

**Between the market and Comrade Mao:  
Newar cultural activism and ethnic/political movements (Nepal)**

*Ingemar Grandin, Linköping university, Sweden*

The Newars are prominent in the indigenous and ethnic (adivasi, janajati) movements in Nepal. With their heartland in the country's capital area, the Kathmandu Valley, their position is contradictory: they are part of the economic, political and cultural elite yet marginalized and subordinated in significant ways. Still in the 1940s, people went to jail for publishing literary works in the Newari language, and Newar social movements and civil society activism for recognition, identity, and cultural survival – often linked with leftist, political movements – has grown and diversified into many forms since then. Cultural activism is prominent among these forms and has a rich cultural repository to draw from.

The Newar civilization has made the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, a site of UNESCO-designated physical heritage, but it also sustains an immensely rich matrix of performance traditions. This creative diversity – with wide participation – is tied in to castes, localities, the ritual year, and the agricultural cycle; and the artistic traditions articulate and are underpinned by a mode of production characterized by caste-based division of labor founded on agriculture, trade and artisanship.

**Challenges to Newar culture**

It is common to see the history of Newar subordination as starting with the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by the king of Gorkha, Prithvinarayan Shah and, like Levy (1990), to see Newar civilization as essentially formed in the period before that conquest, when the Valley was ruled by "Newar" kings of the Malla dynasty. If this is so, Newar culture by now has had to adapt to a number of changes in the political but also economic and cultural climate. Subjugation but also new business opportunities under the Shah conquerors (1769–1846), new administrative opportunities but also more intense cultural persecution which left Newar culture somewhat threadbare un-

der the Rana regime (1846–1951), and modernization, mediatization, globalization in more recent decades (1951–).

Moreover, the recent period has seen a transformation – in many distinct phases – in political terms from absolutism to democratic republicanism with Marxism as perhaps the most important base for political ideology. And equally important, economic transformations have come to challenge the very roots of the traditional agro-urban civilization of the Newar heartland. So Newars have good reasons to see their culture as vulnerable, but they also have the economic muscle to respond to this vulnerability.

### **Aims – and so on**

It is the responses to the vulnerability of Newar civilization that we will be following here. The way this will be done is inspired by the humanities as much as by the social sciences and unavoidably will reflect the orientation of the author towards Kathmandu Valley area studies and ethnomusicology rather than social anthropology proper. The research presented here is a beginning but also a continuation of my research on the musical life of the Kathmandu Valley that began in the 1980s. This musical life includes more than what is done by Newars, so I chose to learn Nepali (Nepal's national language) rather than Newari – though I have picked up important terms also in that language. A final caveat: the term "Newar culture" is used here as a shorthand way of referring to a multitude of practices and objects upheld and produced by people seeing themselves or being seen by others as "Newars", not to imply any single cultural essence. People – men and women, different castes, different towns, neighborhoods and villages, rich and poor, and so on – have a number of different views here, and these differences are in themselves an important part of Newar "culture" or Newar civilization.

### ***Kaula kachala***

So what we will study here is Newar cultural activism as an artistic, aesthetic practice. This is a practice that includes songs (as music and text), cultural programs, music, dance, theatre, but also media artifacts such as cassettes, cds, video-cds, and recordings and video films for broadcasting purposes. Much of all this can be found

within the simple format of one "visualization" of a song (the artists use the English term "visualize" for the process of making a song into a film), a "music video" if you so want.

The song in question is from the album *Jhi newa* ("We Newar"). On its cover, the album is presented as a "collection of songs by newar kids" but the whole CD consists of songs in Newari by Durga Lal Shrestha, sung principally by adult singers. The album was brought out by the artist Gujje Malakar who has composed the melodies and who had asked the poet and song-writer Durga Lal Shrestha to contribute the lyrics, ending up with a total of ten songs, and was recorded during the curfew period in the mid-2000s. The composer is now in the process of "visualizing" the songs for a Video CD or DVD-album. As this is rather expensive, he shoots – or rather, hires a film producer to shoot – one visualization at a time, in a tempo dictated by the funds he has been able to raise, planning to complete the album this present year or so. The visualization is carried out according to his own ideas, and the persons who "act" in the video are often drawn from Gujje Malakar's own circles.

### **The composer**

As a music teacher in several schools and as a key figure in *Indreni samskritik samaj* (Rainbow cultural society) Gujje Malakar can draw upon a wide network of relevant persons – singers, musicians, studio operators, as well as school children who can sing or act/dance from the stage or in audio/visual recordings. Gujje Malakar's own musical background is in two kinds of hymn-singing ensemble in his neighborhood in the Newar town of Kirtipur (some 6 kms to the south-west of Kathmandu) – that is, in the musical life traditionally upheld in Newar towns. Now in his fifties, Gujje Malakar learnt the archaic *dapha* kind of devotional singing as well as the tabla in his young days and participated in the everyday activities of these ensembles.

But he soon went on to the activist scene. By the early 1990s he was recognized as a singer, musician and composer in activist circles not only in his hometown but also in Kathmandu. Originally a house carpenter, he was at that time establishing himself as a music teacher.

As a cultural activist, Gujje Malakar works from a number of different platforms. One, of course, is ISAS – the *Indreni samskritik samaj*. Today, this is a Kirtipur-based cultural society with only some of the advisors drawn from outside the town. In Kirtipur, ISAS grew out of an earlier cultural organization, the *Janasam-*

*skritik dabu* (People's cultural stage; the word "dabu" is Newari) which was formed by Kirtipur activists together with people from the adjoining small town of Nagau in about 1986. ISAS was formed shortly afterwards, when the *Dabu* merged with other left-leaning cultural "families" (*parivars*). However, some ten years ago ISAS split, following new political conjectures, and this left the Kirtipur branch as the sole inheritor of the ISAS banner which they continue to use. Under the banner of ISAS, the activist circle performs both in Kirtipur and in various other places. And moreover, the individual artists take part also in numerous events organized by other institutions: a radio station, a citizen's society (*nagarik samaj*), a manifestation...

Cultural programs such as they are given by ISAS and others is but the tip of the iceberg. The circle of cultural activists to which Gujje Malakar belongs write songs, compose melodies; they record their songs in different studios to bring out an album and/or for programs; they device "visualizations" of songs, for VCD albums or television use. They teach music at schools and to other singers in time for stage events. But they also rehearse songs and other items for performance; they practice their skills in order to have good command of their voices, and of musical parameters such as *tals* and rhythms. To provide a grounding for teaching and performing, the artists-activists have studied music at various institutes – together with some colleagues, Gujje Malakar studied "classical vocal" (this means *shastriya sangit* of *Hindusthani* variety) at the *Kala Niddhi* music college in Lalitpur (Kathmandu's neighbor and one of the three "great cities" of Newar civilization).

### **The lyricist**

A few of the ISAS cultural programs arranged by ISAS have been in the honor of individual persons. Among these is a program in the mid-2000s in honor of the people's poet (*janakavi*) Durga Lal Shrestha, singing Durga Lal's songs from the stage. With financial support from the Kathmandu Municipality this program was presented in the Academy Hall. Some time later, it was given again in Kirtipur.

Durga Lal, now in his seventies (b. 1937), is an institution in Newari poetry and song-writing. He writes also in Nepali. He started out quite young with writing dramas for staging at festivals. Soon however he went over to focus on poems, taking his form from folk songs and writing according to folk song melodies from the Newar repertoire rather than according to metric rules of poetics. This, he thinks, makes his lyrics eminently singable: what has been written to the meter of a folk song can be

given a new melody. And indeed, his lyrics are much in demand among composers and singers. Durga Lal is also known for his political texts – according to the legendary Nepali politician and Newar cultural activist Padma Ratna Tuladhar (Gellner & Sharkey 1996), a childhood friend, it was Durga Lal who turned him into politics and the political left.

Durga Lal Shrestha is careful about the music given to his lyrics. As Gujje Malakar described the procedure to me, if you have succeeded in having Durga Lal give you one of his texts, you'll have to sing your composition back to him over the phone, the poet accompanying your singing by tapping the beat on his side-table, and then wait for his verdict.

### **The text**

The lyrics of *Kaula kachala* are simple enough. There are six couplets, one for each of the six seasons, starting with *sarad* (the cool post-monsoon season that often is translated "autumn"), proceeding to *hemanta* ("winter"), *sisir* ("late winter"), *basanta* ("spring"), *gr̥smā* (the hot pre-monsoon "summer") and ending with *barsā* (the monsoon). The first line of each couplet states the names of two months in Newari, gives the "Nepali" equivalent, and the corresponding season. The second line then goes on to mention a couple of events falling in that season – typically religious festivals. The second line of all six couplets begin *thukihe du* and end *jhīgu re* (these two phrases serve to point what is between them as "ours"), the latter rhyming with *ṛtu re* (*ritu*, of course, is "season", and *re* signifies "it is said that" but is also a common final syllable in Newar songs – cf Lienhard 1984) which concludes the first line of each couplet.

The two lines of the couplet are of equal length, each consisting of 14-16 syllables (as pronounced).

### **The music**

There is no *sthai/antara*-form here, the six couplets are sung to the same music throughout. And this music consists of only four different musical phrases. The music of first line of the text is made up by an ascent in two steps, each a two-bar phrase. (Here and throughout I will, for the sake of convenience, refer to one cycle of the

four-beat tala used in most of *Kaula kachala* as a "bar".) This ascent takes us from the lower tonic (*sa*) to the higher tonic, which is circumambulated. The music of the second line reverses this, by descending back to the lower tonic again, also in two two-bar phrases. Each line of the text is repeated. As the song appears on the CD-album and in the visualization, "the" six traditional Newar seasonal melodies are inserted so as to preface each verse.<sup>1</sup> For example, before the couplet on the subject of *basanta* ("spring"), part of the melody also called *Basanta* is played.

### **The video**

The visualization of all this works from four types of visual content: 1. The two singers, women in their 20s or 30s. 2. A group of six dancers, girls in their late teens or so. 3. The scenery where the singers and dancers appear. 4. Diverse scenes presenting some element or event of Newar culture.

To give a short description, the film starts with zooming in on the town of Kirtipur, as seen from the south-west, with its characteristic skyline. The town is built on a ridge with two peaks, each crowned with an important religious building: the Cilanco stupa on the southern peak, the temple to Uma Maheshwar on the northern one. The Uma Maheshwar temple, built in the multi-roofed pagoda style with multiple platforms that Newar architecture is famous for, gives a clear visual accent to the introductory, rather long, shot of Kirtipur. Then follows a succession of shots of the dancers – all dressed in the same way with brownish blouses, red-bordered black saris and white shawls (also with red borders) and with hennaed bare feet – proceeding through Kirtipur's Bagh Bhairav temple compound. On their way they meet a small procession of children people carrying a red banner with the words *jatiya samskriti vividhata he ratriyata khah* ("ethnic cultural pluralism is nationalism"). The dancers join in with this procession.

All this has been shown during the introductory, instrumental music (the melody called raga *Malasri* or *Mohani* and belonging especially to the ten-day *Mohani* festival falling in the season of *sarad*). When the song's first couplet starts, it is the two singers that are given the visual floor. The two women are dressed in the same way, but differently from the singers: they wear a long, brownish tunic over a pair of

---

<sup>1</sup> Different people have different opinions as to which songs or melodies, more exactly, belong to the six seasons but there is a general agreement on most of them.

baggy blue pants but they also wear the same red-bordered white shawl as the dancers do. A series of shots show that the singers sit on the topmost platform, directly underneath the roof, of the Uma Maheshwar temple whereas the dancers are dancing on a lower platform. Throughout this couplet, shots of the singers and of the dancers are mixed with some shots of an audience of sorts that has gathered below the temple – shots that show also the urban setting of the event.

The scene shifts entirely with the introductory music (known precisely as *Hemanta*) for the next season, *hemanta*. Now the setting is in the farmlands, presumably those on Kirtipur's south-west, and we are given a picture of agricultural work. A man and a woman is seen preparing the field for sowing or planting, the man overturning the dry earth with a *ku* (a digging hoe), the woman then leveling the overturned earth with a rake. The woman is dressed rather similarly to the dancers: in a red-bordered black sari with a brownish blouse; the man wears a tunic and a pair of trousers in a brownish fabric similar to that of the women and a black topi. A second woman arrives on this scene, carrying a basket with food and plates, and proceeds to serve a snack of flattened rice and (presumably) meat to the farmers. Meanwhile the banner-carrying procession, including the six dancers, are seen proceeding over the fields and are watched by the farm-workers. For the first line of the couplet, shots of the two singers are juxtaposed with shots of the six dancers, dancing in the field. This goes on also for the second line of the couplet where, however, also two other scenes are included in the montage. The first of these scenes is cut in exactly at the word "yahmari punhi" and shows the making and eating of the type of bread or cake called *yahmari*. The second scene is from a *jatra*, and depicts a palanquin carried in a procession inside a town. This scene is cut in exactly at the word "nhayagam jatra" (the *jatra* of seven villages).

The ensuing four couplets are visualized in a similar way. There is an introductory montage showing a new setting in which the dancers appear, and there are shots of the singers and of the dancers during the song proper. In a similar fashion to couplet 2, also other scenes are cut in here, as prompted by key words in the lyrics.

After the sixth couplet, the song – and the film – ends with five reprises of the music of the couplet's second line, now sung "la la la". The camera here follows the six dancers as they dance their way along a house. However, when the dancers pass the main door of the house, outside which the two singers are seated with the red banner above and behind them, the camera rest upon the singers and then goes on to zoom in to the banner itself which is the film's final picture, leaving us with the message that nationalism is made up by the multitude of ethnic cultures.

## ***Kaula kachala as a cultural encyclopedia***

Within its small format, this visualized song gives us something of an illustrated cultural encyclopedia of Newar civilization.

The seasons work well as a thematic device to organize an ethnography of Newar civilization in many of its aspects: religion, performance of dance and music, and of course the organization of its economy where agriculture is paramount.

Most notably, the monsoon rains of the summer are crucial to bringing out the full agricultural potential of the Kathmandu valley's fertile soil. Among the earliest written documents on the Valley's history are inscriptions from the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. that irrigation facilities had been constructed. And the inhabitants are indeed very successful farmers. The reports of the early (18<sup>th</sup>-century) European visitors to the Valley abound with descriptions of the high level of land use: all slopes being terraced, irrigation by means of water reservoirs and canals being carefully maintained, and no land being used for grazing cattle – the goats and buffaloes providing the meat eaten by the Valley people being imported from the Hill districts adjoining the Valley. And today, agricultural land use is reportedly never below 200%, which means that in addition to the rice grown during the monsoon, at least one other crop is grown and in fact often harvests of both wheat and a vegetables are taken during the winter.

Over the centuries, the agricultural possibilities of the Valley laid the foundation for a culture of unfolding complexity. The earliest settlers most probably come from the north, as testified by the language, Newari, which belongs to the tibeto-burman family. But subsequently, there were many waves of immigration from the south, including, for instance, scholars and artists fleeing the Muslims who invaded the plains in the 14th century, but also the ruling classes of the Valley society. The courts of the Valley kingdoms were fluent in Sanskrit as well as in Maithili, Bengali and other North Indian languages. And throughout, the Valley has entertained lively cultural contacts with the North Indian plains. The two major religions of South Asian Great Tradition, Hinduism and Buddhism, can be documented in the Valley since the first centuries A.D., and both are important in the Valley today. In this process, the people who lived in the Kathmandu valley became "a" people known as Newars – in contrast to the "khas" and others who came with the Shahs after their conquest of the Valley.

As is natural in a society where a successful monsoon is the base for wealth, the cyclical passing of time has become intensely articulated also culturally. Activities such as kite-flying, food items, music – all these are indexes of the time of the



year. The most notable cultural way of showing the passing of time is the religious festivals which give each season, each month its own distinct flavor.

## Festivals

*Kaula kachala* gives two important events for each season. All these belong to the cycle of festivals. With this, these events at once represent religion, performance, and the cycle of the year.<sup>2</sup>

The songs starts out (presenting the season of *sarad*) with *Mohani* and *Svanti*, the particular Newar articulations of the festivals known as Dasai and Tihar in Nepali and as Durga puja and Diwali in India more generally. These two festivals are mentioned in the text, and *Mohani* is also alluded to by means of the musical introduction to the first couplet, which as we have seen is that of *Mohani*, but they are not visualized beyond that in the film. The second couplet (*hemanta*) gives us *Yahmari punhi* (the full moon when *yahmari* cakes are eaten) and *Nhayagam jatra* (the festival of the seven villages), each with appropriate footage.

In the third couplet (*sisir*), the song goes on to *Ghyah caku salhu* (when ghee and molasses are eaten) and *sila cahre* (the festival of Shivaratri on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the waning moon of *Silla*, i.e. just before the new moon) out of which the first also features in the video. In addition, the film includes a scene of powder-throwing at *Holi* – a festival that falls in this period – to the instrumental introduction to this couplet, which consists of the refrain of the *Holi* melody. The fourth couplet (*basanta*), in its turn, gives us *Pamha carhe* (the festival of the guest, just before the new moon of *Caula*) and *Biska*. The first of these is an occasion to invite friends and out-married women to household feasts, though this is not visualized. In contrast, the film includes two sequences from the major festival of *Biska* as it is celebrated in Bhaktapur: the chariot as it is pulled through the streets of this town, and the important part of this festival when people from the lower and upper parts of Bhaktapur each attempt to pull the chariot into their town-half.

The concluding two couplets of the song makes do with presenting the festivals by name only, without any accompanying footage. I do not know the reason for this, but presumably there was no opportunity to film (or find already filmed) scenes from round the whole year. The festivals mentioned in these couplets are both impor-

---

<sup>2</sup> The particulars in this section is drawn principally from Levy (1990) and van den Hoek (2004)

tant and scenic enough, however. The fifth couplet (*grisma*) gives us *Sithi nakha* and *Gatha mugah*, two significant events that frame the period of rice transplantation, *sihnajya*. The seasonal melody performed in the introduction to this couplet is also known by this name (*Sihnajya*). With *Sithi nakha*, the dry season is expected to end and ponds and dams should be cleansed before the monsoon comes. At *Gatha mugah*, the ghosts that normally inhabit the fields but who have been invited inside the towns not to bother the work in the riceland, are expelled again from the towns together with the demon bearing this name (*Gatha mugah*).

And the sixth couplet (*barsa*), finally, mentions *Gu punhi* and *Yem nya punhi*. *Gu punhi*, the full moon of *Gunla*, includes a number of events, among them worship of frogs, and walking to the important Buddhist stupa Swambhu. *Yem nya punhi*, a month later, falls on one of the days when *Indra jatra*, the major festival of Kathmandu, is in full swing.

By means of its text, its music and its visuals, *Kaula kachala* operates synecdochically (the part for the whole) here. And it does so in two ways. First, a short visual scene or a melody belonging to a certain festival serves to synecdochically evoke the whole of the festival, with its multitude of constituent events, in question. Second, the yearly round of twelve festivals singled out by *Kaula kachala* synecdochically evokes the whole festival year, with its multitude of festivals.

After some months of relative silence during the busy agricultural season at the hot and humid time of the onset of the monsoon the festival season starts in earnest in the late monsoon. As the rice grows in the irrigated fields, there is the Cow festival of the dead (*Saparu*), Krishna's birthday, *Indra jatra*, and numerous other festivals. At harvest time, when the rains are about to stop, there is the ten-day *Mohani*, mentioned in the first couplet of *Kaula kachala*. With *Svanti*, when the harvest is completed and the rice is safely stocked inside the houses, attention is shifted to the household rather than the public rituals of the previous festivals. Now it has dried up, it is still warm but the cold season is approaching and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is called upon for the protection of the gathered wealth for the coming year.

The winter months, though there are a few festivals, is the time when weddings are conducted and when people gather outdoors for great feasts. The onset of spring is celebrated at *Basanta pancami*, and with spring, the festivals start anew. This is the time to worship Sarsvati, the goddess of music and learning and this is also when *Holi* (present musically and visually, but not in the text of *Kaula kachala*) is celebrated. The late spring has a few festivals. The Hindu god Vishnu, in his incar-

nation as Rama, is in focus of *Caitra dasai* and *Ram navami*. The Valley's Buddhists, on their hand, celebrate the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death at *Buddhajayanti*. This is the time of the year when both Hindus and Buddhists go to worship their lineage deities (called *Digu dya* in Newari). Since these deities, venerated in the form of natural stones, are located outside the towns and villages this becomes a day when the people considering themselves blood-relatives go on a picnic together.

In the late spring and pre-monsoon summer, the days are hot and windy and air humidity is on the rise. With the buildup of heat and subsequently humidity, the conditions are perfect for all these micro-organisms that make people sick. And now the monsoon season is anticipated, and with it the whole riskiness of the growing of rice. There may be too much rain, or too little. There may be storms or heavy rainfall destroying the crops. Now the dangerous gods are approached again, in order that their full power should be made use of for the protection of the towns, their inhabitants, and their agricultural efforts. And with *Sithi Nakha* the heavy agricultural season starts anew.

## **Religion**

By singling out festivals as the defining events of each season, *Kaula kachala* emphasizes the religious aspect of Newar civilization. The video gives further weight to religion by setting many of its scenes in religious compounds – the templescape of Bagh Bhairav, the Uma Maheshwar temple, the Cilanco stupa cluster. With this, the religious duality of Newar civilization – including Hinduism but also a specific form of Vajrayana Buddhism – is conveyed. The *Kaula kachala* cultural encyclopedia provides also details of religious life: the dancers proceeding with utensil to do puja, close-ups of religious statues – sometimes red from persistent worship – and wood-carvings, the household rituals carried out at specific occasions (making and eating *yahmari*, feeding ghee and molasses to a child at *Ghyah caku salhu*).

## **Urbanity and space**

One important aspect of the religious festivals is that they tie together Newars socially – by means of making the co-performance of different castes with different tasks integral to the festival – but also spatially. The processions that move in pre-

scribed routes through a town. Also between towns and villages, as in the festival of seven villages mentioned visually and verbally in *Kaula kachala*.

Newar civilization is essentially urban. Even in a small settlement, the houses are built close together – giving a distinctly urban impression – in order to save farmland. The illustrated encyclopedia of the *Kaula kachala* video has many entries on Newar urbanity. Already the introductory shot of Kirtipur’s skyline shows us the dense compactness of a Newar town. The inserted footages of processions demonstrate what this looks like on the inside, with three- to five-story houses lining the streets and alleys, and the amazing number of people living in these houses but now out on the street to take part in or watch the procession. In the video, five of *Kaula kachala*’s six couplets are set inside the town and almost every single shot in the film – except in the second couplet – features houses, architectural details or stone-paved open places and streets. The architecture – from the style of the houses to the small detail such as a stone doorway – makes clear to us, moreover, that this is not just urban space, it is Newar urban space that we are seeing here. Templescapes and the visuals from the Cilanco stupa compound, lined with houses on all sides, further underline the specifically Newar urbanity of what we are presented with.

### **Agriculture and the economy**

As we have seen, Newar culture is essentially based on agriculture. But among the Newars, farming is not a rural activity. On the contrary, farming is integral to the urban organization of the Newar towns and villages. The farmers walk down from their towns or villages – always located on the highest elevation in their area – to work their fields, and bring the produce back to their neighborhoods. According to season, the traditional streets, squares and other open spaces are red with chilli pepper fruits laid out to dry, are filled with men and women winnowing rice, or are filled with stacks of straw.

Farmers are prominent participators in urban life, with key tasks in festivals and as musicians. That this is so can be understood already from the titles of scholarly articles such as ”The Farmers in the City” (Toffin 1994) or ”Urban peasants” (Gellner & Pradhan 1997), both on the subject of the Farmer caste. In fact, the this caste (known as *Jyapu* or *Maharjan*) is the largest single Newar group in most settlements and in all of the larger towns and cities (including even Kathmandu). In towns such as Bhaktapur or Kirtipur they account for nearly 2/3 of the entire population.

*Kaula kachala*, as we have seen, uses farmland as the setting for the visualization of the second couplet. Moreover, the montage to the introductory music to this couplet shows us actual agricultural work. The significance of this part of the film is double. First, it displays agricultural work as part of traditional Newar culture (the traditional dresses of the farm-workers help convey this). And second, it demonstrates the particularly Newar way of doing such work, that is, using a digging hoe (a *ku*) for overturning the earth in preparation for sowing. In most places, a plow drawn by animals would be used for this work but "the Newars" have a well-publicized taboo on this tool (though this does not apply in all Newar settlements). It is also in accordance with Newar practice that it is the man who uses the hoe here – though women on the whole devote more hours to agricultural work than do men, the use of the *ku* is an exclusively male task. And just like in the film, the leveling of the earth is typically work that women do. In the video, a woman brings a meal of beaten rice and meat to the farm-workers and this, too, is the typical practice – together with the drinking of "considerable quantities" (Webster 1981) of white rice-beer, though *Kaula kachala* is silent on this.

The importance of agriculture is brought out in *Kaula kachala* also in a more subtle way – by playing the melody called *Sihnajya* as a prelude to the *grisma* couplet. This melody, as well as its name, is not taken from a festival or such like. Instead, as noted above, *sihnajya* denotes the the work and the time of transplanting rice – the maybe most significant event in the whole agricultural cycle – and songs using this melody were traditionally sung during this work (see Lienhard 1984 for a number of such songs).

The montage from the farmland is the most extensive portrayal of work in *Kaula kachala*. The film throws in also a couple of other encyclopedic entries here: it touches upon the weaving of a rice-mat, shown in a brief shot in the introduction to the sixth couplet. In the introduction to the fifth couplet, the films shows a man carrying the traditional *khaḥmū*, a bamboo pole with one basket suspended from each end, over his shoulder while ascending an alley in the town. The *khaḥmū* is also an index of Newariness. Also household work is shown in brief shots: the making of *yahmari* cakes in the second couplet.

All this belongs to an agricultural economy. But the Newar civilization has not been developed from agriculture alone, but has two more legs to rest upon: artisanship and trade. I have not found any more significant trace of the role of merchants and trade to the Newar culture in *Kaula kachala*, but signs of Newar artisanship

abound in the visualization: stonework, metalwork, woodwork in the form of statues, architectural details, household and *puja* utensils, and so on.

What the film does not show is the type or results of occupations many people typically have today: they drive taxis, teach at schools, build modern houses, work in offices...

## **Clothing**

In the film – with one important exception that we will return to – the main protagonists are dressed in traditional clothes. I have described these clothes above, but in order to spell out what these dresses "mean" let's recapitulate. The singers wear a long tunic of a brownish material over a pair of baggy pants. This is the traditional dress of the unmarried young woman. The fabric of the tunic, moreover, is of the kind locally produced by the women of the household on the handlooms occupying the ground floor of numerous Newar houses. The same fabric is used for the blouses of the dancers' dresses. Such a blouse, together with a sari, is the dress of a married woman, and the red-bordered black saris the dancers wear traditionally signify women of the Farmer caste. (The cover of the CD-album *Jhi newa*, where *Kaula kachala* is found, also features a young woman dressed in this way.) Again, the same type of fabric is used for the traditional men's dress that the farm-working man in the second couplet wears. In the introduction to the fifth couplet, the man carrying the *khaḥmū* (the bamboo pole with a basket suspended from each end) has in the same type of dress.

So *Kaula kachala*'s cultural encyclopedia provides us with three full-scale illustrations of traditional costume. There are also entries for jewellery – the headgear, the anklets, the necklaces and the bracelets worn by the dancers.

The young folks in the banner-carrying procession, however, contaminate the traditionalist purity of the encyclopedia. They wear the types of clothes that are usual in contemporary Kathmandu Valley settings: garments looking like ready-made clothes from any shop and of modern types of fabrics. The footage of outdoor scenery include people in similarly non-traditional dress.

## **Foods**

A whole monography could be devoted to Newar foods and the various cultural meanings of its items. Indeed such a book has been written, devoting some 200 pages to the study of social structure and food symbolism among the Newars (Löwdin 1998). Out of the many items here, *Kaula kachala* singles out three: the snack meal in the farmland, *yahmari* bread, and the plate of ghee, beaten rice and molasses given to a child on *ghyah caku salhu*.

The snack in the farmland consists of beaten rice and – as it looks like – the type of meat dish called *choyala*. This is a standard combination for a midday meal, but both foods have important ritual and social implications – maybe most importantly, unlike cooked rice, beaten rice can be served and taken without strict considerations of caste status.

The combination of molasses, ghee and beaten rice is something children go to get at their maternal uncle's place on the *ghyah caku salhu* day. The combination is also thought to lead to increased fertility for a childless woman (Löwdin 1998).

*Yahmari* cakes are made from a sweet dough of rice flour, molasses and sesame seeds and then steamed. It has to be stored for four days in the family's granary before being taken out and eaten on *yahmari punhi*, which is the only day this cake is consumed (Löwdin 1998).

## **A note on the dances**

A complete and accurate description of the dances that are so importantly featured in the visualization would require analytic skills that the present author unfortunately does not possess. What can be said, however, is that the dances consistently are of the type that I have many times heard pointed out as typically "Newar" in style, featuring rather delicate bodily movements and sometimes including mudras (or maybe mudra-like) hand-gestures. As we will see below, similar dancing by women in similar dress is very common in the body of Newar music videos. An important observation can be added to this. The ritual dances that are so important in many Newar festivals are always carried out by men, not women.

## Music

The cultural encyclopedia that *Kaula kachala* provides us with has quite a few entries on Newar music.

To start with, the melody of the song itself is close to the traditional melodies of the Newar repertoire. The song melody consist of two pairs of two-bar phrases, one pair for each line of text. With its gap in the ascent the music for the first line – as the composer acknowledges – close to the initial phrase of *Basanta* such as it is sung in for instance the popular song *Siri siri phasa jita*. With this, it is also close to the first part of the melody of the popular Newar song *Jhanajaka maya*.

So let us look briefly at this. What the *Basanta* melodies share is, among other things, a specific ascent (which is where they overlap with *Jhanajaka maya*'s melody). Here the melody ascends upwards impatiently and leaps over some of the pitches. It is always the same two pitches that are jumped over (the second and the fifth counting from the tonic). But when the melody descends downwards, all seven pitches are used. This descent is always oblique: going down to the third and then taking a detour upwards to the fifth or sixth before returning downwards to the lower tonic. And characteristically, the sixth (*Dha*; A if the tonic is C) is emphasized in the ascent while the fifth (*Pa*; G) – which is absent in the ascent – is emphasized in the descent. These intrinsic features of *Basanta* are found in all compositions in this raga and all songs seen as "Basanta".

*Kaula kachala* starts with a two-bar phrase A ascending to 5/*Pa* (G) omitting 2/*Re* (D) and then returning to 3/*Ga* (E). The second phrase B continues the ascent to the higher tonic 1' /*Sa* (C). This second ascent in B omits 5/*Pa* in true basantic fashion. All this is a close paraphrase of the *Basanta* and *Jhanahaka maya* initial ascents. What Gujje Malakar, the composer, has done is to divide the straight ascent from 1 to 1' into two ascents; he has shifted the oblique movement from the descent to the ascent; just like in *Basanta*, he omits 2/*Re* (D) and 5/*Pa* (G) in the ascent; his phrase B is very similar to what we find in such a *Basanta* melody as that of folk song *Siri siri phasa jita*; and the rhythmic motif opening that song, he has quoted in phrase B.

In the descending phrases of the songs second line, however, the composer adds *ni komal* (flattened seventh note, B-flat) in the descent, which makes his melody quite distinct from either of the two traditional melodies. But another traditional parallel comes to mind here: the melody of the extremely popular folk song *Rajamati kumati*. Like *Kaula kachala*, *Rajamati*'s melody has a gapped accent and an added *ni komal* (B-flat) in the descent.



To conclude so far, already the song melody itself situates *Kaula kachala* in the Newar musical universe. The inclusion of "the" six traditional seasonal melodies as introduction to each couplet adds further to the cultural encyclopedia. But *Kaula kachala* as a guide to Newar music doesn't end there either. As recorded on the CD, the arrangement goes on to add two Newar sonorities: those of the big barrel-shaped drums *khi* or *pachima*, and those of the even larger cylindrical drum *dhimay*.

The *dhimay* is also presented visually, in the introduction to the fifth couplet (mimicking the recording, as this is also where it is heard). It appears here in the standard combination with the cymbal-pair *bhusya*, though it is doubtful whether this instrument is featured in the audio recording. The visualization includes another trick when it comes to presenting musical instruments. A bamboo transverse flute – *basuri* – is a prominent melody instrument in the audio recording. But in the video, this instrument is visualized with a wooden transverse flute, peculiar to the Newars (also, and a little confusingly, called *basuri*). The Newar *basuri*, however, is not a solo instrument like on the audio recording and as shown in the video, but is always played in groups of several instruments.

*Kaula kachala* has a final musical trick up its sleeve. In all of its representations of musical performance, it is women who perform – they play the *dhimay*, the *basuri*, and the cymbals. This is entirely non-traditional. As the connoisseur of Newar music, Gert-Matthias Wegner, has written (1987: 471) there is a "strict exception of the womenfolk" when it comes to participation in the rich and complex matrix of genres, ensembles, instruments, repertoires, and performance venues that makes up traditional Newar music (see further Grandin 2011). But as Gérard Toffin (2007) as well as many Newars point out, this restriction has been overturned in recent years and women now take part in the traditional musical life that was previously closed to them.

### **Newar music videos**

Visualizations such as *Kaula kachala* are quite abundant these days. Though not always easy to find, there are VCD- and DVD-albums with such music videos, they are shown on various television channels, and they are encountered on Youtube. Such visualizations may present idealized, middle-class life, with children living with loving parents in neat homes and doing their homework at the computer. Or, of course, they may dwell upon the eternal story of girl meets boy. Songs and compositions are

often in modern idioms, typically that of Nepali modern song (*adhunik git*) but also more rock- or rap-influenced styles. But just like in *Kaula kachala*, many visualizations focus on Newar culture which they present in a certain way. There is an almost endless parade of dancers in red-bordered black saris; there are young men in traditional attire, there is Newar urbanity (architecture, the townscapes, templescapes and houses, architectural details, street-life), there are choice emblems like the *yahmari* cake or the *ku* digging-hoe, there are open-air feasts and traditional work in the fields, there is peaceful *Holi*-playing with red *abhir*-powder only, no excesses with balloons and so on, there is the neat style of dancing, there are festival processions, there are traditional musical instruments. The song *Chacalim hinam cvamgu*, on the VCD-album *Jhigu svanigah* ("Our valley"), features all of this and is a good case in point. To give one other example, the video for *Jimi napa guli than* (by Durga Lal Shrestha and Gujje Malakar; also this song is found on the album *Jhi newah*) starts out with presenting a group of schoolgirls, in their school uniforms, arriving at their school, playing outside, and then go into their classroom where the teacher draws a flower, complete with roots, on the whiteboard. Then the bell rings, the girls leave the classroom, and in the next cut, they are on their way out amongst the trees, now dressed in red-bordered black saris and white shawls over their red and black blouses and with red-powdered bare feet. All this in the first 20 seconds of the song/video. The remainder of the video shows how the girls plant, water and attend to flowers, under the supervision of two women teachers who are also dressed in clothes from traditional material. This is interspersed with choreographed group dancing.

### ***Kaula kachala and Sugata saurabha***

Within its 4 minutes and 31 seconds, *Kaula kachala* is, as I have argued, a cultural encyclopedia of sorts – working with samples rather than the full population of cultural "items", and synecdochically evoking a larger whole from the pieces and fragments it provides.

Jovial farmers from different neighborhoods attended  
Adorned with ornaments and clothed in freshly tailored robes.

The men shouldered twin reed baskets loaded and suspended from bamboo poles  
/.../

Look, some came with *khim* drums slung over their shoulders, others played treble flutes

/.../

Ready to turn over the soil with the digging hoes they hold on their shoulders

/.../

Look how the women farmers, set for breaking up the clods, followed them in a line

This is quoted from the Newar writer Chittadhar Hridaya's *Sugata saurabha*, as translated by Todd T. Lewis and Subarna Man Tuladhar (2010). *Sugata saurabha* is an epic poem on the life of the Buddha where, however, the poet Hridaya has borrowed freely from Newar culture to flesh out the scenes. This work was written in the 1940s but the aspects of Newar culture thus highlighted resonate strongly and strangely with what music videos present more than two generations later: clothes, foods, urban life, temples, architecture, rituals, festivals, music. (See further Lewis's essay on "Domestication of Newar traditions in *Sugata Saurabha* as those of the ancient Sakyas" in Hridaya 2010: 355–58. Lewis suggests here that *Sugata Saurabha* is "a kind of cultural encyclopedia of the Kathmandu Valley civilization", a suggestive term that I have borrowed in this paper.) Like *Sugata saurabha*, *Kaula kachala* presents an idealized picture of Newar culture.

In other words, there is nothing arbitrary about what *Kaula kachala* presents. Rather, it is part of a long tradition of Newar cultural activism.

### **Newar ethnic activism**

As the striking similarities between *Sugata saurabha* and *Kaula kachala* make clear to us, they are both products of a long tradition of struggle for the recognition of Newar culture and Newari language within the larger polity of Nepal (a struggle that has often been linked to the political left). The poet Hridaya spending years in prison for his publishing a poem in Newari in the 1940s, the opposition to the closing down of the Newari-language services in Radio Nepal in the 1960s, Newar activist and politician Padma Ratna Tuladhar's election to the National assembly in the 1980s, and the declaration of the Newar Autonomous State at the *Dasrath rangasala* (national stadium in Kathmandu) complete with large-scale singing of the Newar national hymn (*rastragan*; written by Durga Lal Shrestha) in the 2000s – all these are landmarks in Newar "ethnic" activism, but it also works on a more mundane level. Here

we have, for instance, the yearly manifestations and cultural programs at the new year according to *Nepal samvat* (Nepal era, i.e. the traditional calendar of the Kathmandu Valley), various organizations for the furthering of the Newar language, literature, script (Ranjana) and so on, archives for old "Newar" manuscripts, and scholarly and cultural work. The continuous production of Newari songs and music videos can be seen in this light.

### **External foes, internal forces**

Nepal had its own "Arab Spring" in 2006. This was the culmination of a long period of political unrest with a People's War (with a death toll of >13.000 people) going on principally in outlying regions, and with mass demonstrations, strikes, black-outs, manifestations, burning tires, road-block and massive police and army presence in the Kathmandu area. All this has brought comprehensive change to the Kathmandu Valley. The country is now a republic and the Maoists have come back from their People's War to mainstream politics where, being the largest party in the democratic elections, they presently head the government. The ethnic movements of Nepal's janajatis/adivasis have become linked to the political agendas of the Maoists and others in complex ways. And the inflow of people and money to the Kathmandu Valley during the war has inflated the price of land throughout the Valley steeply. When Newar farmers sell their agricultural lands, one of the three legs that Newar civilization rests upon is cut off, leaving the whole thing in a state of instability.

So the position of the Newars is contradictory not only in ethnic terms but also ideologically and economically.

Part of the alliance of indigenous nationalities, they also provide Nepal with much of its elite.

Their support of Marxist (today, Maoist) politicians and parties is much commented upon (see e.g. Gellner XXX), though this ideology is at odds with the hierarchical and inegalitarian social structure underlying Newar civilization. And the market-driven physical restructuring gives economic muscle to the Newar cause, yet undermines the very mode of production wherein the artistic traditions are integrated.

All this means that when Newar culture today is vulnerable, this is not only because of external oppression, subjugation and so on, but also – and maybe more importantly – because of factors internal to Newar civilization as it faces today's

challenges: economy, ideology. Newar culture has successfully coped with waves after waves of challenges to their specific civilization – conquest, political policies of subjugation and cultural repression; modernization, mediatization and globalization – only to find the Newar heritage threatened by even more formidable forces from the inside.

### **Identity or practice?**

*Kaula kachala*, like other products of Newar cultural activism, undoubtedly provides a set of in-group markers, a set of signs of Newar identity. But it also seems to be teaching a lesson. Just consider the first words of every couplet. They give the Newari names of two months, and then immediately go on to the "Nepali" name for the same two months ("silla cilla, magh phagun"). So to whom is the lesson directed? Overtly, to children, since they are the implied audience for (most of) the album *Jhi newa*. So does the song address itself to Newar children who don't speak Newari?

There is an important question here. As we have seen, *Kaula kachala* operates synecdochically, letting a sketch of a part stand for a rich and complicated whole. Isn't there a great risk that this synecdoche will be lost on those – Nepali-speaking Newar children, for instance – who have no experience of the whole? Mentioning a particular festival, playing a particular melody, displaying visually a set of tools will be read differently by different people according to their own frames of reference. It can work as a signal to recall the full complexity of an important event in Newar civilization, or just as a name tag of a museumized piece of Newar heritage, something that "we" (used to) have and that for this reason is important as an emblem of identity, but which "we" have to look up somewhere if we'd like to find out what it really is. In other words, identity might work well from empty signs but to retain their meaning, signs need a living practice. No doubt, the cultural activists work to maintain the practice, but if they do not succeed here, Newar culture may well be reduced to a set of empty markers. And paradoxically, this will be the doing not of adversaries and oppressions from the outside, but of the internal workings of Newar civilization itself as it is caught between comrade Mao's followers and the market.

### **And, finally...**

This has been an introductory study only. Much work is still to be done. What might be needed to make a more full analysis includes, for example, talking to film-makers, choreographers, dress-makers and so on, and to go over the films again together with Newar informants. And the reception side is another chapter... Many questions thus are left open!

## References

- Gellner, David N. 1997. Caste, Communalism, and Communism: Newars and the Nepalese State. In Gellner, David N, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka & John Whelpton, Eds., *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom. The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*. Amsterdam: Harwood, 151-84.
- Gellner, David N. & Rajendra Pradhan. 1995. Urban Peasants: Maharjans in Kathmandu and Lalitpur. In Gellner, David N. & Declan Quigley, Eds., *Contested Hierarchies. A Collaborative Ethnography of Caste in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 158-85.
- Gellner, David N. & G. Sharkey. 1996. An Interview with Padma Ratna Tuladhar. *Himalayan Research Bulletin* 16, 37-46.
- Grandin, Ingemar. 2011. *Music and media in local life. Music practice in a Newar Neighbourhood in Nepal*. (Second, revised edition.) Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.
- Hrdaya, Chitta Dhar. 2010. *Sugata Saurabha. An Epic Poem from Nepal on the Life of the Buddha, by Chittadhar Hrdaya*. Translation by Todd T. Lewis & Subarna Man Tuladhar. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van den Hoek, A.W. 2004. *Cāturmasa. Celebration of death in Kathmandu, Nepal*. Leiden: CNWS Publications
- Levy, Robert I. 1990. *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the organization of a traditional Newar city in Nepal*. Berkeley : University of California Press
- Lienhard, Siegfried. 1984. *Songs of Nepal. An anthology of Nevar folksongs and hymns*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Löwdin, Per. 1998. *Food, ritual and society. A study of social structure and food symbolism among the Newars*. (Revised edition.) Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point
- Toffin, Gérard. 1994. The Farmers in the City. The Social and Territorial Organization of the Maharjan of Kathmandu. *Anthropos* 89: 433–59
- Toffin, Gérard. 2007. *Newar society. City, village and periphery*. Lalitpur: Himal Books
- Webster, Peter. 1981. To plough or not to plough? A Newar dilemma. *Pacific Viewpoint* 22:2, 99–135
- Wegner, Gert-Matthias. 1987. Navadapha of Bhaktapur. Repertoire and performance of the ten drums. In Bernhard Kölver & Siegfried Lienhard, Eds., *Nepalica* 4/21. Sankt Augustin: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag.

**The text (not for quotation!)**

kaulā kachalā

asoj kārtik saradayā ṛtu re

thukihedu mohanīva svanti nakhaḥ jhīgu re

thimlā pohelā

maṃsir puṣ hemantayā ṛtu re

thukihe du yaḥmari puṃnhi nhayagāṃ jātrā jhīgu re

sillā cillā

māgh phāgun sisira yā ṛtu re

thukihedu dhyāḥ cāku salhū silā caḥrhe jhīgu re

caulā bachalā

cait baisākh basantayā ṛtu re

thukihedu pāṃhā caḥrhe biskā nakhaḥ jhīgu re

tachalā dillā

jeṭh asār gṛṣmāyā ṛtu re

thukihe du sithi nakhaḥ gathāṃ mugah jhīgu re

guṃlā ñalā

sāvan bhādog barṣāyā ṛtu re

thukihe du guṃpuṃnhīva yeṃ nyā punhī jhīgu re