went to whatever open spaces were available, primarily at the different colleges and schools, but also at a local Comprehensive Service Center comprised of a school, orphanage and health clinic. In the weeks immediately following the earthquake the whole city was in standstill and people remained stranded where they were. During this period of extraordinary circumstances, the *nhikaḥ pujā* was done from the heart wherever a person could find space.

According to Nitesh, Vajrācārya priests are only required to oversee a domestic *pujā* upon request; and this is generally done only for sickness, death, or some other such special need. In his opinion, there had not been any increase in the number of requests for special domestic *pujā* following the earthquake. What there have been, however, are large communal *pujā* at temples. These *śānti pujā* are intended to bring peace, good weather and health for all of Nepal. Nitesh also described to me how the alignment of the planets can have a positive or negative impact on earthly events, and that the *śānti pujā* also encourages the beneficial alignment of the cosmos. Astrology is, he stressed, of secondary importance in comparison with rituals directed towards the gods, and there is no straightforward relationship between the two.

While the exceptional circumstances in which I visited Nepal revealed fundamental aspects of Newar religious life, such as the return to the home described above, they also revealed to me a prioritization and practicality of ritual. At no time did I observe a sense of dismay that such and such a ritual could not be done because of the earthquake. There is a practicality to all this ritual, and a philosophical understanding that while important when possible, there is a deeper truth to it all that appreciates but does not require embellishments. So it must be, in a context where ritual is so much a part of all aspects of life. Ritual signals the passage of time, it organizes the stages of a life, and it marks beginnings and endings. When times are good, rituals are performed with all their prescribed elements. But no one needs to tell a Newar that times are not always good. The case of the *nhikaḥ pujā* is telling in this regard. It is at once the most constant expression of a Newar's religious life and the most mundane. In the period of dislocation following the earthquake, all of the standard offerings and means of purification weren't necessary because these are just elaborations on a theme. Above all, the *nhikaḥ pujā* is about one's devotion to the gods and a reflection on one's ethical life, and these meditations could be done from the heart, in whatever small corner of space was available.

It was not about performing the perfect *pujā*, and neither was it necessary to maintain at all the costs the standards of worship followed in the good times. People simply made do with what was realistic and what was safe. In this regard, it was not a question of doing it right; what was important was simply to do something. Despite the elaborate ritualism that is peculiar to Newar Buddhism, I found people spoke about their rituals with a surprising degree of understanding regarding the underlying philosophical or ethical meaning of ritual. Just as with the continuities that I observed between 'pre-modern' and contemporary domestic concerns, my interlocutors seemed to be able adapt their ritual concerns and obligations and simply make the best of a bad situation. In both cases, whatever differences they were between the current context and an idealized past (be it

Malla period Newar neighbourhoods or the *nhikaḥ pujā* entire as described by Nitesh), these tended to be circumstantial, not of function but of form.