

Asianart.com offers pdf versions of some articles for the convenience of our visitors and readers. These files should be printed for personal use only. Note that when you view the pdf on your computer in Adobe reader, the links to main image pages will be active: if clicked, the linked page will open in your browser if you are online. This article can be viewed online at: <http://asianart.com/articles/masks>

Living masks of the Newars

The itinerant masked dances of the Kathmandu Valley

by Gérard Toffin

This article first appeared as [Newsletter no. 13](#) of *le Toit du Monde*, Paris, October 2014. The [French version](#) can be found [here](#).

August 28, 2015

(click on the small image for full screen image with captions.)



Fig. 1

In December 2013, François Pannier, the director of the Galerie Le Toit du Monde, located in one of the most picturesque narrow streets of Paris, drew my attention to a set of old photographs illustrating a troupe of Newar masked dancers in the Kathmandu Valley. The photographs were stuck in an album showing various locations in this central Himalayan region and in India. The owner of the album was Major D.C. Monro, surgeon of the commandant-in-chief of the Rāj in India. He had travelled through Nepal in 1931 in the company of Sir Philip Chetwode and his daughter Penelope Chetwode. The latter had taken the photographs. These snaps of the masked characters, a series of about ten black and white pictures, had been taken in the garden of the former British Residency of Lainchaur, Kathmandu.

In the photographs, I recognized dancers from Bhaktapur, a former royal city situated about 15 km east of Kathmandu and inhabited mainly by Newars, the indigenous population of the Valley. The costumes, masks, and characters portrayed are a clear indication of their geographical origin.

I worked with some of these dancers in the 1990s when I was preparing my book (*La fête-spectacle*, Paris 2010) on Indra Jātrā, a prominent festival which is staged every year in August-September in most rural and urban Newar settlements of the Valley, but which is celebrated with particular pomp in the capital, Kathmandu. Most of the choreographic ensembles making up this festival in honour of Indra belong to Kathmandu. But one is from the nearby hamlet of Ichangu and several troupes from Bhaktapur have long been invited to perform their repertoire in a courtyard (Nāsālchok) of the former Hanuman Dhoka Palace and in the streets of the capital.



Fig. 2

In March and May 2014, I showed these photographs to Sulochana Chwaju, a young Nepali student from Bhaktapur who is preparing a Master of Arts (MA) on the 'lost dances' of her city [Lopunmukh Paramparāgat Nrityaharu]. On recognizing in the pictures one of the many Devī pyākhā 'goddess dance' troupes that are sometimes also called Devadevī-yā pyākhā (god-goddess dance) in Newari since most of them also include male gods, especially Shaiva deities, she immediately confirmed my first impression. There was no doubt that the performing artists were from Bhaktapur. What is more, Sulochana was able to identify every masked figure in the old snapshots and to comment on them. She asserted that these dances are still performed in Bhaktapur city during the Sā Pāru/Gāi jātrā (Cow festival) and Indra Jātrā festivities, even the one featuring a peacock (mhaykhā pyākhā) that I have never seen during my years of research on Newar traditional dances and theatre. Yet, according to Sulochana, some of these dances are in danger of becoming extinct. As far as the peacock is concerned, its mask has been supplanted by a more naturalized representation (Fig 22, below).

These old photographs are valuable for at least two reasons. Firstly, they testify to the journeying of Bhaktapur dance troupes through the Valley, and more particularly through Kathmandu itself, as early as the first decades of the twentieth century; i.e. nearly a century ago. Secondly, they attest to the continuity of this choreographic tradition in this city throughout the ages. What can be observed today is firmly anchored in the past and has undergone little change.



Fig. 3

Perhaps more importantly, the photographs clearly show that the custom of being invited by influential persons, presumably in exchange for money as well as for other advantages/commodities, is not a modern feature. It belongs to the past. I will show in what follows that from a very early period these Devī pyākhās specialized almost exclusively (though not totally) in secular dances that were performed mainly to entertain the audience and with a primarily artistic, rather than spiritual, goal. These troupes were, for instance, regularly invited by the ruling Rana families to their neoclassical mansions to amuse and entertain them. Other Newar theatrical troupes, like the jyāpu pyākhā whose plays are accompanied by dialogue and which are on the verge of extinction today, also staged performances in Rana palaces. These plays were formerly called darbār pyākhā, an expression that refers to this royal audience.

These old snapshots are consequently emblematic and extraordinarily meaningful. More generally, they challenge the sweeping statements made by imprudent philosophers and social anthropologists about "primitive" and sacred Asian art, and the supposed absence of any autonomous aesthetic dimension in non-Western countries based on an oral tradition. Not only do the masks of the Newar traditions play a crucial role in the social and religious life, but they also have an aesthetic dimension and value per se, which the spectators enjoy. I therefore argue that a categorical distinction between art and non-art, or between the West and the rest of the world, is totally fictive. These conclusions are in keeping with the theory I put forward in my book La fête-spectacle and other works of mine.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Bearing in mind these theoretical issues, this contribution to Le Toit du Monde's series of publications documents the Bhaktapur Devī pyākhā tradition and focuses on data observed in other Newar settlements, especially in the smaller Newar city of Panauti, where local masked dances have not yet been studied. The text is accompanied by a series of photographs that were recently taken by Prasant Shrestha—my friend and photographer—, and myself. The illustrations emphasize the centrality of the goddess in the Newar pantheon, whether Hindu or Buddhist. As asserted in Tantric literature, which is of such great import in the Kathmandu Valley, the Feminine Force (sakti) is at the basis and at the origin of the universe.

My aim is to contribute to the study of Newar traditional masks, a particular feature of this prominent and brilliant culture in the Himalayas, and to the itinerant aspect of these masked performances. I go back over the question of how masks work and I explore their socio-religious context. I also set out to situate these goddess choreographies within the wider context of masked dances among Newars mainly by opposing Devī pyākhā to the well-known Nava Durgā goddess troupes. The opposition between these two traditional pageants highlights contrasting features of dance and theatre in Newar culture. In Devī pyākhās, the deities are pacified and mild, whereas in Nava Durgā performances, they are wild and untamed. The former can be performed in a more recreational manner for the sake of the spectacle itself and is more or less divested of any religious function, though a number of variations and degrees of sacredness do exist. The latter are above all ritual in nature and express the phenomenon of possession, where the dancer and the deity become one. I argue that this former trend of recreational entertainment existed for a long period of time alongside the latter, which is ritual and ceremonial. For centuries traditions of divine embodiment and of entertainment have been closely intermingled in the Newar culture of the Kathmandu Valley.

Act 1 – Masks, costumes and dramas

Masks are a conspicuous and requisite feature of Newar theatrical plays and dances (both types of performances are called pyākhā in Newari). Normally they are made by members of the local Citrakār painter caste (New. Pum), which is of a relatively low-ranking (but pure) status. However, in Patan, Shākyas used to make and paint their masks themselves (for their annual Gā or Gana pyākhā) and in Bhaktapur members of the potter and agriculturist castes have been making masks for a long time.

Most masks are made of clay mixed with paper and jute. As a rule, they are a mixture of 'Nepali' paper (made from the inner bark of certain Daphne), of clay, jute (borā) and cotton. In some workshops, they are made of papier maché, clay, jute and boiled wheat flour. Clay moulds (New. thāsā) are used to shape them. The masks are then varnished (New. jhāh tayegu) with commercial products bought on the market. In the past, Citrakārs used egg white as an agglutinate.

However, the oldest Newar masks are apparently fashioned from copper and brass. These metallic items are commonplace in Patan, a city that has a long-established tradition of metalworking, jewellery and silversmithing. Colour is applied directly on the

metal. In Bhaktapur, metal masks are extremely rare, if not non-existent. Simple cloth masks with two holes for the eyes are also common among Newars (Fig. 8).



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Newar masks mainly represent deities, both masculine and feminine, including gods in the shape of an animal (Ganesh, Varāha), as well as their attendants and their 'vehicle', vāhanas (peacock, lion, etc.). They may also represent demons, evil spirits, various animals (monkey, dogs, deer, buffalo, pig, elephant, etc.), and human characters such as priests, merchants, clowns, hunters and women belonging to the Jyāpu agricultural caste. Interestingly enough, they do not represent ancestors and they are not worn during funeral ceremonies or rites related to ancestors, except here and there at the time of the Sā Pāru (nep. Gāī Jātrā) pageant. They are used during festivals (Sā Pāru (nep. Gāī Jātrā), Indra Jātrā, Dasain for instance) and religious performances, sometime secretly but mostly before a public. The buffoon, jester and trickster have their own masks, which are worn during comic/clownish theatre performances. Masks usually cover the whole face, but half masks, ba khvāhpāh, which leave the mouth uncovered, are known and used in comic plays accompanied by dialogue.

The colour of the mask differs according to the figures/deities it incarnates. White is mostly associated with the purest, appeasing figures, though some exceptions do exist. Black is synonymous with demons. Red and dark colours are associated with a violent temper, power and strength. Green is mostly synonymous with noble and highborn characters. In fact, each god has its own colour (and its iconographical design): Brahmāyanī is yellow, Vaishnavī, green, Kaumārī red or brown, Ganesh white, Bhairav dark blue, etc. Some variations may however exist between cities. In the Newari conventional lexicon, masked dancing deities are often referred to by the colour of their mask. Colour is therefore an essential element of the scenery's vocabulary and an indicator of the poetics encoded in these mythological figures. It is part of an all-embracing theatrical language, a system of visible signs covering other areas of the performance, such as the music, costume and choreography.



Fig. 10

Fearsome deities (Sanskrit: ugra) are depicted with frightening canines sticking out of their mouths. The trunk of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh, is coiled up on the left side. Save some exceptions, god masks are decorated with a third eye (drishti) painted vertically on the forehead. Indrāyanī's third eye, however, is drawn horizontally. Most male gods have stylized moustaches and tiny beards.

Khvāhpāh masks are worn during dramas and comic plays (trickster bāhthah of Patan or instance). A black or red yak tail is generally fastened to the back of masks that incarnate deities. In addition, these masks are topped with a metal crown or crest, mukuta or matuka, which is decorated with a series of long gilded or silver-coloured lotus petals and fresh garlands of flowers. All the masks are held on to the face and the chin with strips of white fabric. Holes are made at eye level to enable the dancer/actor to see where they are moving on stage. A piece of material that is fixed over the face and behind the head prevents the mask from rubbing or harming the dancer. This pad of fabric to make the mask as comfortable as possible seems to be specific to Newar masked dancers in the Himalayas. When they are not worn, masks are hung up in houses or in temples. And at specific religious times fixed by the lunar calendar they are displayed on the floor, inside or outside the temple with which they are associated, and thus presented to the public.



Fig. 11

Beside masks, the dancer's costume usually includes a blouse (occasionally made of velvet) or an open jacket as well as a skirt (jāmā), all of which are white, black or of any other colour associated with the deity that is represented. The skirt, which is often decorated with variegated horizontal bands of colours at the bottom, is even worn by male deities. It is often partly covered by an apron (jabi or jābhī) made of cloth or of silverware, and decorated with old silver coins. The dancer/actor (Nepali kalākār) also wears ornate jewellery around their neck, including a heavy silver chain (sikhah) and various bracelets (culyā) around their forearms and wrists. Their fingers are adorned with flat silver rings (āgū) (Fig. 9). Bells (ghāgalā) are tied round their waists or necks, and sometimes round their ankles or calves. Normally, the dancer is barefooted but in recent years the use of socks to protect them from the cold is not uncommon, especially in peripheral areas.

Masked dances narrate dramas, often derived from Pauranic Hindu literature, with a storyline, a plot and are split into several episodes. The dancers/actors wearing the masks do not speak, except in certain comic plays (Toffin 2011). There is consequently no dialogue. In some cases singers —whose role is to recount the story of the

drama— sit at the side of the stage. Occasionally, a pair of attendants lifts a dancer into the air to portray his ability to fly (Khokana Sikālī pyākhā). Noticeably, Newar masked dances are also full of folklore and more secular (sometimes even comic) elements that appeal to the audience. There is therefore a continual shift between the cosmic and domestic scale. Comedy itself is not totally absent and is often played out between the scenes. By and large, these performances belong to a living tradition that has been transmitted orally from generation to generation. Written texts are sometimes referred to, but these documents—so it is said—have been either eaten by insects or lost over the years!



Fig. 12

The masked dancers belong to a long list of Newar castes: Shākya, Vajrācārya, Shrestha, Jyāpu, Duwāl, Prajāpatī, Gathu (Mālākār), etc. Most of them are members of agriculturist, potter and gardener castes. All the dancers are male. Traditionally, each troupe is associated with a particular Citrakār family of painters who works for them. Craftsmen paint the masks in accordance with local models sketched in master books, at least as far as deity figures are concerned. These folded manuscripts are kept safe at home. All the recommendations are followed to the letter.



Fig. 13

Masks are regularly repainted or refreshed every year just before the first performance of a dance the date of which is calculated according to the lunar calendar. Discarded masks that were directly involved in ritual activities are cremated or immersed in a nearby river. In this case, each dancer becomes the chief mourner for his mask. In Kirtipur, each Nava Durgā dancer carries his mask down to a pyre outside the city where it is burned. After a mask has been made, it is consecrated according to complex religious procedures. Religious masks need to be recharged with sacrality at regular intervals for them to be able to incarnate a divinity. Their perceived beauty and value is to a large extent a function of their ritual efficacy.

Aesthetically speaking, these Newar masks have an altogether distinct style that is different both from other Himalayan masks (including Tibetan masks) and from those belonging to Indian folk culture. This style is due to a special combination of natural pigments, mask materials (metal, clay, papier maché), shapes, iconographic details, metal decorations and, perhaps even more so, to the transmission over the centuries of specific canons among Newar craftsmen and artists. Newar masks are thus easily recognizable among many others from the same region.



Fig. 14

Act 2 – The sacred and terror : Nava Durgā's masked dance

The nine forms that Durgā (Nava Durgās) takes to fight Asura demons are a remarkable element of the Newar Hindu and Buddhist pantheon and a major feature of the sacred masked dances associated with this ethnic group. Four troupes (khalah) of dancers incarnating these goddesses exist in the Valley: in Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, Theco (a village located in Lalitpur district) and in Kirtipur. All of them date from the Malla (thirteenth-eighteenth century) period and today belong to the Gathu (Gāthā or Mālākār, Bānmālā) gardener caste. These groups are organised round a complex membership system, which is inherited preferably from father to son. In some particular cases, the part (pātra) itself (Bhairav for instance, or Mahālakshmi) is inherited down the patrilineal line, recalling common patterns among North American tribes (Kwakwilt for instance). The troupe therefore forms a closed socio-religious group, a secret association, governed by Tantric types of initiation.



Fig. 15

In Bhaktapur, the Nava Durgā troupe includes thirteen mask-wearers: four male deities (Shiva, Bhairav, Svet Bhairav, Ganesh), the rest being female. Interestingly, the goddess Mahālakshmi is not incarnated by a masked dancer. She is portrayed as the most powerful of goddesses and is represented by a flat silver repoussé icon attached to a sacred kalash vessel. This is placed in a small wooden chariot. Mahālakshmi, locally called siphadyah ('oleander goddess', no doubt owing to the name of the decorative red flowers on her icon), is worshipped by the audience as well as by the mask-bearers. Similarly, Shiva's mask—smaller than others and with no holes for the eyes—is not worn. Instead, the masked dancer impersonating Ganesh carries it on a stick. Mahākālī is represented with emaciated flesh, deep-set eyes, and facial bones protruding in a cadaverous way through the skin. She recalls the terrifying female Gorgon creatures prevalent in ancient Greece.

The troupe also includes a pair of female guardian deities known as Singhinī (or Simā) (with the face of a lion) and Byanghinī (Byaghrinī or Dumā) (with the face of a tiger). This lioness and this tigress are indissolubly associated with a number of Newar masked dances. They come respectively first and last in the street procession made up of mask-bearers that precedes the dancing. Singhinī is usually yellow and Byanghinī white (Fig. 12 & 13). In Bhaktapur, however, the latter is reddish or orange. In this city white-faced Simā is often thought to be male.

Nava Durgā masks are considered to be alive and are empowered with supernatural forces. Every year, at the beginning of the

masked dance season, during the Dasain festival in October, Tantric Hindu priests renew the power of the masks by performing certain rituals and reciting secret mantras. As soon as the bearer puts their mask on over their face, they become possessed by the divinity they represent. Their head and hands start shaking (khāygu). They do not normally speak to others in this state of possession and are guided by attendants as they make their way through the streets. In addition, in using the mask, the dancer is required to fulfil certain sanctioned procedures and to respect certain religious taboos (sexual intercourse for instance) before wearing it. To render the performance more spectacular, Nava Durgā masks from Bhaktapur (made of clay) are topped with removable high, gilded metallic crowns.

These troupes circulate within Bhaktapur as well as within the Kathmandu Valley, travelling from one locality to another. Just after the Dasain festivities, the Bhaktapur troupe traditionally goes round to about twenty neighbouring Newar communities. The period for these performances runs till the beginning of the rainy season. However, this tradition is on the decline. In 2013, the troupe visited only six to seven places, including Panauti, where most of the photographs here were taken. An incident took place there during the performance. The dancer incarnating Svet Bhairav—a clown-like figure much revered by barren women and a central character in the drama (Fig. 17)—broke his leg while dancing because of the disorderly audience. For many people, this accident was a bad omen. Consequently, Gathu performers now turn down any invitation from Panauti. In order to perform the dance without any risk, they demand a prohibitive sum of money and a strict security system. The inhabitants of Panauti themselves hesitate to renew with the tradition.



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

During their sequential visits, the arrival of a Nava Durgā troupe is like the invasion of a specific territory by terrifying forces. Bloodthirsty goddesses stamp through the streets and squares as if they were marching through a battlefield. As a matter of fact, Nava Durgā goddesses are feared by the population. Masked dancers run after small children, they bite the heads off living cocks and drink the blood of sheep (Fig. 16), goats and buffaloes as it gushes directly from the animal's throat (after removing their mask). If dissatisfied, the goddesses may terrorize people. They are the messengers of death. An old tradition describes them as animal-eaters before being controlled by tantric priests. Some troupes are even associated with human sacrifices.

Frenzied Nava Durgā dances are always related to a duodecimal cycle that was defined long ago. Accordingly, every twelve years, the dance takes on a particular aspect: it includes a greater number of characters and the drama is staged in a larger number of settlements. Other Newar goddess troupes have adopted such duodecimal periodicity (Jala pyākhā from Harisiddhi, for instance).

These ballets undoubtedly entertain the spectators. Yet the performance is entrenched in religion and rituals. It is not only men who dance but living gods who may either ensure prosperity or spread disease among humans, if not death. The sacred aspects prevail. People used to present the performers with various offerings during the intervals, and put their hand on their heads after touching the mask-bearers. The vision of the spectacle itself is a pious act.

Act 3 – An aesthetic of entertainment : Devī pyākhās from Bhaktapur

Devī pyākhā choreographic performances in Bhaktapur city, as shown in Penelope Chetwode's black and white photographs, stand in striking contrast to the Nava Durgā bloody and terrifying sacred ballet. I have watched them a number of times over the years. In Bhaktapur these dances are only performed in the streets and squares during the period extending from Gai Jātrā to Indra Jātrā festivals, i.e. August to September. The dancers start in the late afternoon and perform for about two or three hours. However, the troupes may also be invited to give other performances, for example, by the Tourist Board, large hotels and other institutions to enliven an event taking place outside the city proper. Whatever the case may be, it is not a ceremonial performance. Entertainment and enjoyment predominate, even if some masks are believed to be potent manifestations of gods. The audience (svahpin) is not made up of devotees, but of spectators.



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

Today there are about nine or ten more or less professional troupes (khalah) within Bhaktapur who organise and stage Devī pyākhās (Goddess dances). They are named after their location within the city: Galsi Pukhu Devi Pyakhan Samuha, Dokachen Devi Pyakhan Samuha, Thalamalachen Devi Pyakhan Samuha, Chasukhel Devi Pyakhan Samuha, etc. Practitioners belong to Prajāpatī, Awāl, Suwāl, Duwāl, i.e. agriculturist castes of intermediate status in the hierarchy. Each group is placed under the supervision of a leader, a function that is normally assumed by the pyākhā guru, dancing master. There is no song to accompany the performance, only music (drums and cymbals).

The characters include the usual goddesses of the Newar Hindu pantheon (Mahālakshmi, Kaumarī, etc.) as well as Bhairav, the fearsome form of Shiva. Devī pyākhā dances from Bhaktapur (and Panauti) are renowned for the voluminous crowns and streamers of various kinds that top gods and goddesses' masks. In some cases, the crown includes circular, triangular or diamond-shaped crests made of coloured paper or fabric,

which match the robe and extend several feet into the air. These decorations, ornamented with peacock feathers and mirrors, are an essential part of the whole attire. These crowns (or tiara), mukuta, topping the mask are sometimes as large as the mask itself. They may be inlaid with precious stones. All the masks are made of clay.



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

Each troupe also features one or two skeletons kavā (kawācā, or kākāl in Nepali). This costume is normally made of black cloth decorated with bones and comes with a white mask to cover the face (Fig. 20). Their associate, the jostler khyāh, an ape-like hairy creature wears a black cowl over his head; he is dressed in a black woollen pelisse, that gives him the appearance of a bear, with a red tongue dangling from his mouth. Both perform a series of acrobatics on stage. They tumble and roll over the floor. Occasionally, they rush around making scatological gestures at young ladies in the audience. Devī pyākhā troupes also include half-naked, masked forest demons, sincā or jāgalī, with long hair made of jute and bells attached to their calves. Let us not forget betāh (Skt. vetāla), Bhairav's demonic agent that wears a yellow mask; he is a flesh-eating creature that haunts burning pyres and he belongs to the Shiva troupe (Fig. 30). Today still, dogs, a pair of lion/tiger sher-singha (one wearing a white mask, the other a yellow mask) (Fig. 19) and a peacock, mhaykhā, (Fig. 22) are to be found in these troupes just as in Penelope Chetwode's old photographs.

Act 4 – The revival of an ancient choreographic tradition : Devī pyākhā from Panauti

Over the centuries, goddess dances from Bhaktapur have spread to at least two neighbouring settlements: to Sankhu in the north, about 10 km as the crow flies, and to Panauti (Panti), in the south-east, about 16 km by road. In these two small cities, Devī pyākhā masked dances still take place several times a year. In both cases, the performance has adapted to local religious realities and cults. Contrary to Bhaktapur, for instance, in these two typical Newar cities, the respective Devī pyākhā dramas are not only celebrated during Gāi Jātrā and Indra Jātrā but are also performed at other times of the year, especially during the Dasain festival. They are closely associated with the cult of Vajrayoginī (in Sankhu) and of Asta Mātrikā (in Panauti) respectively. They have consequently evolved towards more sacred dances than in Bhaktapur today. In Sankhu, Devī pyākhā is the responsibility of families belonging to the Shrestha caste. In Panauti, it comes under the Suwāl and Prajāpatī castes as in Bhaktapur.



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

The existence of seven old stone stages (dabū) specifically devoted to theatre and dance in the city of Panauti testifies to the importance of these cultural activities in this Newar settlement since at least the Malla period (thirteenth-eighteenth century). One of them is reserved for the Nava Durgā troupe from Bhaktapur, which comes to Panauti every year, as mentioned before. Another is set aside for Jala pyākhā, the masked troupe from Harisiddhi (Jala), a locality in Lalitpur district, which has its own repertoire and is well known for its itinerant performances in the Kathmandu Valley once every twelve years.

According to local folklore, Devī pyākhā was created in Panauti to protect the city from cholera, an epidemic commonly associated in Indian thought with the wrath of Durgā/Devī. In other words, it is linked to the cult of the goddess. Another legend speaks more specifically of a demoness who lived in Sunthan Danda, a neighbouring forest. She was very scary as she robbed and ate children. People promised to provide her regularly with meat but she once again started to attack children. They therefore decided to create a dance that would be performed every year to appease her. Today still, the head of the troupe has to throw a straw effigy of a demoness into the confluence of the rivers marking the site of the city, no doubt in connection with this tale.



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

The troupe comprises eight main masked characters: Bhaila dyah (Bhairav), Mahākālī, Vārāhī, Kaumārī, Ganesh, Māheshvarī, Brahmāyanī, Indrāyanī. These gods and goddesses are accompanied by skeletons (kawā), demons (rākshas), betāh and khyāh who jump and roll around on the floor (gwara-gwara tulegu), and from time to time by a dog, khicā. All together, they form a troupe of eighteen characters, including the musicians. Generically speaking, the group is called dyah gana or gā-chi (Fig. 23) In the past, Vishnu, various evil beings, daitya, and one particular part, that of Digambar, were also incarnated. However, today these parts have been dropped. The characters used to dance all together and separately, one after the other. The troupe is headed by local representatives of the Prajāpatī (Potter) caste. Most of its members, including the 'master of dance', pyākhā guru, belong to this community or to the Suwāl agriculturist caste.



Fig. 28

The Panauti Devī pyākhā takes place three times a year: on the seventh day of Bhādau (July-August) to call for rain; one day after the full moon of Bhādau, i.e. during the local Indra Jātrā; and, more importantly, during Dasain (Mvahnī) in the month of September-October, the main Asta Mātrikā and Nava Durgā goddess festivals. At these annual events, the troupe dances on the seventh (Mahākālī pyākhā only), ninth and tenth day of the festival. The troupe either moves around the city dancing or performs at specific places, such as in front of the Brahmāyanī dyah chen (temple of the goddess) or in the Indreshvar temple courtyard. At these two locations, special stages dabū are permanently set up. The dance always starts with the masked dancers making an offering to the local Nāsaahdyah temple. This god, a form of Shiva, is the main deity of

music and dance. He is worshipped before any masked performance. Then and only then can the play be performed (pi-thane, lit. 'to drag outside') to the audience.

When the whole dance is executed, it narrates the story of a long chaotic fight between Devas (gods) and Daityas (demons), which is drawn from Pauranic literature. Several episodes, mainly in the form of danced duels, are performed. In the first part, Daityas are invincible. They have been granted a favour by Shiva and cannot be defeated. The Devas then turn to Vishnu and implore him to put an end to the predominance of the Daityas who are causing so much damage to the earth. Vishnu accepts. He provides each god with a straight-bladed iron sword, tarvār, as well as the power to overcome their eternal enemies. Then a skeleton, kavāh, announces the death of the main Daitya to Digambar. Thereupon, Shiva symbolically gives the blood of the defeated chief, Daitya, to the goddess, Mahākālī. The latter expresses her delight with a dance she performs with a betāh. This duo is a key moment in the performance. The story is split into various scenes, drishyay. Flanked by two goddesses, Bhairav always opens the dance programme.



Fig. 29



Fig. 30

In one particular scene, each dancer holds a pātra skull-bowl in their hands and drinks what is said to be amrita, i.e. nectar of immortality (in fact rice beer), from it. The beverage in question bestows supernatural force on the actors. Despite this ritual, the mask wearers are not supposed to go into a trance as in Nava Durgā dances and like so many other dancing masked groups among the Newars. They do not drink the blood of animals. Only in worshipping Nāsaahdyah do the dancers sacrifice animals.

The musical instruments accompanying the group include cymbals and three kinds of drum: dhā, pachimā and khim. There is no trumpet, pvāgā. In fact, Devī pyākhā from Panauti is traditionally associated with a particular well-known set of nine percussion and wind instruments called nau bājā.

From the beginning of the 1970s onwards, this performance gradually died out mainly due to financial problems (the choreographic group has no landed property). During my fieldwork in Panauti during the period 1976-1980, I did not have the opportunity to watch this troupe, save the Mahālākī dance performed during the Dasain festival to welcome to the city phulpāti (bunch of flowers), which arrives from Panchkhal in the lower valleys, on the seventh day of the festivities. In 1988 it underwent a revival on the occasion of the first 'great festival', mahotsav, in Panauti, which was organised to celebrate the Makar Melā festival. Traditionally, the goddesses' dance troupe from Panauti was regularly invited by hill-dwelling Newars to perform in three cities: Birganj, Chitwan and Hetauda. It was therefore an itinerant troupe like the ones from Bhaktapur.



Fig. 31

Epilogue

All the masks discussed above are more or less sacred, alive and empowered, even when they are left unworn. In Newar traditional culture, the borders between sacred and profane are fuzzy and extremely porous. It is more a question of a degree than of an actual marked opposition. Totally desacralised masks are rare (except when they are to be found on the market) and even the most sacred performance never bars the way to comedy and clownery (Toffin 2011). The two poles, religious and secular, therefore embrace a number of intermediate situations in between. I contend that the main distinction is more between violent and benign forms of deities embodied in the masks.

The regular performance of these masked dances no doubt has a strong impact on the spectators, especially on children, who attend these programmes in large numbers brimming with curiosity and delight. The dances leave a visual imprint and enhance some of the basic features of the religion and of the culture to which they belong. They tie individuals to the group and inculcate in them the community's main values. But that is not all. The alternation on a regular basis of frightening performances (animal sacrifices, dancers drinking blood) and more peaceful spectacles fashions the sensitivity of the youngest members of the public. In psychoanalytical terms, through these images, children face and actually experiment with a representation of the basic polarity of their existence, life versus death. They are not watching a film, but a living performance. In this manner, masked dances are a way to conciliate the two extremes, a destructive drive on the one side, creative forces on the other, and to overcome any possible narcissistic pleasure when faced with brute violence.

This paper also highlights the intense movement of masks within the Kathmandu Valley. As noted in the case of Panauti, such a flow of dancers implicates other places in Nepal. It is worthwhile recalling in this respect that, in former times, Harisiddhi masked dancers (Jala pyākhā) were known to perform their duodecimal religious programme in Dolakha, three days' walk east of Kathmandu.

Moreover, a number of urban centres/bazaars in Nepal are partly populated by Newars and possess their own masked dances. The recent book (in Nepali and Newari) edited by G. R. Lachhi and S. R. Prajapati, 2006, includes, for instance, chapters on Banepa, Panauti, Pokhara, Dolakha, Chitlang, and Makwanpur, all localities situated outside the Kathmandu Valley proper. Some of these pageants are very old. The Bhairav dance from Pokhara, for instance, dates from Ranajit Malla (king of Bhaktapur from 1722 to 1769). It is likely that some Newar masked dances which have so far never been studied are or were performed in other towns in Nepal as well.



Fig. 32



Fig. 33



Fig. 34



Fig. 35

Furthermore, the lākhay (demon) masked dance, performed every year in August and September, with its typical red mask portraying a ferocious face, protruding fangs and squinted eyes (Fig. 31), is widespread in the hill region as well as in the Tarai to where Newars have moved and settled over the centuries. It is even known in far western Jumla (Fig. 33). These Newar supernatural beings are usually accompanied by a female demoness (lasi) and children who tease them (often called jhyālincā). These secondary characters are also masked (Fig. 32).

In other words, the masks of the Newars have no doubt had a tremendous impact on the masks that exist in the middle hills of Nepal, both in the east and in the west, and which belong to other ethnic groups. They themselves probably have been influenced by these masks from the hill region. Such reciprocal influences have to be taken into consideration when studying Nepalese masks. A number of artistic interactions have obviously taken place over the centuries. It must be understood that these images and figurative masked items have always migrated across space and over time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alsop, Ian, 1976, "The Masks of the Newars". *Orientalia*, September 1976: 52-57.

Amatya, Saphalya, 2000 *Religious Dances of Nepal Mandala (The Kathmandu Valley)*. Kathmandu, Cakam Davū.

Ittis, Linda. 2011. "Seeing the Unseen. The Dance of Harasiddhi Gods", in *Dabu Souvenir 2011, Harisiddhi*, 29-52.

Kropf, Marianna. 2003. "In the Wake of Commercialised Entertainment: an Inquiry into the State of Masked Dance-Dramas in the Kathmandu Valley". *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 30 (1), 53-103.

Lachhi, Ganesh Ram & Prajapati, Subhas Ram (eds). 2006. *The Masked Dances of Nepal Mandal*. Thimi, Madhyapur Art Council/ UNESCO (in Newari and Nepali). Levy, Robert & Rajopadhyaya, Raj Kedar, 1992. *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Newar Traditional City in Nepal*. Berkeley, California University Press.

Rana, Jagdish Samsher. 1989. *Nācgānako Rājdhāni Bhaktapur*. Dilli, Nirala. Toffin, Gérard. 1996. "A Wild Goddess Cult in Nepal: The Navadurga of Theco village (Kathmandu Valley)", in *Wild Goddesses in India and Nepal*. Ed. by Axel Michaels, Cornelia Vogelsanger, Annette Wilke, Bern, Peter Lang (series *Studia Religiosa Helvetica*, 1996, 2), 217-251.

Toffin, Gérard. 1999. "Possession, danses masquées et corps divin dans la vallée de Katmandou, Népal", in J. Assayag et G. Tarabout (eds), *La possession en Asie du Sud. Parole, Corps, Territoire*. Paris, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. 237-261. [Purushārtha, 21].

Toffin, Gérard. 2008. "Le saut du danseur masqué. Poétique d'un théâtre dansé népalais : le Kārtik Pyākhā de Lalitpur", in F. Pannier (Ed). *Masques et Art tribal de l'Himalaya*. Paris, Le Toit du Monde/Musée Cernuschi, 97-114.

Toffin, Gérard. 2010. *La fête-spectacle*. Théâtre et rite au Népal. Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'Homme.

Toffin, Gérard. 2011. "The Trickster in Himalaya Theatre and Folklore: Newar bāthahs", *Sangeet Natak Akademi Journal*, vol. XLV, No.3-4, 2011 (in collaboration with Shova Shakya), pp. 3-32.

Toffin, Gérard. 2012. "Jeu théâtral et acte rituel chez les Néwar du Népal. Une introduction au théâtre néwar", in Eve Feuillebois-Pierunek (ed.), *Théâtres d'Asie et d'Orient. Traditions, rencontres, métissages*. Bruxelles, P.I.E. Peter Lang ["Dramaturgies", 30] 141-164.

Toffin, Gérard. 2012. "Nepali Carnivals: An anthropological account", *Vairochana*, n°6, Kathmandu, pp. 93-95.

Toffin, Gérard. 2014. "Carnivals and masquerades", *The Kathmandu Post*, 11 August.

Toffin, Gérard. 2014. "Chemins du rire et des morts : carnaval, burlesque et satire au Népal", in Nathalie Gauthard (ed.), *Fêtes, mascarades et carnivals*. Montpellier, Éditions L'Entretemps.

Vajracharya, Asha Kaji. 1982. *Mallakālayā Ganpyākhā* (in Newari), Lalitpur, Ikhachen.

Vergati, Anne. 2000. *Gods and Masks of the Kathmandu Valley*. New Delhi, D. K. Printworld.

Viatte, François, Cordellier, Dominique & Jeammet, Violaine. 2014. *Masques, mascarades, mascarons*. Paris, Louvre éditions.

Abbreviations

New. means Newari (Nepā Bhāsā), Nep. Nepali, and Skt. Sanskrit. If not specified, the word is Newari. These vernacular terms have been transliterated in a simplified way. In the references to the photographs, the first figure refers to the page, the second one to the number of the photograph (ex : cf. Fig. 4.3)

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to François Pannier for having suggested that I publish this opuscle as a "Le Toit du Monde" newsletter. In Nepal, I must thank the photographer Prasant Shrestha from Panauti, as well as Sulochana Chwaju from Bhaktapur. In Patan, Raju Shakya, Uku Bahal (Rudra Varma Mahavira), himself a dancer and a teacher of caryā Buddhist Tantric dance, helped me in various ways during my research on Newar dance and theatre. Lok Citrakar, painter and gallery owner, checked some identities of gods in the photographs. I am also grateful to Laxmi Shova Shakya who translated some articles written in Newari on the subject and to Bernadette Sellers who revised my English. Ian Alsop made some further edits.