Chapter 2

Constraining Liminality and Performing Culture: The Festival of Buṅgadyaḥ in the Kathmandu Valley

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This chapter examines stasis and innovation in what is arguably the largest festival of the Kathmandu Valley, a festival that is notably punctuated by periods of stillness and movement. It focuses on changes that have occurred over the past two decades. This festival honors a deity known to Newars as Buṅgadyaḥ, the most important of the Kathmandu Valley's manifestations of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The deity's name (one of many used in popular discourse and historical texts) derives from the village Bũga (Nep. Bungamati), where one of two temples devoted to this god is located. To most Nepali speakers, this deity is known as Matsyendranātha, a Hindu *mahāsiddha*, though Newars, both Buddhists and Hindus, also often use this name. I have used the epithet Buṅgadyaḥ here for the sake of consistency and have referred to this deity using masculine pronouns in the interest of simplicity. It is important to note, however, that the ambiguity of this god's gender is a frequent topic of conversation among devotees.[1]

1 I use masculine pronouns to refer to this deity for convenience and because Buṅgadyaḥ is most frequently identified as masculine. It is important to note, however, that Buṅgadyaḥ is also recognized as feminine, marked most conspicuously by undergoing initiation rites for both boys and girls as part of the re-empowerment of his image and by the practice of referring to Bungamati as

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I first saw this festival in 1977 and have chronicled some transformations that have emerged over time, while at the same time, remaining amazed that so much has stayed the same. More recently, I have been struck by how much has changed and the direction these changes have taken. This chapter describes these changes and how they undermine the fundamentally transgressive nature of the festival even while preserving it.

Far from simply being an arena in which social hierarchies are reaffirmed and the dominance of those in authority put on conspicuous display, as scholars of state-sponsored South Asian festivity often have understood them, this festival is like many others around the world: a stage on which relations of power can be called into question and the status quo challenged. Festivals are liminal spaces in which, as Victor Turner long ago observed, new possibilities are considered and acted upon: sometimes fleetingly, other times with enduring effects. As he put it, "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but also in some sense the source of them all, and more than that as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations, ideas and relations may arise" (Turner 1967, 97).[2] The liminal space of this festival has provided opportunities to reject what Turner calls "positive structures" and invent them—both enduring and transitory—at the same time.

This festival was born of transgression: violations of norms that apply to social behavior and generally shared cultural understandings of propriety. What follows is a highly abbreviated account of its origins, an oft-told tale with many variations that I will summarize here, paying particular attention to the tensions described within it. Most accounts of its origin trace it back some fourteen hundred years[3] to a twelve-year drought caused by Gorakhanātha, disciple of the god it honors. The most widely imitated (if not plagiarized)[4] version to find

his *thaḥ cheṃ* or "*woman's* father's house." The Newar language conveniently does not have gendered pronouns, thereby avoiding this issue.

2 Though Turner first deployed the concept of liminality in his analyses of rites of passage (drawing upon Van Gennep (1960), he later incorporated it in his analysis of festivity (1978), as have others (Guss 2000, MacAloon 1984).

3 Locke comes to the conclusion that "it is entirely possible that the festival of Bugama Lokesvara was inaugurated by the Licchavi King Narendradeva (ca. 643–679 CE) as the *Gopālarāja Vaṃśāvalī* states" given its "proven reliability" on matters of this nature during this period (1980, 328).

4 See, for example, a Newar "classic comic" version by Swayambhu Ratna Saurabh (n.d.), and a recent version by Artha Ratna Tuladhar published in 2019.

its way into print was first published in 1956/57 by Āśākājī Vajrācārya (1980 [1956/57 (VS 2014)]), and republished in at least five editions. The account that follows is largely derived from this work.

Gorakhanātha remembered that Nārāyaṇa had promised the father of Narendradeva, the King of Nepal, that his guru, Buṅgadyaḥ (here referred to as Karuṇāmaya),[5] would come to Nepal and enable the people there to cultivate rice. (Nārāyaṇa had made the land fertile and enabled its people to grow paddy, but its husks contained no grain, something that only Karuṇāmaya could provide.) So Gorakhanātha decided to journey to Nepal as his guru (and Nārāyaṇa's) had, taking the form of a *kanphaṭā yogī*. In order to quench his prodigious thirst after his arduous trip, an innkeeper provided him with endless quantities of beer, tricking him by doing so with the secret aid of *nāga* serpent deities. Angered by this deception, he sat in meditation upon the rain-bringing *nāga*s, ultimately compelling his guru to come to him —a radical inversion of the usual guru-disciple relationship.[6] The priest Śāntikar Ācārya[7] advised King Narendradeva that the drought that resulted from Gorakhanātha's obstinacy could only be alleviated by bringing Karuṇāmaya from Kāmarūpa (today's Assam), where he was living with its demonic King and Queen who cherished him as the youngest of their five hundred sons. King Narendradeva from Bhaktapur, a priest named Bandhudatta from Kathmandu, and a farmer called Rathã Cakra[8] from Patan—three city-states all located in the Kathmandu Valley, which was synonymous with Nepal at the time[9]—therefore set off to bring Karuṇāmaya to Nepal. They could only do so

5 Regarding the derivation and use of this term, see Owens, 2019.

6 A Buddhist chronicle, probably written in 1830, and widely known as "Wright's chronicle" after the name of its first translator, explicitly describes Gorakhanātha's motivation for entrapping the *nāga*s as being to force his guru to come to him so that he might have *darśana* (to behold and be beheld and thereby blessed) of him. In this account Gorakhanātha resorts to this strategy because it was very difficult for him to go to his guru who was residing in the "Kāmani mountains" (*Nepālikabhūpavaṃśāvalī* ed. 2016, 51). Several other accounts relate that Gorakhanātha sat upon the rain-giving *nāga*s out of rage, deliberately causing a drought in retaliation for the people of Nepal failing to recognize him and giving him no alms (see Locke 1973, 52–55).

7 There has been some debate about whether this priest was Buddhist or Hindu, a question recently taken up by Nepal's Supreme Court (Naresh Man Vajrācārya, personal communication, October 18, 2021).

8 Also known as Lalita Jyāpu.

9 These three urban centers became three independent kingdoms in 1482 (Slusser 1982, 400). The location of the Licchavi capital at the time of Narendradeva is a matter of debate (see Slusser 1982, 109–126).

through subterfuge and by deploying tantric powers of transformation. Along the way, they tricked Karkoṭaka Nāgarāja, king of the *nāga*s (serpent deities), into joining their quest by appealing to his vanity. After the Nāgarāja demonstrated his capacity to assume a gigantic form, Bandhudatta asked if he could also shrink to become minuscule. When Karkoṭaka demonstrated that he could, Bandhudatta captured him in a box and compelled him to join their quest. The priest then enlisted his aid in his giant form to cross a treacherous river that would turn whatever touched its waters to stone.

Upon their arrival in Kāmarūpa, the demon king and his wife refused to relinquish their son despite the numerous gifts they were offered, so Bandhudatta called upon the Nāgarāja's help once again. The aim was for him to assume his minute form to make the demon king sick by entering the king's stomach. Bandhudatta hoped to win the king's gratitude by curing him from the illness he created: a strategy that failed. Karuṇāmaya's compassionate nature nonetheless compelled him to leave with them. In so doing, he defied his mother's wishes and disrespected her in the process by inadvertently stepping over one of her hairs as she lay across his doorway to prevent his departure. In stepping over part of her body, he committed the highly disrespectful act of "*hācāṃ gāye*ing" her.[10] To facilitate their escape from the angry pursuing demoness, the priest extracted the life of the god in the form of a bumblebee and captured it in a ritual ewer or *kalaśa*. This required the assistance of the king, who thrice fell asleep during the ritual process, compelling the priest to nudge his king awake, thus enraging him so much that he inwardly thought of killing the priest. This ritual is commemorated each year at Kvaduvāḥ Daha where the life of the deity is retrieved from the Bagmati River, introduced into a *kalaśa*, and brought to his image for reconsecration.

Once they arrived in the valley, Gorakhanātha rose in honor of his guru, thereby releasing the *nāga*s and bringing rain. It then had to be determined in which of the Kathmandu Valley's three kingdoms to hold the god's festival, and once again, transgressive deception was critical to determining the outcome. The king of Patan secretly compelled his eldest subject, who had been appointed to make this choice, to decide

10 The expression *hācāṃ-gāye* is most often applied to a situation in which one assumes a position above another person while climbing the open stairs in a traditional Newaḥ house, thereby offending them. One is expected to take pains to avoid this situation by calling out *bināḥbi* before mounting the stairs, thereby warning anyone who might be standing below.

in his kingdom's favor by giving him a bowl of yogurt laced with salt. (To take salt from someone is to become beholden to them.) As a consequence of this subterfuge, when the old man announced his coerced opinion from atop a pile of seven wooden mortars (*ugaḥ*), the earth opened up and swallowed him. Despite this obvious procedural irregularity, it was decided to hold the festival in Patan.

Seven other chariot festivals in honor of other gods were being held in Patan at the time of the festival's inauguration. All but one of these gods agreed to Bandhudatta's request to relinquish their own festivals and merge into Karuṇāmaya's image.[11] The only deity who did not agree to this request is known as Cākvāḥdyaḥ[12] to Newars and as Mīnanātha[13] to Nepali speakers. In Vajrācārya's text, this deity is referred to as Jaṭādhārī Lokeśvara. Bandhudatta redoubled his efforts and used his tantric powers to invoke the deity into a *caitya* that he had made to secure his presence,[14] but it split open in a dramatic display of Cākvāḥdyaḥ's displeasure at Bandhudatta's impertinent request. Cākvāḥdyaḥ then came to Bandhudatta in a dream and told him that his chariot festival must not be discontinued.[15] As a result, the festival of Buṅgadyaḥ also includes a smaller chariot in which Cākvāḥdyaḥ is processed through the streets of Patan.

11 Here, "merge" refers to a process whereby one being or deity is "absorbed" by another, the being or deity being absorbed thereby recognizing the superiority of the deity with which they have been merged. This is often expressed in Newari using the phrase *līna juye*. Vajrācārya describes the process whereby Bandhutta accomplished this as employing the esoteric tantric visualization technique of *sādhanā* ("*Śrī Lokanāthayā mūrtisa sādhanā yānā bijyāta*") (Vajrācārya 1980, 85). The term *sādhanā* is often popularly glossed as *sāle taye* (to pull and place).

12 There is some disagreement regarding the derivation of this name. Locke has suggested that it derives from the *cāku* (molasses) that is offered to him (1980, 372). This hardly distinguishes this deity, however, as *cāku* is offered to many deities. It is more likely that the name derives from an account of the origins of the *bāhāḥ* (Buddhist monastic temple compound) in which he resides, the location of which in this account was determined by a *cakhuṃcā*, or sparrow (Locke 1980, 379).

13 On the relationship between Matsyendranātha and Mīnnātha, see Locke (1980, 426).

14 "*Hānā caitya sthāpanā yānā sādhanā yānā bijyāta, caitya pāmhuyā vana svāpnas kyana, hānā ākā śabārṇī dhayā hala*" (Vajrācārya 1980, 85).

15 The priestly attendants to Cākvāḥdyaḥ in Taṅgaḥ Bāhāḥ told me that the deity was so angered by Bandhudatta's request that he hurled a *vajra* from his temple sanctum, which struck a *caitya* by the *hiti* outside the *bāhāḥ*, cracking it. This can still be seen today.

To underline the motif of transgression (or disruption to use the word of the moment) in this account of the festival's origins, I will review these transgressions here.

- An annoyed disciple who had been tricked by an innkeeper imprisons rain-giving *nāga*s, thereby causing a prolonged drought and ultimately compelling his guru to come to *him*, a radical reversal of relative status.
- The priest tricks a serpent deity into aiding him in his journey and tricking the demon king into seeking his medical care.
- The deity defies his mother's wishes and unintentionally disrespects her in the process.
- The priest insults his king while invoking the life of Karuṇāmaya into a *kalaśa*, and the king inwardly contemplates killing the priest.
- In order to establish *his* kingdom as the site for the festival, the king of Patan bribes his eldest subject, intending to extract the proclamation he desires, resulting in his elderly subject's death.
- Finally, the festival includes *two* deities, the second refusing to relinquish his own annual celebration as other deities had.

There are many more instances of such transgressions in the full account provided by Āśākājī Vajrācārya and in the festival itself. Other accounts of the festival's origins often accentuate these transgressions (see notes 4 and 11 in this chapter).

Country temple/city temple

The festival is celebrated in two versions: an annual chariot procession that is confined to the city of Patan, and a much grander twelve-year version that extends to the village of Bungamati, about seven kilometers to the south. In eleven of every twelve years, around the winter solstice, Buṅgadyaḥ's priests carry him in a palanquin (*khaḥ*) from his temple in Bungamati to his Patan Temple, where he resides until he is placed in his chariot for his festival in the spring. He then proceeds to four major prescribed destinations,[16] and is then returned in a palanquin

16 These major destinations are Gā Bāhāḥ, Lũhiti (Nep. Sundhara), Lagankhel, and Jawalakhel, all of which define localities in which residents feast upon the god's arrival and the day thereafter. The chariot also stops a short distance from where it is built in Pulchok at Sohrakhuṭṭī Pāṭī, where the *pānju*s, priests to

to Bungamati at the end of the festival. Once every twelve years, however, his chariot is constructed entirely anew in Bungamati and the deity's procession begins and ends there.

Traditional transgressions

If one includes all the ritual preparation and its denouement, festival-related activities extend over eight months of the year. The most public part usually lasts one or two months, depending on astrological conditions and festival mishaps. It involves hundreds of people in dozens of traditional key roles who perform *dyaḥyā jyā*, "god's work" (Owens 1989, 2000). Two of these roles relate directly back to bringing the god from Kāmarūpa: some priests (*pānju*s) trace their ancestry to Bandhudatta, and the Malīnī, who regards herself as an ancestor of Rathã Cakra and who accounts for her role in the festival in terms of Buṅgadyaḥ's feminine identity. Two relatively new roles among the many involved in "god's work," both of which entail guiding the chariot-pulling, bring us back to the theme of transgression.

The first of these relative newcomers to the procession are the Rājopādhyāya, Hindu priests to Kṛṣṇa. They once guided the chariot pullers by synchronizing their efforts and urging them on. Popularly known as *Se Se Bājyā* after the chant they shout to encourage the pullers, they say that their role originated from a time when the chariot got stuck in Patan's palace square during the reign of Siddhinarsimha Malla.[17] They told me that one morning, a mute boy miraculously spoke with the voice of Buṅgadyaḥ, proclaiming that for the chariot to move, the Brahmin priest who lives here must lead those who pull it. When the king heard of this miracle, he went to the chariot and saw Kṛṣṇa inside, not Buṅgadyaḥ. He then went to the Kṛṣṇa temple he had built across from his palace and saw Buṅgadyaḥ instead of Kṛṣṇa within. The king then assembled a council to help him understand this strange turn of events. Among his councilors was a Brahmin priest to Lord Kṛṣṇa who served in the very temple that the king had built. He confessed that he had that morning punished his wife for worshiping that "red-faced god" in his chariot, and given that he lived in the neighborhood, he must

Buṅgadyaḥ, receive an offering of a calf (*godāna*), and for an extended period in Poḍe Ṭol, from which point it is pulled to Jawalakhel.

17 Padmagiri's Chronicle specifies that this happened in 1631 (Hasrat 1970, 69).

be the Brahmin to whom Buṅgadyaḥ had referred through the young boy. Henceforth, Brahmin priests from the Kṛṣṇa temple have played a conspicuous role in leading the chariot-pulling (Owens 2000, 721). This is clearly a story about retribution for disrespect and competing authority, both human and divine. Here, the Buddhist god encompasses the Hindu one,[18] and the Hindu priest is made to serve the god whom he had disrespected and whose actual attendants are Buddhists.

To complicate this further, the role of Hindu Rājopādhyāya priests, which has always been limited in comparison to that of Buṅgadyaḥ's Buddhist priestly attendants, is now largely symbolic. The Rājopādhyāya priests, who provided the account of the origins of their role, explained this shift as a result of what has been called Nepal's first experiment with democracy. In the 1950s, members of the public, presumably inspired by the democratic fervor of the moment, took on the role of leading their peers from the very front of the chariot yoke.[19] They were selected democratically, if not anarchically, in a kind of popularity contest. One kept the position as leader of the chariot pullers only as long as one was able to do the job, which often required fighting off contenders for the prized role. So now the Rājopādhyāya Brahmins take a backseat to the popularly selected leader of the pullers, known as *haḥpāḥ biyemha* (encouragement givers), who come from a wide variety of castes (*jāti*) (Figure 1).

All festivals are disruptive, but disruption and transgression are intrinsic to this one in quite pervasive ways, not only in accounts of its origins, but also in its enactment. Purportedly weighing thirty-five tons,[20] towering over twenty meters high, and standing on a wheelbase of only about four meters square, the chariot is effectively designed to fall over and built to stand erect to the best of the abilities of those who construct it. The chariot's precariousness is a salient feature of the

18 To designate this deity as either Buddhist or Hindu is clearly problematic with respect to the religious orientations of those who worship him. This account, however, emphasizes the religious distinction between the priests who attend and have direct access to the deity and those who serve him less directly.

19 The enormous drawing entitled: "*La Procession de Matsyendra Natha*" commissioned by Brian Houghton Hodgson in the early nineteenth century and presently in the collection of the Musée Guimet, includes no *haḥpāḥ biyemha*. Though its background is rather fanciful, other details of the procession itself are quite detailed and accurate. This image is also included in Lévi (1990).

20 Estimates of its weight vary wildly. A construction worker told Christoph Emmrich that it weighed two tons (2007, 141), which seems to be a rather low estimate since it usually takes about three-hundred people to pull it.

Figure 1: Haḥpāḥ biyemha leading the chariot pullers, with the Rājopādhyāya Brahmins standing behind, Poḍe Ṭol, Thati, May 27, 1982, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

festival, as its success or failure augurs the favor of the god and the fate of the king and kingdom, now government and republic. Festival participants often display photos of festival mishaps in their homes. Mishaps occur most frequently during the extended and arduous twelve-year festival. The stakes are high. If the very top of the chariot (the crow's nest-like *bāymvaḥ*) were to touch the earth, it would signal the end of the world.

The fact that the stakes are so high also puts some of those whose work is critical to the festival at odds with one another, even though they must collaborate. The wooden parts of the chariot are fabricated and assembled by Bārāhī carpenters, but they are lashed together with vines, rope, and bamboo by Yāvāḥ, members of a clan of Jyāpus. If the chariot breaks, it is often one or the other of these groups who are blamed, and they, in turn, are likely to blame one another.[21] Tensions between them are such that they never work on the chariot at the same time, lest disputes break out.

The deity himself is transgressive. Consider that Buṅgadyaḥ is stuck in his chariot weeks on end with the *pānju*s who attend to him.

21 Kesang Tseten's film, *On the Road with the Red God: Machhendranath*, includes footage of Yāvāḥs quite passionately discussing this issue of blame (Tseten 2005).

Figure 2: Kipū Jyāpunī Yāḥ, Pyangathã, Kirtipur, June 10, 1983, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

One account has it that one night he went off to the town of Kirtipur, about six kilometers away, in search of a lover, where he found one in *yākaḥ misā*,[22] a farmer woman from Kirtipur. The god's infatuation with his lover was so great, according to some accounts, that a *pānju* had to come retrieve him so that his festival could be completed. *Yākaḥ misā*'s descendant is honored every year during the festival. This festival within a festival involves a reversal of a conventional ritual practice (Figure 2). Normally, the devotee first makes offerings to the deity, who then reciprocates, through the agency of attending priests, by giving the devotee *prasāda,* typically offerings that have been blessed by a deity after previously receiving them. Here, that process is inverted;[23] the *pānju* first presents the *yākaḥ misā* with *prasāda* that he has brought

22 When I first began my research in 1982 and for years thereafter, this woman was referred to as Kipū Jyāpunī (the farmer woman of Kirtipur), but perhaps due to the derogatory implications that the term *jyāpunī* now carries, she is now referred to as the *yākaḥ misā* (lone or unmarried woman).

23 Residents of Kirtipur recently provoked considerable controversy by installing an image of Buṅgadyaḥ alongside an image of Kipū Jyāpunī at the ceremonial site where this exchange takes place. The *pānju*s threatened to stop bringing *prasād* to Kirtipur on the basis of several arguments, one being that if Buṅgadyaḥ were already present in Kirtipur there would be no need for them to come there on his behalf. Another objection (clearly related to the first) was that the image of Buṅgadyaḥ they had installed resembled the unique form in which he is worshipped at his Bungamati and Patan temples (and in the festival). Had he been represented in a form that was conventionally identified as Avalokiteśvāra (Buṅgadyaḥ being one of his many manifestations), this would probably not have been as problematic, presumably because such iconographically conventional images are ubiquitous in Nepal and are not usually specifically identified as Buṅgadyaḥ, thereby apparently obviating the problem of redundancy. Reports of this controversy cited here refer to the descendant of

Figure 3: Yākaḥ Misā Yāḥ, Poḍe Ṭol, Thati, June 12, 2009, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

from the god's chariot, which she then reciprocates by bringing offerings from her home.

In another festival within a festival focused on women and celebrating transgression, the Yākaḥ Misā Yāḥ or "Lone Woman Festival,"[24] only women pull the chariot (Figure 3). This allows them to participate in pulling the deity's chariot without being jostled by men. More significantly, it commemorates a time when a sweeper woman[25] pulled the chariot all by herself in the dead of the night so that the god would stay in *her* neighborhood. This neighborhood, known in Nepali as Poḍe Ṭol (New. Thati), or the neighborhood of the sweepers, was traditionally inhabited largely by *dalit*s. As we shall see, it is remarkable and significant that the deity stays there—a place where pigs used to roam freely and water buffaloes are slaughtered—longer than anywhere else during his festival. The deity's long stay at this place of impurity, as well as his escape from it in search of a lover, are transgressive acts, as was that of the woman who single-handedly brought him there.

Conflict among those who live in different neighborhoods (*tvāḥ*), and who compete for the god's proximity, has been a constant theme in the festival and takes various forms. As previously noted, there are four major ritually prescribed destinations within Patan, and the town

Buṅgdyaḥ's lover as the *yākaḥ misā*. Both statues were removed before the ritual was performed that year (see Mishra 2022 and Shrestha 2022).

24 This appellation is now somewhat confusing, given the new name given to the woman at the center of the ritual held in Kirtipur described above.

25 People of this social category are now preferably referred to as *dalit*s, a term that many of them embrace. Using it in this context is somewhat jarring, given the antiquity of the tradition and modernity of the term. Newars often refer to such people as *thī majyupī*, literally "people whom one should not touch."

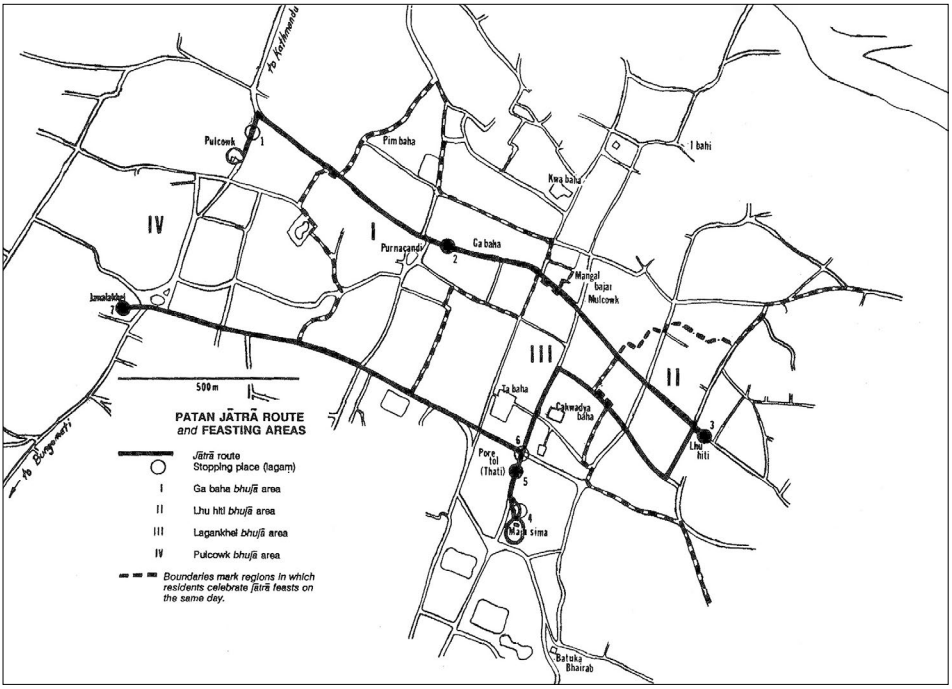

Figure 4: The four principal destinations associated with feasting in Patan, map: Bruce McCoy Owens.

of Patan is divided into four different sectors that are associated with these destinations. The residents of each of these sectors celebrate two feasts in honor of the arrival of the god at the prescribed destination nearest them (Figure 4). The first of these feasts, *choylābhū*,[26] is primarily for family members and held on the evening of the chariot's arrival at its designated destination. *Bhujyāḥ*,[27] which is much larger, and to which those who live in other sectors and beyond are invited, is held the evening thereafter. During the day of *bhujyāḥ*, the deity is also feasted with elaborate offerings carried in processions accompanied by musicians. People prepare these feasts in anticipation of the chariot's arrival at its designated destination, and its failure to do so is often a source of tension between chariot pullers, who are looking forward to

26 *Choylā* refers to a meat dish that is almost always served at feasts.

27 The term *bhujyāḥ* usually refers to ritual offerings of rice, which are given to the deity on this day.

feasting, and those who decide to stop pulling for the day, usually to avoid accidents that often occur in the waning light of evening.

Contestation over when and where the chariot stops is also evident when Buṅgadyaḥ's chariot reaches Gā Bāhāḥ, the first of these four designated stops along the procession route. Here, Cākvāḥdyaḥ's chariot is positioned in front of Buṅgadyaḥ's chariot, which it usually follows. It is turned to block the road toward its next destination lest those who live further along the route prematurely take the god to where *they* live. For many years, it was customary—though somehow always a surprise—for people of the U Bāhāḥ neighborhood to steal the ropes used to pull the chariot once it arrived at their neighborhood after being pulled from Lũhiti, the second of the four prescribed destinations. This made it impossible to pull the chariot any further that day and ensured that the god would stay in their neighborhood for the night. The ropes always magically reappeared the next day.

I was also told that before the early 1980s, when I arrived to do my research, gangs from different neighborhoods in Patan would take advantage of the liminality of the *jātrā* to settle scores, lubricated with *thvaṃ* and *aylāḥ*, the local rice beer and distilled spirits that are essential components of Newar feasts and festivity. Fights among these groups were, according to these accounts, also a regular if unscheduled feature of festivals past.

On the long journey back to Bungamati during the twelve-year festival of 2003, violence erupted at the prospect of the chariot stopping for the night in a neighborhood inhabited primarily by non-Newars. This occurred when officials tried to stop the procession as the evening grew darker. This prompted those who wished to move on and those who wanted the chariot to stop to hurl bricks and stones at one another in a fracas that the police ended with their batons.[28]

This inter-neighborhood rivalry also takes symbolic form on a larger scale between cities that were once independent kingdoms. When the chariot reaches Lũhiti, great pains are taken to turn the chariot around 180 degrees to face west before the procession stops for the night. People explained this to me as a means of preventing the people of Bhaktapur, which lies to the east of Patan, from pulling the god to their city. This prospect plays out in other ways in oral tradition, and,

28 This is also captured in Kesang Tseten's film, *On the Road with the Red God: Machhendranath* (Tseten 2005).

more recently, in transgressive violence, as described below in the section on the *jātrā* held during COVID-19.

Finally, when the god makes his way back to Bungamati its residents chide him for consorting with the sweeper women of Poḍe Ṭol and accepting food offerings from low-caste people during his festival. The deity spends four nights in a side chamber of his temple and undergoes purificatory rites to recover his caste status before he is placed in his own temple sanctum (Locke 1980, 276). Not even the god himself is above criticism for having transgressed social norms. Is it any wonder then, considering all of the traditional transgressions that I have described above, that the word *jātrā* can mean not only festival or procession, but also fight?

Decline and disappearance: Ruptures and expected change

It is a familiar trope in literature about cultural heritage that traditional practices are fragile and in decline. Though the situation is far more complex than that, certain changes in Buṅgadyaḥ's festival undeniably conform to this assessment. One of the most conspicuous forms of rupture concerns environmental change and its impact on religious observances. When the chariot crossed the Nakhu River on its way back to Bungamati during the twelve-year festival of 2003, the crossing point was surrounded by rice paddy. Twelve years later, the paddy had disappeared, taken over by shops, industrial buildings, and houses, leaving only a narrow path near a new bridge through which to maneuver the massive chariot across the river. That same year brought the Gorkha earthquake, which decimated both Buṅgadyaḥ's temple and the temple of his protector, Hayagrīva Bhairava, in Bungamati. Buṅgadyaḥ was, like many of his devotees, forced to take refuge in a shack.[29]

Some traditional performative practices associated with the festival are also in decline. The *dāphā bhajhan*s that come early every morning of the festival to play during the awakening and bathing of the deity have become fewer, and their members older over the years; few young people are willing to replace those who are no longer living. So too, the *tutaḥ khalaḥ* that stand in front of the chariot each morning to

29 David Gellner alerted me to this analogy between people and a god seeking refuge that he heard Newars making after the earthquake (personal communication, 2015).

sing hymns once the first ritual of the day is completed, have become reduced in number and their members older. Whereas seven privately owned *hārkhāṃ dyaḥ* or masks of Bhairava, used to be displayed along the chariot festival route in the early eighties, in 2009 there were only three.[30] Thus, the familiar trope of traditional practices being in decline does apply, in some ways, to Buṅgadyaḥ's festival.

Innovation and reinvigoration

The trajectory of the transformation of Buṅgadyaḥ's festival is not entirely one of decline, however. Resilience and innovation, some of which is surely in response to engagement with the world beyond the Kathmandu Valley, are also part of the transformation of this festival tradition. Whereas in the 1980s and early 1990s only men performed in the *dhimay bhajan*s that led the chariot along its path, and only men danced to their music, women are now doing both of these things.[31] Whether prompted by climate change, new awareness of the need to stay hydrated, or the transnational flows of capital that make innovative philanthropy possible, a flatbed truck carrying volunteers who distribute clean water to festival participants has become a regular part of the procession, thanks to the generosity of private sponsors (Figure 5).

In 2012, Dinesh Ananda Vaidya of Saugal Ṭol collected funds for 160 grams of gold and fourteen kilograms of copper and commissioned Samir Shakya (who provided his services free of charge) to fashion a new mask of Bighna Bighna Bhairava,[32] which is placed at the very

30 During the festival of 2024 I could find none, though I was unable to conduct a thorough search for them.

31 See Toffin (2007, 402–403) on the recent participation of Newar women in musical groups and their previous exclusion from them.

32 The identity of the deity portrayed and manifest in this mask has long been a matter of debate. Prior to its restoration in 1984, when the hands, one of which held a skull cup (*kapāla*), were re-attached, people told me that it represented Karkoṭaka Nāga Rāj, which is consistent with it being attached to the long yoke that is associated with this *nāga*, but inconsistent with the sacrifices offered to it, which are never offered to serpent deities. Dinesh Ananda Vaidya, who oversaw the creation of a new mask in 2014, identified it as Bighna Bighna Bhairava, *bighna* referring to obstacles, which are first encountered by the deity along the procession route. He informed me that this is the epithet used in the *vidhi*, or ritual manual used in one of the major sacrifices (*māha bali*) offered to the deity embodied in the mask (personal communication, 2017). Vajrācārya refers to this deity as Bighnāntaka Bhairava (1980, 86).

Figure 5: Volunteers distributing water from a flatbed truck in the procession, Haugal, Patan, May 14, 2015, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

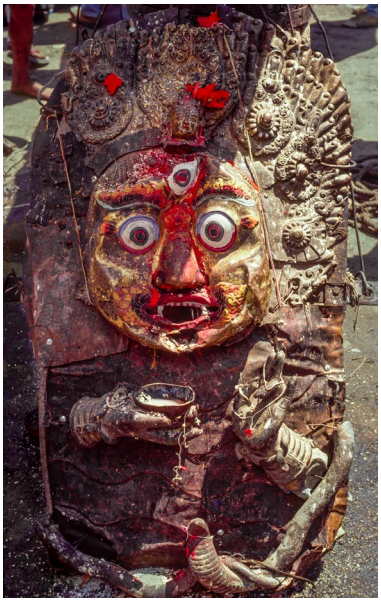

Figure 6: Mask of Bighna Bighna Bhairava after 1984 restoration, Poḍe Ṭol, Thati, August 24, 1984, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

front of the chariot. The late Jagat Pratap Joshi, while he was chief (*subbā*) of the local office of the Guṭhī Saṃsthāna that oversees the festival, had the mask restored in 1984, reattaching its arms (Figure 6). Though it has been repeatedly heavily damaged over the years, reducing it to a mere vestige of what it had been before its 1984 restoration (Figure 7), I was told that no one dared to create a new one out of fear of the deity that it represents and with which it is understood to be imbued. This new mask is emblematic of a trend: just as the festival is becoming less frightening, so is Bhairava as portrayed in this mask (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Mask of Bighna Bighna Bhairava after the twelve-year festival of 2003, Jawalakhel, Bungamati, July 3, 2003, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

Figure 8: New mask of Bighna Bighna Bhairava commissioned in 2012, Poḍe Ṭol at Thati, Patan, June 18, 2014, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

Transgressing transgression and performing culture

Kesang Tseten, who made a documentary film of the twelve-year festival of 2003,[33] invited all the principal players in the chariot festival to view his film at an opening in Patan the following year. He did this in collaboration with the Jyāpu Mahāsaṅgha, a large voluntary organization of Newars traditionally identified as farmers who are widely

33 Tseten 2005.

Figure 9: Hāḥpāḥ biyemha with officially conferred sashes awaiting their turn to lead the chariot pullers, Jawalakhel, Patan, June 10, 2009, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

recognized as stalwart supporters of Newar traditions. The film featured conflict among the themes it explored, and included a particularly striking segment that showed violent struggles among those who vied to be the *haḥpāḥ biyemha*. One of the comments that his cameraman heard from the exiting audience was "people are filming this, we'd better behave ourselves next time" (Tseten, personal communication, 2005). Whether as a consequence of this film or not, a wide range of festival participants seem to be heeding this injunction.

The *haḥpāḥ biyemha* are now selected for the following year in a process organized by the Jyāpu Mahāsaṅgha, which also establishes the order in which they should take on their duties. No longer must an individual claw his way through rivals to get to the front of the chariot yoke to urge his peers on: the process is orderly, and the status of those eligible to lead is conspicuously marked with an officially conferred colorful sash (Figure 9).

Festival participants seem to be increasingly thinking about their actions as cultural performance in new ways.[34] Levy (1990), Toffin

34 Milton Singer is credited with first articulating the concept of "cultural performance" in 1955, in which he stated that "it seemed to me that my Indian friends—and perhaps all peoples—thought of their culture as encapsulated in these discrete performances, which they could exhibit to visitors and to themselves," these "discrete performances" including "what we in the West usually

(2012), and others have commented on the fundamentally performative nature of Newar tradition, the former stating that "the civic life of Bhaktapur [is] something like a choreographed ballet," and that the "city space is the carefully marked stage" (Levy 1990, 16). But in the innovations described here, festival participants are not just performing their ritual tasks; they are deliberately performing Newarness in the context of a new politics of ethnicity that emerged in Nepal with democratization in the early 1990s. There are also new stakes in doing so in ways that are deemed "appropriate" and effective according to new standards held by non-Newars and Newars alike.[35] In the process, they are engaging in a new paradoxical form of transgression: they are transgressively diminishing the festival's potential for transgression itself. They are establishing limits to its liminality.

Signs that implore festival participants to remain orderly in order to preserve Newar heritage (a contradiction in terms from my perspective) have become conspicuous parts of the festival (Figure 10). Volunteers in distinctive T-shirts that signify their status of authority form human chains to prevent onlookers from being injured by the rolling chariot[36] (Figure 11). Such specially commissioned T-shirts also

call by that name—for example, plays, music concerts and lectures. But they also include prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual" (1955, 27). Guss usefully summarizes what Singer and Cohn (whose dramaturgical approach to understanding festivity pursued what Singer had identified as the need to historically and situationally contextualize cultural performances) and those who followed them have identified as key characteristics of cultural performances. They are "clearly framed events set off from what might be considered normative everyday reality; […] forums in which communities can reflect upon their own realities; […] profoundly discursive forums of behavior […] in which actors can "duel with ritual" (Bossevain 1992, 3); […] and have the "ability to produce new meanings and relations" (Guss 2000, 8–9). As McAloon argues, "[p]erformance is constitutive of social experience and not something merely additive or instrumental" (1984, 2, as cited by Guss 2000). Though the festival so pervades the lives of those who live in Patan and Bungamati that one might question the degree to which it is "set off" from daily life, all of these characteristics pertain the festival under examination here, as well as to most, if not all, of its many components.

35 Grandin has argued that Newar cultural activism, which included staged performances deliberately intended to raise people's consciousness, entered a new phase in the 1980s when the Panchayat regime discontinued radio broadcasts in Newari (2017, 149), essentially producing the opposite of the intended effect of reducing Newar ethnic and cultural consciousness.

36 During the festival of 2024, I also noted that Yāvāḥ chariot builders used safety harnesses while building the chariot spire, the same sort of harness that Nepalese workers are trained to use before going to do construction work in the

Figure 10: Signs imploring festival participants to comport themselves appropriately, Mahābauddha, Patan, May 14, 2016, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

Figure 11: Human chain protecting procession onlookers, Jawalakhel, Patan, June 10, 2009, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

provide a new medium for signifying distinct localities, on the one hand, and expressing shared Newar cultural pride, on the other (Figure 12). These T-shirts often also conspicuously display their corporate sponsors, who apparently find it advantageous to show their support for Newar tradition. All of these innovations mark distinctions that were previously unmarked. They also reveal and contribute to a kind of order that was previously either non-existent or invisible.

What were once musical offerings have been transformed into cultural performances that are conspicuously marked as such, with a designated space (and chairs) provided for attentive audiences, the boundaries between performers and audience having previously been

Gulf. I also noted that some neighborhood groups wore gloves while pulling the chariot, thereby avoiding abrasions that can result from performing this task.

Figure 12: Residents of Chabāhāḥ with T-shirts identifying their locality and shared Newar identity, Jawalakhel, Patan, June 10, 2009, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

Figure 13: Audience attending the performance of the *mṛdaṅga bhajana* from Taḥ Bāhāḥ, Poḍe Ṭol at Thati, Patan, May 31, 2003, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

rather blurred (Figure 13). Schedules of upcoming performances by ensembles from as far away as Bhojpur are posted. *Bhajan*s (religious musical groups) come with banners that identify them clearly as distinct musical ensembles from particular places (Figure 14).

During the festival of 2009, the chariot collapsed in Calāchemṃ, a few hundred meters from its destination at Lũhiti.[37] The deity had to be removed from the chariot so that it could be reconstructed. When the deity was reinstalled, one of the attending *pānju*s elected to wear a Nirvana T-shirt under the ceremonial red sash that marked his status (Figure 15). I don't know if he deliberately chose his wardrobe as commentary on globalization or postmodern pastiche, but for me it captures something of what I have been trying to describe here: how

37 See Emmrich's thoughtful analysis of this event (2007).

Figure 14: Taḥ Bāhāḥ Mṛdaṅga Bhajan, Poḍe Ṭol at Thati, Patan, May 18, 2016, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

Figure 15: Pānju welcoming Buṅgadyaḥ back into his chariot, Cālācheṃ, Patan, June 4, 2009, photo: Bruce McCoy Owens.

disruption is part and parcel of Newar cultural heritage and innovation goes hand in hand with tradition, and both of these processes are responding to influences that extend beyond Nepal Mandala: influences that now seem to be disrupting disruption itself.

The *jātrā* and COVID-19

The global pandemic of 2020–2022 has affected the *jātrā* in new ways, prompting both transgression and its containment. Or, to paraphrase Turner, it has both said nay to positive structural assertions and been a source of them (1967, 97). Nepal first went into lockdown due to COVID-19 on March 24, 2020. The prescribed starting date of the festival for that year was April 24, but the chariot construction did not begin until June. The deity was installed in the chariot on July 25, but because of COVID, the procession did not begin the following day

as it normally would. Over a month later, on Thursday, September 3, a crowd of about eight hundred people gathered around the chariot, and several hundred of them pulled the chariot a short distance before the Armed Police dispersed them with teargas and water cannons and arrested nine of them. In their attempt to continue the traditional procession, the crowd defied not only governmental regulations but also traditional ritual requirements. No auspicious moment (*sāita*) had been determined for the timing of the pulling, and no symbolic pulling of the chariot at such a moment was undertaken. The guards attached to the royal priest (*gurujuyā paltan*) had not been summoned to escort the procession, and the sword of Jayastithi Malla was not in place in the chariot, among many other omissions.

While the crowd was taking matters into its own hands, a group of key festival coordinators, unaware of what was transpiring at the chariot in Pulchok, were meeting to determine how to proceed with the festival that year. A curfew was imposed. After another meeting that evening that included members of the Jyāpu Samāj and the government agency that oversees the festival (the Guṭhī Saṃsthān), the curfew was lifted with the stricture that groups of more than five people could not gather near the chariot. The following day, priests performed a conciliatory *kṣamāpūjā* to placate a presumably angered deity, and police arrested eleven additional people from their homes, reportedly based on photographs they had posted to Hamrojatra, a Facebook page devoted to Newar festivity. On Sunday, three days after the chariot was first pulled illegally, it was pulled under tightly controlled conditions to the traditional first stopping point (Sohrakhuṭṭe Pāṭī in Pulchok), which lies before the first destination that would usually mark two days of feasting. That same day, the Rāṣṭriyā Prajātantra Party Lalitpur District Committee issued a press release demanding the release of the imprisoned "cultural heritage activists," and the following day (Monday, September 7), people from Patan protested near the district administration office, demanding the release of those arrested. Buṅgadyaḥ finally made his way back to Bungamati on September 14, under extremely controlled conditions.[38]

The factor that is most commonly cited to explain the crowd's illegal pulling of the chariot is a tradition that if the deity is not returned to Bungamati by the eighth day of the dark half of Ashwin (September 24

38 For comparative examples of the impact of the pandemic on religious practice, see Hertzman et al. 2023.

of that year), the people of Bhaktapur would have the right to bring the deity to their city. The traditional procession usually takes at least three weeks to complete. This apprehension that the people of Patan and Bungamati would be deprived of their deity echoes the account that holds that the original decision to keep the deity in Patan was marred by irregularity, and the concern that people of Bhaktapur might pull the chariot to their city from Lũhiti, the festival stopping point in Patan that is closest to Bhaktapur. The only indication that this tradition has ever been acted upon, however, is recorded in Father John Locke's important work, *Buddhist Monasteries of Nepal*, in which he mentions that informants in Bhaktapur told him that this had occurred once, about a hundred years ago (i.e., ca. 1884) (1985, 436). Yet, there is no mention of this happening in the extensive historical record of the festival that Locke provides in his other major work, *Karunamaya* (1980).

Having learned from the events of 2020 (and apparently chastened by commentary made on social media sites), local authorities, festival stakeholders, and other representatives of the Newar community began holding meetings about the chariot festival on April 10, 2021. In the face of a second surge of COVID-19 and pressure to hold the festival despite it, they decided to hold a "symbolic" (*sāṃketika*) festival, that year. This included constructing the chariot, placing the god within it, and pulling the chariot a short distance to the same traditional stopping point that the chariot had reached the year before. The *pānju*s then took the deity out of the chariot only a week after he had been placed in it and returned him to Bungamati. Chandra Maharjan, president of the Jyāpu Samāj, expressed his happiness over the success of sending "Machhindranātha to Bungamati by adopting some method in line with the idea that culture does not change even in the midst of the current Corona riots" (Shrestha 2021). The brakemen, or Ghaḥkūs, who perform the extremely dangerous job of controlling the movement of the chariot by thrusting chocks of wood under its massive wheels, held a rather different view. They resigned their positions about two months after the radically simplified festival of 2021, protesting the failure to maintain religious tradition as they thought necessary. They described the actions taken by the authorities who oversaw the festival as "immoral" (*anaitika*) and "sinful" (*adhārmika*).[39]

39 They resumed their positions in the festival of 2022 which was carried out in normal fashion. For the Facebook page see "Bunga Bungamati" 2021. Facebook. July 13, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/bungabungamati/posts/4276254505750612.

The theme of paradoxically preserving a fundamentally liminal and disruptive tradition by subjecting it to new controls and standards of behavior takes on extraordinary new dimensions here. Just as we all wonder what aspects of our adjustments to COVID will endure as valued cultural innovations, it remains to be seen to what degree unruly festival crowds will be considered a threat to social order and, indeed, to the tradition of the festival itself. One of the most powerful means of "cosmopolitically" engaging with the world is surely the internet. Just as many of those arrested for mounting an insurrection against the legal transfer of power in the United States in January of 2021 were identified through social media posts they had created, so too were those deemed "cultural heritage activists" after attempting to preserve their tradition in Nepal in September, 2020 by pulling the chariot in defiance of government orders. In both these instances, the internet played a key role in creating the communities whose members caused these disruptions and in punishing those who participated in them.

Critically, these "cultural heritage activists" who defied governmental authority were acting in response to an alleged threat that they perceived as being posed by tradition itself: the understanding that the people of Bhaktapur could take the deity to their city if the *jātrā* was prolonged beyond a certain point. This tradition may never have been acted upon, but was nonetheless sufficiently powerful as a social fact to goad them to action.[40] The analogy that I am drawing between these radically different disruptions in Kathmandu and Washington D.C. prompts me to suggest another factor that needs to be considered if we are to better understand the "performance of social, religious and gender identities, the staging of power and status and the construction of spatiotemporal imaginaries" in the context of this festival, as the contributors to this volume have been charged to do. That is the power of imagination itself. Arjun Appadurai brought this to our attention in his discussion of global mediascapes and ideoscapes when he focused on the power of media to radically alter the imaginaries that constituted the realm of people's experience throughout the world (1990, 9). He

40 Their frenzied efforts to move the chariot are reminiscent of the incident that led Locke to discover this tradition during the festival of 1976, when the final portion of the procession was delayed until September 11, due to a lack of auspicious dates before then. Surprised by the apparent desperation to pull the chariot out of a ditch after months of sitting idle, he inquired about the rush, and was informed that it was the threat of the god being taken to Bhaktapur that motivated their determination (1985, 436).

argued that their access to visions of alternative ways of being not only broadened their imaginaries, but also inspired them to act upon them in ways that changed their worlds. Mallan and others have expanded Appadurai's concept of "scapes" to include "Iscapes," which refers to the multiple ways in which the internet shapes people's worlds and their visions of them (Mallan 2010). Banaji (2010) has argued that the "affordances of new media platforms such as blogs and mobile phones for the pursuit of egalitarian and democratic goals by civil society groups" have opened up new opportunities for political work and new possibilities to "create alternative political narratives" (as cited by Grandin 2017, 165). This observation is clearly borne out by the proliferation of social media platforms devoted to Newar cultural activism. I have argued in this chapter that we can only understand stasis and innovation in the processional culture of Kathmandu Valley if we understand the participants in these processions as responding not only to expanded possibilities in which they can envision themselves as participating, but also responding to their awareness of the global gaze to which they are increasingly subject, including cultural assumptions that shape that gaze.[41] At the same time, it is critical to understand that the people who participate in this festival are also weighing the consequences of their actions (or inaction) in the context of events that they understand as having transpired over a thousand years ago, many of which are fraught with conflict and contradiction, as are the traditions that emerged from them. It is hardly surprising, then, that some efforts to sustain tradition might also undermine it.

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41 This is further complicated by the panoptic gaze that the internet affords the state, though it is not clear how those participants in online communities have responded to this.

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