

**IN THE WAKE OF  
COMMERCIALISED ENTERTAINMENT:  
AN INQUIRY INTO THE STATE OF MASKED  
DANCE-DRAMAS IN  
THE KATHMANDU VALLEY<sup>1</sup>**

**Marianna Kropf**

Manifestations of goddess circles within the Kathmandu Valley are manifold. Most influential for their development and conception were locally shaped traditions flourishing within the Newar community. The goddesses, generally addressed as *mātrkā/māi* (Nep. 'mother') or *ajimā* (New. 'grandmother'), are present with their divine entourage in temples; they may additionally have their interrelated *pīṭhas* (Skt./Nep. 'seats') outside the boundaries of human settlements.

Newar towns are protected by a circle of *mātrkā*s, all conceived as fierce and ferocious emanations of the divine feminine. For their yearly festivals these goddesses are invoked into their procession images (*utsava-mūrti*) and installed on a wooden *ratha* (Skt./Nep. 'chariot') or a *kaṭh* (wooden litter) to be taken around and worshipped.

In some Newar towns and villages the *mātrkā*s further emanate in human form. Troupes of divine dancers, whose bodies serve as vessels (*pātra*) for the respective deities, appear with their own faces replaced by divine ones – the corresponding masks. Their dresses and other attire, their gestures (*mudrā*) and their movements express key features of the deity embodied. Traditional rhythms and tunes produced by an ensemble of instruments and human voices add to the uniqueness of these divine performances. Each one of the *gaṇḍyākhaḥ* (New. 'dance-drama/performance of a divine troupe') is seen to rely on its specific context, history and myths. Nevertheless they share some features, underlying concepts and structures which distinguish them from other genres of traditional dance or drama. The integrated ritual corpus is saturated with tantric elements – the dance-drama itself being but

another facet of ritual performance<sup>2</sup>. The conception of the body serving as a temporary receptacle of the deity for worship is immanent to tantric practice. But whereas the practitioner mentally invokes the chosen deity in private by specific techniques<sup>3</sup>, the masked dancers target a public; interaction with the audience is, to various extents, part of the performance. Every dance troupe follows a specific yearly and/or twelve-year cycle. Further prescribed by tradition are the actual localities chosen for performance; they are restricted to places within one village or encompassing wider circles, including neighbouring villages and the major towns of the Valley.

After an overview of the history of divine masked dances within the Kathmandu Valley, the main features of authentic *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* traditions will be sketched and arguments developed to distinguish these *authentic, self-contained* performances from *folkloric, representative* ones. Though all dance troupes face challenges from recent socio-structural changes in present-day Nepal, it will be shown that the capability to adapt is rather inherent in folkloric-representative troupes, whereas, considering their foundations, some of the authentic ones bear signs of at least a partial decline. The paper concludes with the prospects for masked dance performances within a society moving away from a self-contained social and cultural system towards an economically, ethnically and culturally open and competitive one.<sup>4</sup>

### **Authenticity versus folklore**

Observations of a variety of the masked dance troupes and their respective contexts give rise to hesitation to see them all as emanations from one and the same melting pot labelled 'folklore'.<sup>5</sup> Applied to a South Asian context, 'folklore' has sometimes been equated with oral traditions, or the term used to denote minor, locally bound traditions as opposed to a 'high tradition' with a body of respective canonical Hindu and Buddhist texts and teaching. Given its vague and pejorative semantics, and further considering its most controversial connotations within Western scholarly and political discourse, the term 'folklore' is best avoided – or must be redefined. Having done so, one may agree to talking about cultural traditions locally defined and unique to a specific community, such implying some kind of historicity and ongoing transmission from within. The concept of folklore further implies an insider–outsider opposition: on the one side, a specific community sharing a cultural tradition – its members, and among them the specialists being the heirs of the

tradition in question – on the other side, the outsiders, onlookers, the potential audience. A kind of self-consciousness that arises as a community – or even a nation – is confronted with and opposed to the other-ness of foreign communities, countries, or even continents. The framing of both can be flexible to some extent. Depending on the context, a Rai dance may be conceived as representing the traditional dance of the Mewahang Rai living in a specific region in eastern Nepal; or it may count as just a Himalayan folkloric dance if performed in Europe or Japan for an Asian Cultures event. For the purpose of this paper, folklore carries the above connotations, being used as a working term to designate some of the masked dances, namely those which are not part of authentic or self-contained traditions anymore, but are tending to develop into a cultural marketing product. Indeed, there are examples of masked dances having been promoted on the (inter)national market recently.

An overview of the research published so far on the masked dance-dramas within the Kathmandu Valley conveys some idea of the extreme complexity of these performing traditions. Any attempt to fully describe them by means of a linear, written account must fail. With few exceptions<sup>6</sup> all the studies available concentrate on one single *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* tradition, focusing moreover on specific aspects of it only. The Bhaktapur Navadurgā have so far proven the most attractive to foreign researchers.<sup>7</sup> Several other dances have provided research fields for single scholars.<sup>8</sup> The attention devoted by local researchers to *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* seems to be rather occasional and eclectic up to now. Accounts in the Nepali or Newari languages dedicated to the subject mainly concentrate on the Patan Aṣṭamātrkā, the Harasiddhi-pyākhaḥ and the Bhaktapur Navadurgā. In addition, investigations into historical documents relating to the dances as well as brief descriptions of specific dances are scattered in books, booklets, brochures and vernacular journals.<sup>9</sup>

Primary source materials are scarce. Several of the local 'chronicles of dynasties' (*vaṃśāvalī*, see below) mention the dances. The *guṭhī* documents preserved contain information on dates and material support for specific rituals and feasts that go along with the dances. Finally, some manuals relating to the dance-dramas are preserved in the National Archives in Kathmandu.

The knowledge of rituals and the performances themselves are highly specialised within the troupes. The initiated priests, dancers and musicians each preserve the secret teachings related to their functions. The details of the materials needed and the proper manufacturing of the masks, the metal

ornaments or dresses are known only to craftsmen long engaged in this work. Common rules, duties and regulations are intrinsic to the community as a whole. All these domains of knowledge and inherent responsibilities are kept alive mainly by oral transmission.

### **Historical references**

The beginnings of *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* can be traced back mainly to the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, one or the other of the Malla kings being reported as founder (see appendix). If one can trust the local chronicles<sup>10</sup>, a good number of the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* date back to Amara Malla, a king who reigned in Kathmandu from 1529 to 1560. He is said to have initiated the Rudrāyaṇī-Sikālī-pyākhaḥ in Khokana; further, the dance-dramas of Halcowk-Ākāśdevī, Tokha-Manamāījudevī, the Kathmandu Navadurgā dances of Pachali Bhairava and Bhadrakālī; and finally, the Kathmandu-Kaṅkeśvarī<sup>11</sup> and Kirtipur-Bhāgbhairava dance-dramas (Wright 1990, 205). The legendary origins of the Bhaktapur Navadurgā are traced back to Ānanda Malla, who "set up their images in proper places to ensure the security and protection of the town both internally and externally" (Wright 1990, 163), but it was Suvarṇa Malla, in power from 1487 to 1502, who initiated the Navadurgā's *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* in 1513 (ibid., 189). The same king is reported to have founded the Bode Mahālakṣmī-pyākhaḥ tradition.<sup>12</sup> A reference to Harasiddhi is found in a statement to the effect that in N.S. 495 (1375 AD) "the man impersonating the Goddess of Harasiddhi was possessed at Ekātavihār in Yarha" (Vajrācārya and Malla 1985, 64/158). This would support the tendency to identify Jala-Harasiddhi as the oldest masked dance tradition.<sup>13</sup> According to a legendary account given in the Mahālakṣmī-Purāṇa, at the time of their founding each of the three towns in the Valley was threatened by a demon, with the gods left helpless. When the latter approached the highest Śakti-Devī asking for advice, she created Mahālakṣmī to free Bhaktapur, Mahākālī to free Kathmandu, and Mahāsarasvatī to free Patan. The Bhaktapur Navadurgā, the Kathmandu Śvetakālī-Naradevī, and the Harasiddhi-Triśakti dances (here assigned to Patan), were initiated in praise of these goddesses (Divasa 1984, 8).<sup>14</sup> Besides such historical references and legendary accounts, a variety of myths elaborate on the origins of the *māṭṛkās* and their importance for the Valley and its inhabitants.<sup>15</sup> For each of the divine dance troupes specific sets of myths circulate among people familiar with the tradition. Shaped by local oral transmission, these stories refer to the

origins, identity and specific features of the deities impersonated, and their relation to the locality in question.

The historical references reveal a common feature, namely a relation to a specific king, who may have initiated a dance-drama in circumstances of distress, as a protective measure for his kingdom, because of a dream, or the like. Consequently, dance-drama troupes could expect support from the royal palaces. At the same time, they remained bound to a specific locality. They placed themselves under a leader or 'root deity' (Skt. *mūladevatā*), which was a specific emanation of the goddess. The myths and legends together with the executing power ascribed in general to tantric ritual performance account for the unique position of these masked dance traditions. Their cycles of performance on a this-worldly stage are associated with the maintenance or restoration of cosmic, divine order.

Besides the *gaṅḍyākhaḥ* traditions just mentioned, a good number of performances mainly entertaining in character were seen in the Valley. Stone inscriptions and chronicles reporting on the Licchavi period (4<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century) allow for the assumption of a widespread tradition of dance and drama supported by rulers. *Nāṭya-goṣṭhis*<sup>16</sup> are mentioned, while several Umā-Maheśvara icons of the same period show dancers attending the main divine couple (Pradhan 1985, 47–48). The Gopālārājavamśāvalī (Vajrācārya and Malla, 1985, 33/128) mentions King Ānandadeva (1308–1320) as having commissioned a play staged weekly. In the time of King Jayasthitirājamalladeva (1382–1395) another play, *Caturaṅga Rāmāyaṇa*, was staged (ibid., 62/157). A third play mentioned, *Bhairavānanda*, was shown in all three towns to celebrate King Dharmamalladeva's marriage, its inaugural performance being recorded for N.S. 503 (1383 AD).<sup>17</sup> Cundā Vajrācārya (1996, 9) gives an incomplete list of no less than nine dance troupes, which were invited from surrounding villages and from Kathmandu to perform at the Bhaktapur palace on the occasion of the *vratibandha* (a boy's initiation into manhood) of the crown prince during Bhūpatīndra's reign (1762–1769). Based on his source text, Vajrācārya states that the Malla royal palaces patronised a number of troupes which engaged in music, dance, and drama, including comedy, and which were occasionally invited to perform at the palace during festive celebrations of the royals. They were fed and sheltered, and sometimes generously rewarded by the palace (ibid., 32–35).

Some of those dramas and dances were and continue to be shown on specific occasions of the festival year. Siddhinarasiṃha Malla (king of Patan 1619–1661) initiated the yearly staging of stories in praise of Lord Kṛṣṇa in

the month of Kārtik (October-November), which have been known as Narasiṃha- or Kārtik-nāc up to the present.<sup>18</sup> The Devī-nāc of Kilāgaṭol in Kathmandu, performed during Indrajātrā, and th Mahānkāl-nāc of Bhaktapur, the latter performed on various festive occasions both in Bhaktapur itself and externally, should be mentioned in the same context.<sup>19</sup>

Even though their entertaining nature stands out, such performances still rely on the riches of an all-inclusive 'religious', dhārmic-śāstric tradition. If the ritual aspect has been of secondary importance, they nevertheless kept along the lines of sanctified aesthetics and divine dramatic plots found in authoritative texts<sup>20</sup> and modelled by oral tradition.

Two tendencies among the dance-dramas patronised by kings in the Valley are distinguishable right from their historical beginnings. While some seem to have emerged in response to a need for protection or a wish for increased communal prosperity, others were obviously initiated out of a genuine yearning for entertainment. The compositional materials – stories, plots, divine and mundane characters – were universally provided by the same all-encompassing tradition. However, the extent of ritual embedding, the effect striven for, the potential of power and inherent danger, and the degree of secrecy do differ from one dance-drama to another. The distinction between *ānuṣṭhānika* (Skt./Nep. 'concerning the worship of deities') and *manorañjanātmaka* (Skt./Nep. 'pleasing the mind and senses', 'entertaining') types of performance raised by Tulasi Divasa (1984, 6–7) applies to a large extent to the categories discussed here.

For the purpose of this paper, the features of the *gaṅpyākhaḥ* traditions of the *ānuṣṭhānika* type of performance will be outlined in order to substantiate their authentic and self-contained character and consequent reasons for their present struggle. One should bear in mind that each of the *gaṅpyākhaḥ* traditions, while relying on a common Newar-tantric background, has been moulded and reformed according to local contexts, which results in a unique pattern revealing itself for each of them. Therefore, none of the troupes will fulfil all of the criteria given below, but all will share some of them.<sup>21</sup>

### **Features of authentic *gaṅpyākhaḥ* performances**

Common to authentic *gaṅpyākhaḥ* performances is the dancers' complete merging with the deity. The dancers do not simply personify a specific deity, nor is their dance a devotional expression towards a god.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the Newar *gaṅpyākhaḥ* dancers all display artistic-expressive elements in a way

similar to how they were elaborated within Indian performance traditions, the latter based on a philosophy and practices first developed in the Nāṭyaśāstra.<sup>23</sup> Specific steps and movements (*cārī*, *maṇḍala*) and hand postures (*mudrā*) are used as modes of expression saturated with meaning.<sup>24</sup> But they refer to local, Hindu and Buddhist, tantric teaching rather than the paurāṇic-āgamic philosophical and ritual schools that evolved in various parts of India. Again, the Indian concept of *līlā* as a mode of playful action immanent to gods is not completely foreign to *gaṇpyākhaḥ* performances, but the prevalent understanding of these dances is as effective – and in most of the cases protective – acts.<sup>25</sup>

*a) The troupe: divinities, specialists and attributes*

The most striking attribute of the divine dancers are their masks, themselves deified and handled accordingly. They consist of a variety of materials, with selected clays as the primary raw material. Covering them with cloth, Nepali paper and pastes precedes the application of colours. Exclusively created, painted and repaired by the Citrakār (Newar painters' caste) the

masks need to be empowered by a series of rituals.<sup>26</sup> These include ceremonies similar to those performed for any icon or statue to be installed in a temple or family shrine.<sup>27</sup> And like icons, they are worshipped as emanations of the divinities they represent. At the end of a cycle, such masks may be stored, or else consigned to a fire as a consequence of the ritual death of the deities.<sup>28</sup>

Further attributes of the *deutās* (Nep. 'deities', commonly used to address the divine dancers) are their specific garments, ornaments and jewellery. The sword (Skt./Nep. *khadga*) is the most common among the weapons displayed. The elements of dance include specific movements, steps and hand postures (Skt./Nep. *mudrā*); rather than the voice, these bodily gestures are used as a means of expression.<sup>29</sup> The dancers are assigned a specific status from the moment of their first *dīkṣā* (tantric initiation). They variably keep additional rules in order to preserve their heightened ritual purity, they may observe to a restricted diet, specific clothing and hair-dress and a specified behaviour towards the community.<sup>30</sup> In villages like Khokana, Theco or Bode, becoming a member of the *dyahkalaḥ* (New. 'troupe of deities') means a life-long commitment.

The troupes not only consist of dancers, but also include a variety of further members responsible for the one or other office. The duties of the *guru* ('master' or 'teacher') are split within some troupes into the *mūl-guru*

(New./Nep. 'root teacher'), the *pyākhah-guru* (New. 'dance teacher'), the *bājā-guru* (New. 'music teacher'), the *mye-hale-guru* (New. 'teacher of the songs') and the *pūjā-guru* (New./Nep. 'master of worship'). Some places, such as Halcowk or Bode, just have one *guru*, responsible for teaching and coordination. The musicians are always part of the core troupe. The *dyahbuḥ* (New. 'bearer of the *mūdyah*' – see below) is another important member designed to the carrying and attending of the major deity invoked in a jar (Skt./Nep. *kalaśa*).<sup>31</sup> Specific carriers are appointed for each of the ritual items taken along during processions and displayed while performing.<sup>32</sup> There may be further members of inferior status responsible for the animal sacrifices and the preparation and serving of food to the divine *gana*.<sup>33</sup> Each of the dancers has one or two assistants, called *jvakālu* (New. 'helper') or *nāyā* (Nep. 'guide'). These are usually male family members not belonging to the core troupe.

Knowledge within most of the *ganpyākhah* troupes is divided among the specialists involved and not disclosed to others of the troupe or even to outsiders. Consequently, neophytes among the dancers or musicians are initiated and taught exclusively by their respective *guru*. The *gurus* are recruited from the senior members according to age or experience within the dance troupe. Minor duties are likewise transmitted to newcomers by the senior members in charge. Though the major part of the specialised knowledge relies on oral transmission, there may exist manuals with guidelines recorded for the staging sequences or some of the ritual acts.<sup>34</sup>

The dancers' *jāt*<sup>35</sup> varies to some extent with each troupe (see appendix). The *Gāthu/Gāthā* (gardeners and flower-sellers, alternatively called *Mālākār*, 'makers of flower garlands', *Māli* or *Vanmālā*) and the *Jyāpu* (New./Nep. also *Kisān* – farmers) are the most common, else there are *Putavār* (porters of royal litters), *Balāmi* (cutters and sellers of wood) and *Kumāi* (potters), all of low social status. Some of the troupes are recruited from higher-ranking *jāts* like the *Śreṣṭhas* and the priestly *Rājopādhyāyas*. The majority of the *jāts* belong to the Newar-Hindu tradition, but the Patan Aṣṭamātrkā offer an exception, with Newar Buddhist *jāts* of the highest status (*Vajrācārya* and *Śākya*) performing. Linked with all the troupes is at least one organisational body (Nep. *guṭhī*) responsible for all the duties related to the performance. The members of the *guṭhī* may be identical with the troupe itself. Further local *guṭhīs* may have secondary functions, and the governmental Guthī-samsthān, the governmental 'Guthī-Assembly' may provide some support in cash and goods.<sup>36</sup>



The number and identity of the deities embodied vary with every *gaṇa* (see appendix).

The goddesses generally joining the *mātrkā-gaṇa* include Brāhmaṇī/Brahmāyaṇī, Maheśvarī, Vaiṣṇavī, Vārāhi, Kumārī/Kaumārī, Indrāṇī/Indrāyaṇī, Cāmuṇḍā/Mahākālī and Mahālakṣmī.<sup>37</sup> Besides these classical names, a variety of local Nepali and Newari names are also current.<sup>38</sup> In some troupes only one or two of the *mātrkās* are part of the divine set, whereas in others they all appear on stage. They are led by Bhairava and Gaṇeśa and escorted by Siṃhini/Siṃhā ('lioness') and Vyāṅgini/Dumhā ('tigress'), the latter two acting as guardians and occasional fun-makers within the *gaṇa*. Further deities variously included are Mahādeva, Kumāra, Pārvatī and Gaṅgā, and additional emanations of Bhairava. The presence of a demonical figure, be it referred to as Daitya, Varṇa or Mahiṣāsura,<sup>39</sup> is indicative of the culmination of these performances, which enact the final triumph of the divine female over the demonic.<sup>40</sup> A Lakhe dancer<sup>41</sup>, semi-divine beings like the Kicā (New. 'dog') or the Kiśī (New. 'elephant'), or legendary figures like King Vikramāditya may complete the set of masked dancers.

Not all the deities belonging to the troupe are personified by dancers. Mahālakṣmī and Mahādeva are sometimes taken along as a small metal mask, and various reasons are given why they are not to be embodied. The demon god of the Bhadrakālī troupe is represented by a huge wooden mask. Further, among some of the *gaṇas* the *mūdyah* (New. 'root-deity') or *siphadyah/sipho dyah* (sometimes translated as 'oleander deity', for the flowers used to decorate the shrine) occupies a key position both in ritual and on stage.<sup>42</sup> This deity resides in a *kalaśa* installed in a moveable shrine on the dance platform. It is worshipped by dancers and public alike. All the offerings are first displayed to this deity. If animal sacrifices are performed, it is again to the *mūdyah* that the first share of blood goes. The identity of this deity is not disclosed generally. From the gathered descriptions of its character, one can assume that it consists of the essence of the whole of the divine troupe, conceived as its root or origin, or else, that it is the manifestation of a deity superior to all the ones appearing on stage.<sup>43</sup> The *kapālapātra* ('skull-vessel') or *mahāpātra* ('great vessel') represents another divine emanation within some of the *mātrkāgaṇas*.<sup>44</sup> It may be placed in front of the *mūdyah's* shrine as a recipient of offerings, carried as an attribute by one of the *mātrkās*, or appear as a key requisite of the dramatic plot. If rice-

beer<sup>45</sup> is distributed to the *gaṇa* by one of the gods, the *kapālapātra* serves as the drinking bowl.<sup>46</sup>

The *mohanī* vessel is another requisite to which divine qualities are attributed. It contains a black paste (made of collyrium and oil) which is exclusively used in tantric contexts. Its production involves another secret ritual process, empowering this substance to induce divine possession as soon as applied to the forehead of the dancers and their masks.

Finally, some of the musical instruments, especially the *khīm* or *dhamāi* drums, are held to be divine representations to which a supreme status is assigned, and they are worshipped accordingly by priests and devotees.

*b) The musicians*

The patron deity not only of artistic performances, but also of any creative activity or skill, is Nāsadyaḥ (New. 'God of music and dance'). Within the Kathmandu Valley tradition, he is regarded as a fierce form of Śiva.<sup>47</sup> Unlike the beautiful and philosophically highly inspired iconography of the South Indian Śiva-Naṭarāja or Nṛteśvara (Skt. 'King/Master of Dance'), Nāsadyaḥ is usually represented as one or three holes in the back wall of the numerous open shrines dedicated to him.<sup>48</sup> He is repeatedly worshipped by all troupes, from the beginning of the dance and music teaching sessions up to the performance proper. When the troupe goes on tour, he may be taken along in a *kalaśa* to be placed side by side with the *mūdyah* shrine.

The musicians of the *gaṇa* are equipped with a core set of instruments, including double-headed drums (New. *khīm* or *dhamāi*) sometimes decorated with rams' horns,<sup>49</sup> at least one set of small and big cymbals (New. *chusyā*, *tāh* and *kāy*), and two to eighteen elongated wind instruments (New. *pvamgā*, or the even longer *khāḥ*). The latter produce the invocatory sound for the deities to appear on stage. They are further blown to introduce the sacrificial and other core sequences of a performance.<sup>50</sup> More than just parts of a musical ensemble, these instruments are considered to produce divine sound, their divine 'voices' telling unique stories properly understood by gods and the initiated only. The same applies to the language of the songs, be they sung by the musicians or the corporeal deities themselves. This language is said to be *dyahbāe*, 'the sound of the gods', and not understandable by unqualified mortals.<sup>51</sup> The dancers themselves add to the acoustic tableau by jingling their *ghamgalās*, a number of small bells stitched to a piece of cloth or leather and worn on their ankles. During processions and key ritual acts,

the core set of musicians may be enlarged by a number of wind and percussion instruments played by members of the local musicians' *jāts*.

c) *Dramaturgy, performance and audience*

Every troupe has its own dance dramaturgy. While on stage, the Khokana- or Harasiddhi-pyākhaḥ will adhere to a given set of sequences – an orchestrated line of myths and legends, interrupted by worship sessions, rest periods, and sacrifice.<sup>52</sup> While these performances take a good day to come to the concluding acts, the Halcowk twelve-yearly displayed set of dances takes but one to two hours, including the final worship and offerings brought by the public. While 'alive', the Halcowk deities are formally invited by the Kathmandu royal palace to perform at Hanumāndhoka, and they further accept invitations from private families residing in Patan and Kathmandu. The Bhaktapur Navadurgā perform orchestrated sets of dances and sacrifices while on tour through the villages. They additionally stage a series of dances specific to the initiating and concluding periods of their annual cycle. The Bode dances concentrate not on stage performance, but on continuous processions, completing various prescribed tours around the village within one day and halting at every major temple for a specific set of dances. They always keep in line, never altering the sequence of deities. Not that they abjure divine mythical enactment, but they do not stage a drama-like succession of acts.

As noted above, common to all the troupes is an obvious or underlying archetypal plot of a demon threatening the worlds of humans and gods alike, and the goddess overcoming the destructive invader. The demon is usually depicted as an out-and-out enemy, but also sometimes as an ambivalent character caught in the double identity of lover and foe.<sup>53</sup> Such a basic scenario of the divine feminine opposed to the demonic is known not only from the *Devimahātmya*, but also from innumerable vernacular versions of a similar plot. Seen from this angle, the buffalo sacrifice as a culminating scene can at least partly be understood as a re-enactment of the goddess's final victory.<sup>54</sup> Animal sacrifices to ferocious tantric deities are common practice, with the blood as primary offering being sprinkled on the deity's image. When such tantric deities are embodied, their drinking of blood from its dying source is another variation on the same sacrificial pattern. The sacrificial part of the performance will always be one of the culminating points, and one sure to draw an audience. Bhairava generally acts as the executioner – he strikes with either his or the *mūdyah*'s sword. The number

and identity of the deities joining in the blood-drinking sequence again varies. In Harasiddhi no more than three deities (Kumārī, Bālkumārī and Bhairava) will attend; in Khokana they are Kumārī, Vārāhī, Ajimā/Mahākālī and Bhairava. In Parphing, Kālī alone drinks from a sacrificed goat's neck, after its slaughter at the hands of Kumārī. As for the Bhaktapur and Theco Navadurgā troupes, all deities but Maheśvara will come on stage to claim their share.

Common to most *gaiṅpyākhaḥ* performances is frequent interaction with the audience. The divine dance includes breaks for worshippers to come and offer *pūjā* (worship including the offering of flowers, light and incense at a minimum) to the gods on stage. Even during the dances proper, people may flock in for worship. Individuals and families do so, along with *ṭol*<sup>55</sup> and further local associations. The number of offerings and animal sacrifices presented to the dancing gods varies considerably from place to place. Sometimes, as in Theco or Khokana, elaborate offerings including sacrificial animals, build up. Moderately wealthy families may seize the opportunity of the *pyākhaḥ* to offer a meritorious *pañcabali*.<sup>56</sup> But while in Jala more than fifty ducks and twenty-five goats' heads may pile up in front of the *mūdyah* shrine at the conclusion of the *bali* ('blood offering') sequence, the Halcowk *deutā* received, at the last opening of their twelve-year dance cycle in 2001, just some casual *pūjā* offerings – at the most boiled eggs – from the audience.<sup>57</sup> The divine dancers for their part may distribute five-coloured thread (New. *pasūkā*) or flowers from the *mūdyah* shrine as blessings. They may also accept invitations to private houses, where they are served to their heart's content. Some of the divine dancers, the Theco Bhairava for instance (who is said to provide male progeny to families hitherto deprived), are especially invited for their miraculous powers.

The dance days are a meritorious time for women to keep vows (Nep. *vrata basne*) – they may observe full fasting, perform an offering of one hundred eight lights (Nep. *eksau-āt battī bālne*) or continuously worship the dancing gods during their performance.<sup>58</sup> In Jala, the *vrata basne* women will sit all day in front of the performing gods, moving onto the dance area time and again for another *pūjā*. In compensation they will get a special *prasād* (food offering blessed by a deity) by the gods at the conclusion of the day. And whatever their wishes, they are said to be fulfilled.

Animals are not only offered by the audience; they are a basic part of the material support provided by the Guṭhī-saṃsthān. In the beginning, the troupes were patronised by the Malla kings. For performing in front of or

even inside the palaces, they could expect material support and agricultural land grants in return. Despite the coming to power of the Śāha kings in 1769, this kind of relationship was continued. The fundamental changes in the political system about half a century ago implied a loss of feudal rights formerly held by the king. With the Guṭhī-saṃsthān, a new governmental framework was created to control the income of the now nationalised *guṭhī* lands and the redistribution of the latter. As far as the *gaṅṇyākhaḥ* are concerned, the Guṭhī-saṃsthān mainly supports them with goods and cash for rituals and related feasts, while another governmental organisation, the Purātattva-vibhāga (HMG Department of Archaeology), charged with preserving the national heritage, may contribute some money to cover expenses for masks, ornaments and dress. At least in recent times, these contributions are said, in all cases inquired about, to have been insufficient to cover the expenses. This entails an additional financial burden for the local *guṭhīs* responsible for the performances and the manifold related duties. In some villages each household is expected to contribute goods and cash, regularly collected by the *guṭhī* members.<sup>59</sup>

Still, the traditional relation to the king is not completely given up. A delegation of the dancers' *guṭhī* will, before starting a new cycle, ask for permission from the king by formally appearing at the Nārāyaṇhīti Palace to hand over a *kisli*<sup>60</sup> to an official and to worship at various shrines inside the royal premises. The *dabhus* or *dabalīs*, the traditional performance platforms of royal palaces, are still used by all the troupes performing in one of the royal towns of the Valley, even though, except for Kathmandu, there is no king anymore who might attend. One instance of concrete interaction between the king and the divine dancers has been continued up to the present in Kathmandu: the *kaḍgasiti*, the ritual 'exchange of swords' with the king, is a key feature of the Bhadrakālī and Pachali Bhairava twelve-year dances (van den Hoek 1994, 387–388).

#### d) Layers of interpretation

Hand in hand with all the dances goes a multi-layered potential of interpretation. This becomes obvious if only trying to identify the deities involved. Even the *mātrkāḅaṇas* of Bhaktapur, Naradevī or Patan, which may appear univocal as far as the identity of the deities is concerned, may assemble a sometimes distracting range of appellations. The identity of additional deities, like those represented by the *mahāpātra* or the *khim* drum, is not univocal either. And as if not enough of layers and connections hidden

before non-initiates, there remains the question of the *mūdyah's* identity and its relation to the divine *gaṇa*.<sup>61</sup>

Reading Linda Iltis' article (1987) might result in the impression that the Jala-pyākhaḥ, with a number of Buddhist deities and a Newar Buddhist Vajrācārya as the main priest, relies on Buddhist teaching. Along this line, Harasiddhi herself appears as one of the major *yoginīs* in the Valley, closely affiliated to Vajrayoginī of Sankhu. However, Rameshvar Maharjan, the son of the actual Kumārī-*deutā* in Harasiddhi, describes the Jala-pyākhaḥ as a purely Hindu-based performance, and he stresses the point by saying that the divine troupe is exclusively of *kāśigotra* descent. He understands the *mūdyah*, Harasiddhi or Jaladyah, as an androgynous deity, combining Hara-Śiva and his consort Siddhidātrī, the ninth of the Durgās, who is herself identified with Guhyeśvarī.<sup>62</sup> According to some ritual manuals related to Harasiddhi, Jaladyah carries another identity as Trīśakti-Devī. In this understanding the Harasiddhi *mūdyah* is the essence of the tripartite *śakti* goddesses Mahāsarasvatī, Mahālakṣmī and Mahākālī, who are also associated with Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva.<sup>63</sup> The lavishing between Buddhist and Hindu identities is found among several of the deities embodied. The Patan Aṣṭamātrkā, though representing the Hindu circle of mother goddesses, are not only worshipped for their protective power, but also for their association with the eight *mahāmayas* ('great hinderances') that one is to overcome according to Buddhist teaching.<sup>64</sup> Siṃhinī and Vyaṅginī, both outcomes of the Mahāyāna Buddhist pantheon, always appear as the attendants or guardian deities of the *mātrkā*s, themselves no doubt of Hindu origin. Taking another example of the Harasiddhi troupe, one and the same set of three dancers may be interpreted as Mañjuśrī with his two wives by some, whereas others see them as Śiva with Phucamājyu and Jhīcamājyu.<sup>65</sup> Both identifications are based on classical as well as local myths.

The association of the *deutās* embodied with specific deities of the surroundings reveals another layer of understanding. Each of the members of a *gaṇa* may be ascribed to a specific temple of its own, and several legendary accounts in respect to its whereabouts may circulate among the local communities.<sup>66</sup> To some extent, such relations may be reconfirmed ritually, e.g. when the dancers initially visit the temple of the deity embodied for worship.

On still another level, the *gaṇpyākhaḥ* deities are identified with deities and divine plots provided by Hindu classic texts. The respective stories

known from epic and paurāṇic sources are then enriched with additional, locally emerged mythical elements.

The foregoing may suffice to show that the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* do distinguish themselves in various aspects from other dance performance genres (Nep. *nṛtya-nāṭak*) enacted in the Valley and variably characterised as *dhārmika*, *śāstrīya*, or *saṃskṛtika*.<sup>67</sup> They go beyond mere stage plays in their attempt to achieve a complete, 'authentic' performance. Through practice and rituals the dancers prepare their bodies to become suitable 'recipients' of the divinity they are to incarnate. Consequently the deity embodied is worshipped during the performance as a consecrated image would be. The sequences shown in public are but another ritual part of the total performance of the divine troupe. Though performed for their ritual (protective or cosmological) effects, the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* troupes of an authentic type still contribute a valuable share to the whole of cultural artistic expression. Not at least for their tantric embedding – implying the conception of the divine *gaṇas* as fierce and potentially dangerous ones – a flavour of mystery to the non-initiate is part of the attraction radiating from their performances.

### Aspects of a transitional period

In their introduction to Indian performance traditions, Richmond *et al.* (1993, 8–12) distinguish five interlocking spheres of influence: the classical, the ritual, the devotional, the folk-popular and the modern. The characteristics outlined for the category of 'ritual performance' are seen to apply to the masked dances being discussed here. These dances do serve a specific function. They are performed mainly for a ritual end – which ultimately implies reliving the cosmological concepts of inherent cycles of renewal and the overcoming of evil. They have a highly elaborate structure, the performance itself being only one part of the total ritual complex, which calls for a division of specialized functions and duties. The elaborate investiture, especially the masks, and the worship of the dancers as deities by the spectator-participants, are further aspects seen as specific to this category of performance. The last characteristic given is important for the following discussion: "*Ritual performances, once established, remain relatively closed systems, in which a specific sequence of events must be precisely enacted in order for the efficacy of the ritual to be attained*" (op. cit., 10–11). This implies a limited flexibility for the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* troupes in terms of adaptation to a changing environment. Nevertheless, like any living tradition, the dances

have been subject to change. The historical references to Harasiddhi provide evidence of long-term interruptions of the masked dances more than once.<sup>68</sup> Along with names variously attached to the main deity there must have been divergent opinions among the *gurus* – Vajrācāryas and Rājopādhyāyas in turn – on the correct understanding of the dance and the corresponding ritual corpus, which seems to have vacillated between Newar-Hindu and Newar-Buddhist predominance.

Such internal ideological discrepancies may further have induced change within the Bode-pyākhaḥ. This performance is mentioned in the early sources as 'Mahālakṣmī nāṭak',<sup>69</sup> but nowadays everybody calls it Nīlavārāhī nāc. As each of these two goddesses has a temple in present-day Bode, one can but assume that at some point in time, a struggle over their hierarchy resulted in the change of focus and name.

In her study on Khokana's social organisation, Silke Wolf elaborates on the potential for conflict inherent to social bodies. As she shows, the *pyākhaḥ*-related organisations, though hierarchically structured, are made up of individuals who at times come to divergent opinions, whether for reasons of honest difference or personal interest. In fact, in the case of Panauti, quarrels among the core members of the troupe were the major reason why the dance was discontinued in 1965.<sup>70</sup>

Recent times have induced new kinds of modifications, which on the whole are of an irreversibly degenerating nature as far as the whole of this performance genre is concerned. Particularly noticeable to an outsider is the decreasing number of performances by several of the troupes. Up to a few decades back the Harasiddhi dancers used to maintain an extensive schedule of performances during their twelve-year cycle, including appearances in Bungamati, Khokana, Deopatan, Patan and Bhaktapur (twelve performances each), and also Sangha, Dulikhel, Panauti, Dholaka, Lubhu, Thaiba, Chapagaon and Nakati.<sup>71</sup> Of all these places, Dulikhel alone was left in recent times.<sup>72</sup> The Bhaktapur Navadurgā have been skipping several of the villages previously visited during their yearly tour. For the last two years the Theco Navadurgā have contented themselves with going just for one day to Patan, rather than staying there for several nights as they used to do. They have further refrained from going to Chapagaon. The Bode Nīlavārāhī troupe has discontinued visiting Paśupati, Bhaktapur and Nagadesh during their years of *gaṇa pherne*.<sup>73</sup> The Sankhu *devīs* now perform but one night a year, whereas in former times they were invited to many more places.<sup>74</sup>



A fact rather hidden to the outsider is lamented by elders who have had long experience with the dances. According to them the traditional (tantric) teaching is losing its hold. The *gurus* may still treasure this centuries-old knowledge, but their pupils of a younger generation are no longer committed in the same way. As a consequence the dance movements, the *mudrās* and steps, each designed as highly meaningful and efficacious patterns, are increasingly turning into a series of rather cursory and sloppy ones. The shivering (New. *khākegu*) of the dancers, according to them an effect induced by the deity entering the dancer's body, tends to become a purely theatrical gesture.<sup>75</sup>

With the interruption of traditional teaching, some troupes face serious problems in recruiting new dancers.<sup>76</sup> The rhythm of modern life with its modified ideals and goals is gaining the upper hand, especially among the urban young. Such requirements as regularly attending classes and finding a permanent occupation have had their impact on potential dancers. Consequently, not only are the training periods getting shorter, but also young initiates are increasingly alienated by traditional learning.

The problems do not stop here. Time frames, venues and routes traditionally prescribed in detail are not consistent with present-day realities either. Attending week- or night-long staging does not fit into modern working or college schedules; consequently, the audience decreases. The performances shown on dance platforms inside town cause bad headaches to the traffic police. Former procession paths may appear to have been blocked by houses or army camps, or else they have turned into one of the overcrowded streets of Kathmandu Metropolitan City.

The commitment and strain required of the whole of a *gaṇa* to present the performances no longer pay in terms of the appreciation and recognition accorded by the general public. Such is an often heard complaint by the troupes' members. Together with a growing disinterest goes the lack of support and material offerings formerly received from the population and local governmental or private institutions in the towns visited. Two major reasons are given for the decreasing generosity towards the *pyākhaḥ* on the part of the audience. Though the economic situation of many people has improved as compared with earlier times, income is more reluctantly invested in offerings to the dancers, in view of multiplied expenses and alternatives to spending one's savings. Second, the dance performances, once a welcome occasion for entertainment, are nowadays competing with mass media, television being the most potent one. A further deplorable fact is the decrease

or even cessation of material and cash support from *guṭhī* sources. This is not surprising, since the *guṭhī* lands of both local and state-controlled *guṭhīs* are increasingly being handed over to private owners, and unless alternative income sources are made available to fill up this gap, the troupes are left with the choice either to add up from their own pockets or to mutilate or drop at least parts of their ritual and performance duties.

The increasing confrontation with foreign elements that have forced their way into what was formerly a mainly self-sustained community further heightens any already precarious identity crisis. The conviction that the deities are embodied in the dancers is senselessly called into question before a foreign public. Killing animals, and even more so drinking their blood, may provoke a mixture of shame and anxiousness among the local community. A reluctance to perform any kind of animal sacrifice is gaining ground not only from outside, but even from within, particularly from the urban upper-class Newar community, and this increasingly serves to create a rift with the lower classes and rural communities. The *narabali*, the sacrifice of humans to the gods, may then be played out as an exotic joker. Such practice is legendary for several of the masked dances, supported by scattered hints in the local chronicles.<sup>77</sup>

The "No photo!" commands have become legend with some of the troupes. Concerning the Bhaktapur Navadurgā, there are a number of incidents reported of cameras being smashed by the deities themselves. Sometimes it is the local onlookers rather than the *deutās* who issue the ban on pictures as soon as a foreigner is spotted, although a video-camera with a simultaneous display screen may at other times appear as a special attraction rather than a menace. One may recall the fact that traditionally any substance belonging to a person, and more so a picture, was feared to fall prey to abusive magicians. This cannot hold for gods, though, and the ban is rather explained by the intrusion itself and a notion of something beyond control happening and being carried away.<sup>78</sup> The idea of detaching and replicating of a unique tradition, be it in the form of pictures or even movies, puts its authenticity in peril.

Such ambivalence in terms of self-understanding and identification accounts for unreflected and wavering attitudes not only towards one's own tradition, but also towards intrusive foreign elements.

To sum up: It becomes more and more difficult, if not impossible, to keep up traditions that on occasion presuppose a society organised and functioning centuries back. The younger generations outgrow traditional patterns of life

embedded in an all-encompassing belief system. Modern educational and working schedules, multiplied interests and entertainment possibilities among the general public, and an ambivalent position towards one's own cultural heritage may well cause a gradual collapse of traditions like the one discussed here.

The *gaṅḍyākhaḥ*, having grown out of and relying on a self-contained, supportive community and a worldview that are no more, are obviously in peril. Therefore, the question of continuity within the present social and economic conditions is an urgent one.

### **Potentials from Within**

The two categories of masked dance traditions of the Kathmandu Valley here distinguished – one focussing on its entertaining, the other on its ritual effects – have many aspects in common. They use similar dress, masks and attributes. They are performed by a specific community. They refer to a shared history and religious tradition. The legends related to both are interwoven with local lore specific to the deities enacted and their mythical origins.

But then, as outlined in the table below, the two genres can be distinguished with respect to several criteria, which have a crucial impact on their flexibility in adapting to present-day exigencies.

| Criteria                                 | Authentic/ self-contained/ closed performance ( <i>ānuṣṭhānika</i> )                     | Folkloristic/ open performance ( <i>manorañjanātmaka</i> )                                       |
|--|--|--|
| relation between performers and audience | closed circle, self-contained, interaction-based   | open circle, public-oriented, representative   |
| goal of performance                      | religious  | entertaining   |
| ritual impact                            | high   | low  |
| Secrecy                                  | high   | low  |
| knowledge transfer                       | following strict rules, from <i>guru</i> to initiated new member only                    | disclosed to community members and interested outsiders  |
| participation specialists                | restrictive, bound to one's <i>jāt/ thar/ family</i> defined by tradition, authoritative | open within the given community selected among the most knowledgeable within the local community |
| time of performance                      | bound to lunar day/ month/ year/ twelve-year cycle                                       | not time-bound   |
| place of performance                     | bound to traditional ritual and performance venues                                       | not place-bound  |
| adaptive will                            | limited  | potentially active   |
| adaptive capacity                        | narrow   | potentially wide   |
| commercialising tendency                 | none   | potentially great  |

*Criteria distinguishing the two types of authentic/self-contained versus folkloristic/open performance*

The dances of the *manorañjanātmaka* genre, given their inclination towards entertainment rather than a ritual goal, did not develop the same rigidity in terms of structure, authoritative teaching or accuracy of performance as found among the *pyākhah* troupes of the ritual genre. Therefore, they have an inherent adaptive potential, for example, to widen the frame of performance time and place, and to adapt their programme content to the expectations of the audience, or they may chose to develop different sets of dances displayed according to circumstances. Within the present-day social context, they tend towards a *folkloristic, open* performance type rather than an *authentic, closed* one. Therefore, this category has the opportunity to open itself up to alternative forums without betraying its major values. The dancers may appear, for instance, on the same stage with modern theatre or folkloristic dance troupes. They may even, up to a certain point, opt for commercialising themselves as a cultural product of the country. The Mahānkāl-nāc, for instance, did not deny invitations to Europe and Japan in recent years. Be it their choice or not, by performing in such alternative settings, they move closer to folkloristic groups such as those staging traditional Rai or Tharu dances for an anonymous public, and so represent their respective communities within the country and abroad.

Recent examples of a successful revitalisation of traditions by applying gentle reforms can be seen in the two *pyākhah* troupes of Patan-Lalitpur. Only a few years ago the Aṣṭamāṭrkā, after a break of some years, appeared anew on stage, now managed by a voluntary body rather than a traditional *guhī*, and with loosened restrictions in terms of *jāt* participation. Further the timing of the performances was adapted to the modern requirements of local publics, being rescheduled for the evening instead of late night hours.<sup>79</sup> For about thirty years the staging of the Kārtik-nāc had come to be reduced to two consecutive days a year only. In 1980 a committee was formed to restructure this dance-drama, which in former times had covered the whole month of Kārtik. The new organisational body succeeded in revitalising the Kārtik-nāc, which is now again staged on eight consecutive evenings, each with a variety of divine, mythical and comical plots.<sup>80</sup>

These two examples may be counted as traditions that have ventured onto a middle path: they did not give up their claim to being founded on a dhārmic – and in the case of the Aṣṭamāṭrkā, ritually effective – base; at the same time, they not only procured alternative operating funds, but also introduced newly adapted organisational and scheduling frameworks.<sup>81</sup>

For the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* troupes of the ritual or *ānuṣṭhānika* category proper, choosing to develop into a folkloristic type of performance would invite a complete break with their origins, their authenticity, their major *raison d'être*. Nevertheless, they are forced to face the present-day challenges. Given the above-mentioned signs of decline, they need to reconsider their present situation and possible measures to improve it. The question at hand for each of these troupes is how far they can allow change without giving up their identity. As long as the local communities remain loyal and identify with their *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* tradition, many problems can be solved. But with the opening of formerly self-contained, closed communities, the attitude of respectful appreciation no longer goes without saying. Where traditional structures are fading away, alternatives must be developed, both on the local and governmental levels.

One urgent task is the uninterrupted provision of necessary funds for the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* troupes. With the traditional bodies generating income for them losing their base on the local and governmental levels, a reformed schedule of systematic support is required.<sup>82</sup> Some of the troupes manage to get irregular financial support from one or another commercial body, or else occasional donations from individuals, whether local or foreign. With financial support from the local government, the Panauti Devī-nāc experienced a revival for the *Visit Panauti* tourism fair organised in 1999. Since then their yearly performance has been rescheduled for the seventh day (*Saptamī*) of the Dasain festival in autumn – given that the municipality provides the necessary funding, which must be decided every year anew. There being no assurance of the material and financial support needed until two weeks before performing, the body responsible for the performance faces problems in planning and preparations.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, if one wants to secure the continuity of the Panauti or any other traditional dance-drama, the covering of expenses cannot be left to chance in the long run.

Besides the question of alternative funding, there opens a potential of influence on the level of respect and appreciation for such traditions. The print and broadcast media reporting on local traditions increasingly influence the opinions of the general public. Such power and responsibility is to be wielded seriously. Further on, educational institutions are increasingly taking up tasks formerly fulfilled by the parental house. Given the teachers' influence on mind-making in the class room, the conveyance of esteem for the traditions of one's own country and communities may turn into a challenging matter.

Such considerations address attitudes towards *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* traditions and related practical, organisational and financial matters. Efforts on these levels do offer some potential for actively counteracting recent developments towards decline. The heart of the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* for its part, the traditional knowledge and experience within the troupe, and with it the continuity of or possible modifications to the body of ritual involved, remains the exclusive domain of the heirs of this unique tradition.

### Summary and concluding remarks

Along with a number of other regional genres of performance, the masked dance-dramas in the Valley can be classified as *dharmic* or *sāstric*, having developed out of a specific teaching and related body of authoritative texts and oral tradition. Unique to the authentic *gaṅṇ-* or *mātrkāpyākhaḥ* is their embeddedness in a centuries-old transmission of tantric teaching. Locally shaped practices are predominant, the corresponding knowledge being carefully dispensed by initiated specialists only. The staging is conceived as an extended form of ritual, with the publicly enacted sequences opposed to a corpus of further secret rituals. Though the dramatic plot and the deities enacted may refer to the Hindu or Buddhist classic traditions on one level, the close connection with a localised divine setting of the deities and their respective myths is what lies at its heart. The audience is an integral part of the performance, which implies, to a certain degree, interdependence in terms of ideological and material support. In their initial period, when they were closely associated with the kings reigning in the Valley, the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* troupes were granted royal support in exchange for their divine enactment, whose aim was to secure protection and continuity for the kingdoms and their inhabitants. For all its modifications time and again, be it for social, practical, political or ideological reasons, the current transitional period represents a new challenge for the troupes, namely to reconcile age-old ritual performance traditions with the influences of modern life, distracted as it is by multitudinous worldviews fed by an all-encompassing globalisation process.

The visible efforts to consciously engage in maintaining and encouraging the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* traditions have been few so far. Many more will be required to address current struggles of not only the *gaṅṇpyākhaḥ* troupes discussed here, but also a number of other cultural heritage treasures. A certain loss of their authenticity may be the price asked to ensure their continuity. The deplorable alternative would be watching such traditions either break down into insipid relics or else vanish as a whole.

**Appendix: Authentic *Gaiṇpyākhaḥ* troupes, deities embodied, *jāṭṣ* of dancers and historical references.<sup>84</sup>**

- ‘Mātrkāgaṇa’ refers to the Aṣṭamātrkā, the eight goddesses most commonly identified as Brāhmaṇī/Brahmāyaṇī, Maheśvarī, Vaiṣṇavī, Vārāhī, Kumārī/ Kaumārī, Indrāṇī/ Indrāyaṇī, Cāmuṇḍā/ Mahākālī, and Mahālakṣmī. They are led by Bhairava and Gaṇeśa, and further escorted by Siṃhini/Siṃhā and Vyāṅgini/Dumhā.
- The years given are AD.
- # introduces abbreviated bibliographical references (author’s name and page number).
- marks dances performed every twelve years only.
- ‘*Mūḍyaḥ*’ here denotes the main deity of a troupe; it may be embodied by a dancer (+) and/or reside in the *mūḍyaḥ* shrine (=) installed on the dance platform.

| Locality:<br>Gaiṇpyākhaḥ                            | Deities embodied/enacted  | Performed by<br>( <i>jāṭ</i> ) | Historical references                                      |
|---|---|--------------------------------|--|
| Kathmandu:<br>Bhadrakālī-/Lumaḍi-<br>Ajimā-pyākhaḥ* | <i>Mūḍyaḥ</i> : Bhadrakālī/ Lumaḍi-Ajimā (+ =)<br><i>Deities</i> : Mātrkāgaṇa. (Mahālakṣmī carried ahead as a small mask on a stick)<br>Add. Sveta-Bhairava embodied,<br>Daiṭya as a wooden mask-shield | <i>Gāṭhu-Mālākār</i>           | Initiated by Amara Malla<br>(1529–1560)<br>#Has61, #Wṛi205 |
| Kathmandu:<br>Pachali-Bhairava-<br>pyākhaḥ*         | <i>Mūḍyaḥ</i> : Pachali Bhairava (+ =)<br><i>Deities</i> : Mātrkāgaṇa   | <i>Gāṭhu-Mālākār</i>           | Initiated by Amara Malla<br>(1529–1560) #Has61,<br>#Wṛi205 |



|   |  |                                    |   |
|---|--|------------------------------------|---|
| <p><b>Kathmandu:</b><br/>Naradevi-/Śvetakālī-/<br/>Nyatamamaru-Ajīmā-<br/>pyākhaḥ</p> | <p><i>Mūdyah:</i> Naradevi/Śvetakālī/<br/>Nyatamamaru (+ =)<br/><i>Deities:</i> Mātrkāgaṇa<br/>For 12-year performance add. Daitya, Kumāra<br/>and Mahādeva</p>  | <p><i>Jyāpu-Kisān</i></p>          | <p>Initiated?<br/><br/>Initiated by Srinivāsa Malla<br/>(1661-1684)<br/>#Has69</p>  |
| <p><b>Lalitpur-Patan:</b><br/>Aṣṭamātrkā-pyākhaḥ</p>                                  | <p><i>Mūdyah:</i> not specified<br/><i>Deities:</i> Mātrkāgaṇa</p>   | <p><i>Vajrācārya and Śākya</i></p> | <p>Initiated by Srinivāsa Malla<br/>(1661-1684)<br/>#Has69</p>  |
| <p><b>Harasiddhi/ Jala:</b><br/>Harasiddhi- or Jala-<br/>pyākhaḥ</p>                  | <p><i>Mūdyah:</i> Bhavani/Trīśakti (=)<br/><i>Deities/characters:</i> Tāmvyāyāḥ Rikheśvara<br/>(Tāmanarṣi), Agni with two attendants,<br/>Ganeśa with Riddhī and Siddhī<br/>Maheśvara, Śiva-Maṅjuśrī, Phucamājyu and<br/>Jhīmcamājyu, Rāmacandra,<br/>Bali Rāja and Sugrīva (<i>daitya</i> brothers) with<br/>their wives, Rāja Vikramāditya, 4 Rājas of the<br/>directions, Mantrī, Rakṣasa/Lakhe, Kīśi<br/>Bhairav(ī), Kumārī, Bālkumārī</p> | <p><i>Jyāpu-Kisān</i></p>          | <p>Vikramāditya from Ujjain to<br/>#Wri131-132 Nepal<br/>Ref. to 1375 #Gop64<br/>Revived by Amara Malla<br/>#Has61, #Wri205.<br/>Reinstated by Amara Malla<br/>1654 #Ilt-88<br/>More ref. on this tradition:<br/>#Has70, 79, 89, #Pou63-64,<br/>#Raj2,10 (see Ilt-89)</p> |
| <p><b>Bhaktapur:</b><br/>Navadurgā-pyākhaḥ</p>  | <p><i>Mūdyah:</i> Mahālakṣmī (=)<br/><i>Deities:</i> Mātrkāgaṇa (Mahālakṣmī as small<br/>mask attached to the shrine)<br/>Add. Seto Bhairava<br/>Mahādeva carried along as mask</p>  | <p><i>Gāthu-Mālākār</i></p>        | <p>Initiated by Suvarṇa Malla<br/>(1513)<br/>#Has58, #Wri189</p>  |

|   |   |  |   |
|---|---|--|---|
| <p><b>Bode (Thimi):</b><br/>Nilavārāhi- or<br/>Mahālakṣmī-pyākhah</p> | <p><b>Mūdyah:</b> Nilavārāhi (+)<br/><i>Deities:</i> Bhairava, Gaṇeśa, Vārāhi, Kumāri, Siṃha, Dvārapāla (, Gaṇeśa, Vārāhi, Kumāri and Siṃha each embodied by 4 masked dancers)</p>  | <p><i>Śreṣṭha</i></p>  | <p>Initiated by Suvarṇa Malla (1513) #Has58, #Wri189. Further ref. to 1856 #Shre14-18</p> |
| <p><b>Kīrtipur:</b><br/>Bāghbhairava-pyākhah*</p>                     | <p><b>Mūdyah:</b> Bāghbhairava/Mahālakṣmī (=)<br/><i>Deities:</i> Mātṛkāgāna (with Gaṅgā instead of Maheśvarī),<br/>Kaṭi Mahādyah as small mask on stick</p>  | <p><i>Gāthu-Mālākār</i></p>  | <p>Initiated by Amara Malla (1529-1560) #Has61, #Wri205</p>                               |
| <p><b>Khokana:</b><br/>Sikālī-/Rudrāyaṇi-pyākhah</p>                  | <p><b>Mūdyah:</b> Sikālī-Rudrāyaṇi (=)<br/><i>Deities/characters:</i> Mātṛkāgāna Kumāra, Śakti Kumāra<br/>Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Mahādeva Hanuman, Gaṅgā<br/>Mahiśasura/Varṇa/Daitya and Lakhe<br/>Nāg-kanya and Nāg-kanyā, Dvārapāla<br/>Kal and Kica,</p> | <p><i>Jyāpu-Kisān</i></p>  | <p>Initiated by Amara Malla (1529-1560) #Has61 #Wri205</p>                                |
| <p><b>Theco:</b><br/>Navadurgā-pyākhah</p>                            | <p><b>Mūdyah:</b> Savadyah (=)<br/><i>Deities:</i> Mātṛkāgāna (Indrāyaṇi is fixed to the altar as a small mask)<br/>Add. Mahādeva.<br/>Add. Śvetabhairava only during 12-year performance</p>   | <p><i>Gāthu-Mālākār</i><br/>(previously<br/><i>Jyāpu?</i> – see<br/>Toffin 1996,<br/>220-21)</p> | <p>Introduced by Amara Malla (1529-1560) #Has62</p>                                       |

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| Sankhu:<br>Devī-pyākhah                  | <i>Mūdyah</i> : an emanation of the goddess (+)<br><i>Deities</i> : Devī, Caṇḍī, Bhairava   | <i>Śreṣṭha</i> and<br>others                         | Initiated?<br>2 Mss dated 1856 and 1863<br>#Shre-96                    |
| Tokha:<br>Manamāiju-pyākhah              | <i>Mūdyah</i> : Manamāiju-Ajīmā<br>(formerly (+), now taken along on <i>kaṭh</i> )<br><i>Deities</i> : Ajīmā, Gaṇeśa, Bhairava, Kumārī,<br>Manamāiju  | <i>Jyāpu-Kisān</i>                                   | Initiated by Amara Malla<br>((1529–1560)<br>#Has61, #Wri205            |
| Halcowk:<br>Ākāśabhairava-<br>pyākhah*   | <i>Mūdyah</i> : Ākāśa-Bhairavī/Ākāśa-Devī (+)<br><i>Deities</i> : Kumāra and Caṇḍī,<br>Bhairava, Gangā, Mahādeva,<br>Parvatī/Maheśvarī, Ākāśa-Bhairavī, Varāha,<br>Dakṣiṇakālī, Mahākālī  | <i>Putavār</i>                                       | Initiated by Amara Malla<br>(1529–1560)<br>#Wri205 #Has61              |
| Panauti:<br>Devī-pyākhah                 | <i>Mūdyah</i> : Mahākālī (+)<br><i>Deities/characters</i> : Bhairava, Mahākālī,<br>Vārāhī, Devī (2 masks), Mahālakṣmī, Kumārī,<br>Indrānī, Mahākālī, Gaṇeśa, Betaḷ, Mahādeva,<br>Viṣṇu<br>Puca, Kauvā (skeleton, 2 masks), Digambara,<br>Kyāg, Kica | not specified<br>(previously<br><i>Kumārī</i> only?) | Initiated ?<br>Restarted 1999 after a 35-year<br>gap                   |
| Parphing:<br>Kattī- (Kārtik-)<br>pyākhah | <i>Mūdyah</i> : Mahālakṣmī (+)<br><i>Deities</i> : Gaṇeśa, (Dakṣiṇa-)Kālī, Mahālakṣmī,<br>Kumārī, Indrānī, Nīlavārāhī, Bhairava,<br>Mahādeva  | <i>Balāmi</i>  | Initiated by Siddhinarasimha<br>Malla (1619-1661)<br>(acc. to locals ) |

### Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the *International Folklore Congress* organised by the *Nepali Folklore Society* in Kathmandu, May 5–7, 2001; I would like to express my special thanks to Tulasi Diwasa and C.M. Bandhu, to whom I owe the initiative to write this paper.
2. The term ritual is here used in a restricted sense, referring to a sequence of physical or mental actions prescribed by tradition and addressing non-human entities.
3. The invocation part of the daily ritual mainly consists of *dhyāna* (mental concentration on the deity's gross, outer form) and *nyāsa* (invocation of the deity into one's own body) with the deity's *dhvani* or *bīja mantra*, the 'seed syllable', which induces the subtle form of the deity.
4. The materials underlying this paper were collected during my ongoing stay in Kathmandu since January 2000. This has allowed me to attend several masked dance performances, to collect opinions from the public and to hold interviews with some members of divine dance troupes and their attendants. I have seen on stage at least once the *gaṇas* of Khokana, Harasiddhi, the Theco and Bhaktapur Navadurgā, the Kathmandu Naradevī, the Patan Aṣṭamātrkā and Narasiṃha dances, Pharping, Sankhu, Halcowk, Bode and Tokha. Occasionally I could further witness some of the folkloric performances during the Kathmandu Indrajātrā and Bhaktapur Gāijātrā. Detailed studies carried out in the past on several such performances were available to me. The results of consulting a varied assortment of *guthī* documents, manuscript catalogues and *vaṃśāvalis* are further taken into account. Finally I rely on discussions with people who, though at least in the narrow sense outsiders like me, have a much deeper insight into some of the performance traditions discussed here.

Technical terms, if not otherwise indicated, are given in Sanskrit, though they may be used in some modified spelling taken from vernacular languages. Newari terms are given in the most popular spelling only, despite the variety of alternatives circulating. Names of persons are given with diacritics, if they were encountered in vernacular languages only; if given in English spelling, they are reproduced in that writing.

I am very grateful to Philip Pierce for revising my English and notifying of further inconsistencies.

5. 'Folklore' or 'folk' are variably used when translating Nepali terms like *loka-sahitya*, *loka-gīti*, *loka-nāc*, *nāṭya-nṛtaka*, *loka-saṃskṛti*. Among local scholars, the terms are used to denote any kind of cultural production bound to a given community and as a category distinguished from classic dance-drama traditions, the latter mainly defined by including elements from canonical sources like the Nāṭyaśāstra or the Hastamuktāvalī (Śubhāṅkara 1969).
6. An overview of the masked dances within Newar tradition has, as far as known to me, only been ventured by Tulasi Divasa, and I am very grateful to him for having provided the pertinent articles to me. Gerard Toffin has investigated possession and masked dance traditions, with a focus on the Theco Navadurgā troupe, analysing the dances within a wider framework of Newar tantrism. Anne Vergati has contributed a study on masks and mask-making within the Kathmandu Valley.
7. To mention some: Robert Levy and Kedar Rājopādhyāya in *Mesocosm* describe their yearly cycle in the third part of their work titled "The dance of symbols", where they elaborately analyse the lunar, solar and goddess-related festivals in Bhaktapur. Niels Gutschow focuses on spatial orientations and conceptions of the two crucial goddess circles, the Aṣṭamātrkā and Navadurgā, and on their specific functions within the Bhaktapur tradition. Tordis Korvald wrote his M.A. thesis on the Navadurgā in Norwegian; in one of his articles, he elaborates on selected examples of the Navadurgā dancers' interaction with the audience (Korvald 1994). A recent study in Nepali by Puruṣottamalochan Śreṣṭha dealing with historical aspects, the yearly ritual cycle and the locally shaped tantric tradition at its base.
8. E.g. Jala-pyākhaḥ – Linda Iltis, Theco Navadurgā – Gerard Toffin, Kathmandu Bhadrakālī – Bert van den Hoek, Sankhu Devī-nāc – Bal Gopal Shrestha, Kirtipur Bhagbhairava-nāc – Reinhard Herdick, Khokana Rudrāyaṇī-Sikālī-pyākhaḥ – Silke Wolf (see bibliography).
9. A study of performance genres in Nepal and their history by Mrgendramansimha Pradhan is available in Nepali.
10. Several historical references to dance and drama performances are scattered in the *vaṃśāvalīs*. Three of these chronicles were translated separately by W. Wright, B.J. Hasrat and Dh. Vajrācārya/K.P. Malla; further published are the Devamālā-, Bhāṣa-, and Rājabhoga-vaṃśāvalī (see bibliography).

11. On the Kañkeśvarī and Raktakālī gaṅpyākhaḥ of Kathmandu, only historical references are left. The former was initiated by Amara Malla but soon discontinued (Wright 1990, 205, Hasrat 1970, 61–62); the latter is said to have been initiated by Siddhinarasiṃha (1619–1661) and Śrīnivāsa Malla (1661–1684).
12. See Wright 1990, 189. According to the historical account given by Shrestha (2000, 17), Bhūpatindra Malla gifted land and initiated a *guṭhī* to support the dance (the Wright chronicle and the Bhāṣavaṃśāvalī refer to the Bode dance as Mahālakṣmī-nāṭak).
13. The historical references assembled by Linda Iltis (1989, 147–150) prove its antiquity. They further show that this dance tradition experienced repeated interruptions and modifications down through the centuries.
14. A similar threefold allocation of the three goddesses is again found in the Devamālā chronicle, there ascribed to the initiative of Guṇakāmadeva, who flourished in the late 10th century (Divasa 1984, 8).
15. Regmi dates the beginnings of tantric worship back to the 10th or 11th century. Tantric deities, including the seven or eight *mātrkās* (Saptamātrkā, Aṣṭamātrkā) and the Daśamahāvīdyā, became very popular in the centuries to come. Many temples dedicated to groups of female deities, such as Kathmandu's eight Kālikās, Bhaktapur's Aṣṭamātrkā, and Patan's Aṣṭakumārī, belong to the 16th century (Regmi 1966, 576).
16. Skt. *Nāṭya-goṣṭhi* (Nep. *nāc-guṭhī*) denotes the organisational unit behind a performance. Among the Newar, it is only one of a variety of *guṭhis* that have been responsible for all kinds of social activities up to today.
17. These dramas are described in three papers published in *Pūrṇimā* (year 9, part 1), including quotes from the manuscripts relied on. Some of the dance and drama compositions are ascribed to the kings themselves.
18. In the Padmagiri chronicle, the Patan performances in Kārtik are recorded under the name of *Kṛṣṇalīlā* (Hasrat 1970, 69). Its present form dramatises several legends centring on the emanations (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu, without focussing on Kṛṣṇa, though. Further, the selection of stories acted out is decided every year anew. On the background to this tradition see S. Lienhard in Kölver 1992, 227–234.
19. The Mahānkāl-nāc of Bhaktapur, also known as Mahākālī-pyākhaḥ or Tridevī-nāc, was initiated by Bhūpatindra Malla, a king devoted to arts, at the beginning of the 18th century.  
Furthermore, the *devī-nāc* in its various forms, the Patan Narasiṃha-nāc, the Kathmandu Dasāvatara-nāc, the one or other *bhaila-/bhakku-*

*/bhairava-nāc* and the *lākhe-nāc*, all performed mainly during Indrajātrā, Gāijātrā and Dasain, can be assigned to the entertaining category.

20. The fact that the *Hastamuktāvalī* by Śubhaṅkara, an elaborate Sanskrit handbook on *mudrās* and *padas* (hand- and foot postures) and their expressive meanings, was published by the National Archives in Kathmandu in 1969, substantiates the familiarity with Indian classical performance traditions.
21. For a methodical discussion of 'gliding definitions' see Gaenzle 2000.
22. For a number of highly artistic Indian dance traditions of the *bhārat-nāṭyam* kind, the perfected performance of the dancer is conceived as his or her devotional gift to the deity.
23. For an introduction to Indian classical dance traditions see Michaels and Baldissera 1988.
24. For some examples of *cārī* and *mudrā* in Nepalese dance see Pradhan 1985, 9–21.
25. For an overview of both philosophical and performative concepts of *līlā* in Indian traditions see Sax 1995.
26. The process of mask-making for the Bhaktapur Navadurgā has been described in some detail by Jehanne H. Teilhet (1978). Anne Vergati includes the same example in her study on masks and mask-making in the Valley (Vergati 2000, 123–133, with further references given). The pertinent knowledge is transmitted within the Citrakār families affiliated to the dance troupes. At present, the masks of the Bhaktapur Navadurgā, along with those of the Boḍe and the Pharping *gaṇas*, are all made by Pūrṇa Citrakār and his family. The ones used in Harasiddhi, Kokhana and Theco are commissioned from Patan, while the Kathmandu and Halcowk troupes have their own Citrakārs in town.  
The mask-making is itself a ritual act and therefore bound up with many restrictions and ritual duties for the Citrakār involved (personal communication by Pūrṇa Citrakār, who kindly shared insights into the process of mask-making and its ritual links).
27. For the Bhaktapur Navadurgā see Vergati 2000, 123–133, and Teilhet 1978.

Several documents relating to the *Harasiddhi bāhra-varṣa-guṭhī* are preserved at the Guṭhī-saṁsthān in Kathmandu. One such document (file 453) from V.S. 1996 (1939) lists all the materials for the necessary rituals and related feasts as they were provided to the *guṭhī* responsible for the twelve-year performance. The sequence relating to the process of

manufacturing and progressive consecration of a set of new masks includes more than twenty ritual instances, including fire sacrifices, which were performed by the Citrakār craftsmen in Patan and by the *guṭhī* members themselves at various places in Patan and on the way back to Harasiddhi; for some rituals, a *Rājopādhyāya* priest was requested to perform on their behalf.

28. The Bhaktapur Navadurgā, the Kathmandu Bhadrakālī and Pachali dance troupes, and the troupe from Kirtipur burn their masks, whereas others keep and repair them, and even store them if replaced by new ones. Unique in this respect is the Halcowk tradition. There, after the completion of the twelve-year cycle, the masks are taken to the river for immersion during the monsoon (personal communication by the *naike*, the senior leader of the troupe).

The treatment of the masks is one key means of understanding the dance cycle as a whole. An elaboration of this would go beyond the limits of this paper, however. See, as an example in this direction, Bert van den Hoek's excellent paper on the final part of the Bhadrakālī twelve-year dance cycle and its interpretation.

29. Linda Iltis (1987, 205–211) has devoted part of her study on the Jala-pyākhaḥ to this topic.
30. Dietary rules may include abstaining from chicken meat, garlic and chilli peppers. One's hair may not be cut but is bound into a knot. Further possible restrictions include a partial prohibition of sex and limitations on social contact prescribed according to an intensified set of purity rules. The locality may not be left, and additional rituals may at times be prescribed.
31. The *kalaśa* (Skt./Nep.) is an earthen or metal water jar frequently used to invoke deities during ritual.
32. These items include a flag (Nep. *dhvaja*), a royal sceptre (Nep. *rājadaṇḍa*), oil-lit torches (Nep. *cirākh*), a ritual oil-lit lamp with a Gaṇeśa image (Nep./New. *sukundā*), and incense sticks or an earthen pot with hot charcoal for burning fragrant substances (Nep. *dhūpamakha*).
33. Nep./Skt. *gaṇa*, New. *kalaḥ* refers to the divine entourage of a specific deity. These are common terms used to designate the dancers' troupe.
34. A number of manuals relating to the Harasiddhi-pyākhaḥ are, exceptionally, available at the National Archives in Kathmandu. Some troupes, though they confirm that such texts exist, do not let them out of their hands.



35. *Jāt* refers to the social status group conferred by birth and associated with specific occupations. These latter are sometimes completely disregarded nowadays, though.
36. On the *guṭhī* as an organisational unit within Newar society see Gutschow 1982 or Levy and Rājopādhyāya 1992. Silke Wolf chiefly focussed her PhD study on the very complex organisational framework of the main yearly festival in Khokana village (about six miles south of Patan), of which the *Sīkāli-pyākhaḥ* is the most important feature (available on microfiche from the author).  
The *Guṭhī-saṃsthān* (also referred to as *Rāja-guṭhī*) is a governmental organisation founded in 1963 to secure financial and material support for rituals, festivals and temple *pūjās* deemed of general interest. Its income is still partly based on agricultural lands owned by the state. It is further allowed a state-approved budget.
37. For an inspiring account of local contexts, interpretations and meanings of the *mātrkās* see Hari Ram Joshi: *Eight Divine Mothers*, published in *Rolamba* 11.1, 1991 (3–11).
38. In Newari they are often addressed according to the main colour of their mask and dress (see Toffin 1996, 223). An identification with local, enshrined emanations of the *mātrkās* becomes obvious with *Kālī*. Even the public knows her as *Sīkāli*, *Dakṣiṇakālī*, *Svetakālī* etc. depending on the location of the dance. As for *Theco*, all the deities personified are associated with a specific shrine within the Valley which they initially visit.
39. *Daiṭya* is here used as a proper name, whereas in other contexts it denotes a class of demons. Alternatively, the demonic characters are all called *raḡsasa*, a term referring to another class of demons.
40. Though this theme is inherent to most of the *pyākhaḥ* performances to some degree, variants of it are explicitly staged only by the *Kokhana*, *Naradevī* and *Harasiddhi* dancers. This episode further constitutes the final act of the *Bhadrakālī-pyākhaḥ* – with a big wooden mask as *Daiṭya* on stage instead of a human *Daiṭya*-dancer. The drunken buffalo chased out of town and then sacrificed on the tenth day of *Dasain* – a part of the yearly initial period of the *Bhaktapur Navadurgā* – is again understood as an enactment of the victory over the demoniac. The buffalo sacrifices performed on stage are but another facet of the same theme, and they are an integral part of the *Kokhana*, *Kathmandu Naradevī*, *Theco*, *Harasiddhi* and *Halcowk* performances.

41. The Lakhe is conceived of as a demonic being, but of benevolent character as long as he is not teased. He wears a red mask showing a fearsome expression and a black wig of matted locks, a red dress kept with a girdle and jingles, which announce his wild approaching and spontaneous movements in the street. He often appears as a *solo* performer during public festivals mainly of the summer season.
42. The Sankhu, Bode, Panauti, Pharping and Patan Aṣṭamāṛkā and Nārāsiṃha dancers do not perform with a *mūdyah* shrine installed while on stage. In Tokha, the festival litter displaying Manamāiju and her divine *gaṇa* is taken around and referred to as *mūdyah*.
43. Attempts at a univocal identification are of a hypothetical nature. For Bhaktapur see, for example, Gutschow 1996, 197, Mānandhar 1991, 14, or Korvald 1994, 408 – all of them tend to take the Navadurgā *mūdyah* as representing Mahālakṣmī, who is, according to Korvald, sometimes referred to as the lineage god of the deities impersonated. Mānandhar describes her as *ādiśakti devī*, the goddess of the highest level. The Naradevī *mūdyah* is conceived as the deity from which all the others emanate. It is regarded as beyond a specific sex or gross form. Worshipped daily by the Śvetakālī dancer in complete secrecy, it is seen to be the core deity of the Naradevī-*gaṇa* throughout the year (personal communication by Naradevī-guṭhī members).  
As for the Theco *mūdyah*, an identification with Śiva, as suggested by Toffin (1996, 222), was denied by the dancers asked; further, they kept silent on the identity of the little silver mask attached to the *mūdyah* *kalaśa*, which depicts an animal face bearing traits of a monkey or a lion. One is reminded of tantric-philosophical concepts according to which all the subtle and gross emanations, both divine and mundane, derive from a single highest principle, conceived as a one-, two- or threefold creative power.
44. The *mahāpātra* is an important attribute of the troupes that include the full set of the *māṛkāgaṇa*. The conception of it as another emanation of the goddess (variously identified as Mahālakṣmī or Guhyeśvarī) adds an additional level of meaning to the whole of the *gaṇa*.  
By contrast, each of the Manamāiju deities has its own *pātra*, which was explained to me as being merely an appropriate offering vessel.
45. Varieties of rice-beer (New. *thvoñ*, Nep. *jāñ*, *chyāng*), an alcoholic drink, are prepared by many Newar households at festival times. The one to be served to the gods is a special variety of brown colour, which may have

been prepared in huge earthen jars by the *deutās* themselves in a ritual manner. The *thvoñ* jars are sometimes conceived as emanations of Bhairava, and decorated and worshipped accordingly.

46. This element is part of the Kokhana, Theco and Bhaktapur Navadurgā, Kathmandu Naradevī and Bhadrakālī performances.
47. Even the Patan Aṣṭamāṭṛkā dancers, who otherwise abstain from any blood sacrifice during their performances, will twice offer a goat sacrifice to Nāsadyaḥ.
48. Such simplistic representation points up one of the basic concepts of the god of artistic creation and performing arts. The empty space is not just empty, but it symbolises the deity's relation to sound (Skt. *svara*). Within Indian philosophy, the original sound is understood as the root of any creative process. The medium of sound is *ākāśa*, the ether element or atmosphere. The original sound and its medium are the pre-requisites for the creation of (poetic) language and music.  
A few temples, however, do display iconographic representations on the arch (*torāṇa*) of the shrine, which show Nāsadyaḥ with a Bhairava-like face and up to eighteen hands, sitting or standing on a bull as his vehicle. On Nāsadyaḥ see Wegner 1992, 125–137, and Ellingson 1990, 221–272.
49. The *khīm* is the leading musical instrument. It is said to represent Mahākāla or some other male deity usually associated with Śiva (Toffin 1999, 244). Again not every *gana* has a *khīm* drum. They are not found among the Pharping, Tokha or Halcowk troupes, for example.
50. The instrumental equipment of the troupes differs a lot. Twenty-seven musicians are part of the Bode troupe, the Khokana *dyahkalaḥ* has fifteen, while the Halcowk troupe has but three. When they go around town, the core instruments of the Bhaktapur Navadurgā are but two, namely the *dyah-tāḥ* and the *dyah-khīm*; these are at times joined by large cymbals (New. *kay*) and the *ḍamaru* hand-drum (see also Gutschow 1996, 213 and Manandhar 1991, 16).
51. In fact, nobody has so far identified this language for any of the troupes. As for the Khokana *dyahbāe*, it is definitely not Sanskrit, Nepali or contemporary Newari. It has dialogic elements sung by various key musicians with an intonation, that is of a mantric-syllabic rather than a prose character.

The night-long performance at Pharping is likewise accompanied by a number of songs. The divine language is said to be *dvāṃsa-bhāṣā* (Nep. 'mixed language'), and some of the locals who themselves had taken

interest in solving this question suggested that it may have its roots in medieval Maithili (personal communication by Viṣṇu Man Balāmi). Efforts to trace down the language used in the numerous songs of the Harasiddhi-pyākhaḥ did not result in their definite identification either, according to Rajendra Shrestha (personal communication).

In Theco, the musicians' voices at times join the sound of cymbals and horned drum, but here, no text or song-like pattern can be distinguished.

52. Each of the localities involved are strictly defined, and the dance platforms chosen are the traditional ones, in urban settlements sometimes distinguishable as elevated square stone platforms (Nep. *dabali*).
53. This double aspect of the relation between the goddess and the demon is explicit in the Kathmandu Naradevī and Bhadrakālī performances.
54. Note that the demon is not always embodied, nor does every troupe perform buffalo sacrifices on stage. For Halcowk and Bode, the goddess-overcomes-demon/lover plot is completely absent.
55. The *ṭols* are administrative and ritually relevant village or town units.
56. The *pañcabali* ('offering of five kinds') consists of five male sacrificial animals (rooster, duck, ram, he-goat, buffalo); also offered are plates with fruit, vegetables, a variety of sweets, grains of rice, beaten rice, cereals and various worship materials.
57. Personal observations, on March 9, 2001 and April 14, 2001.
58. Such practice can be observed during the Khokana, Harasiddhi and Theco performances.
59. Such is the practice in Kokhana and Theco. In Pharping the contributions are collected from the seven *ṭol* units rather than from individual households. In Harasiddhi, the meat of the abundant animal sacrifices is shared by the *deutās* and the villagers in equal parts, the former redistributing half of each sacrificial animal as *prasāda* to the offering family the day after.
60. A *kisli/kisali* (Nep./New.) is a small earthen bowl filled with unbroken rice, with an areca nut (Nep. *supāri*) and a coin on top. It is put on display in various Newar ritual contexts. The Sanskrit equivalent given is *pūrṇapātra*, which actually serves other ritual and symbolic purposes, though.
61. See above, note 42.
62. Personal communication.

These three goddesses, though originated within the Hindu classic pantheon, are frequently included into tantric teaching. They are here

- conceived as the first multiplying step of a primordial feminine principle, further evolving, in the local understanding, into the Sapta- and Aṣṭamātrkā, finally the Navadurgā. Each step implies one emanation of the goddess as a higher or essence form of the respective group.
64. See the article on the Patan Aṣṭamātrkā in *Sandhya times*, October 31, 2001.
65. These two goddesses have their temples on two hill-tops in the neighbourhood.
66. For the Bhaktapur Navadurgā, see, for example, the legends given by Gutschow and Bāsukala 1987, 137, and Levy 1987, 5–8; for Harasiddhi, see the legendary accounts summarised by Nutandhar Sharma 1999 in his research note; for Sankhu, see Shrestha, 1996, 257–258 and Shrestha 2000, 397–398. All such legendary accounts reveal interactions between selected humans – kings, tantrics, or otherwise outstanding personalities – and the gods.
67. See Pradhan 1985, 52. Buddhist dances like those featuring Mañjuśrī, Dīpaṅkara or Pañcabuddha, performed in the Kathmandu Valley up to today, may be said to belong to the same broad category.
68. Linda Iltis (1989, 147–150) has assembled the relevant passages from Regmi, Wright and Hasrat, and further from the Devamālā-, Bhaṣa- and Rājabhoga-vaṃśāvalis. The Jala dance was, as legend goes, first created by King Vikramāditya of Ujjain. It was Varadeva, a Thākuri leader, who is said to have afterwards successfully initiated the Jala-pyākhaḥ. Some centuries later, Amara Malla revived the tradition after it was interrupted. Again, Pratap Malla is reported to have reintroduced the dance after another interruption.
69. Devīnātha 1956, 123. See also Shrestha 2000, 17–18.
70. See Toffin 1984, 300–301.
71. Personal communication by Rameśvar Maharjan, son of the present Harasiddhi Kumārī-*deutā*. See also Sinyā 1991, 16.
72. With Harasiddhi-Devī being the *kuladevatā* ('family deity', a chosen deity specific to each Newar clan) of many Dulikhel Shrestha families, there is a strong interest on their part to continue the invitations, and to reward the dancers generously during their stay.
- According to the information provided to me by locals, the Harasiddhi-pyākhaḥ used to be shown continuously for three months every winter, whereas nowadays, the performances are limited to the first and the

concluding day of this period, which are the full-moon days of Mārgaśīrṣa (November-December) and Phālguna (February-March).

73. *Gaṇa pherne* ('regrouping of the divine troupe') is not strictly bound to a twelve-year cycle (Shrestha 2000, 45–49). It is initiated when one of the four Vārāhī dancers becomes possessed by the main deity. The *mūlguru* will then appoint the dancers, along with five extra characters. Only during such years did they use to go to outside places in Kārtik (October-November), in addition to the regular performances in Bode during the dark half of Bhadra (July-August).
74. Personal communication. See also Shrestha 1996.
75. Such points were brought up by Ratna Rāj Rājopādhyāya, with reference to Bhaktapur, and also by members of the Khokana, Theco and Harasiddhi troupes.
76. This is obvious in the case of Manamāiju, where only two persons are left to personify the deities. The ornaments and metal *kapālapātras* of three more deities are now taken around the village on a litter to be worshipped. Though not openly stated, a similar reason may explain why the Śvetakālī twelve-year cycle has not been staged at all for eighteen years; the present troupe mainly consists of elderly dancers perhaps unable to stand the physical strain anymore. Members of the troupe rather tend to reason that the present *kaliyuga* is a period too corrupted for gods to emanate (the elaborate cycle is initiated by one of the main deities's dancers becoming possessed).
77. In particular, *narabali* is said by the people to have been part of the Naradevī, Khokana, and Theco performances. Although the Theco Bhairava dancer asserted to me without asking that it was still practised during the twelve-year festival, it is doubtful on whether he was serious.
78. Such reactions, formerly based on an ill-defined fear, appear even more obsolete now that many locals have their own camera in hand. And everyone turns into an importunate beggar for pictures as soon as such an opportunity presents itself.
79. This tradition is obviously undergoing a process of redefinition, in an aim to create legitimation based on Newar-Buddhist teaching for a dance which features a *gaṇa* of deities that arose on a Hindu base. See, for example, the two articles published in *Sandhyā tāims*, October 30 and 31, 2001.
80. Articles on the Kārtik dance were recently published in some detail in *The Rising Nepal* and *The Kathmandu Post*, both on November 11, 2001, and

in *Gorkhāpatra* and *Kāntipur* on October 27 and November 23, 2002 respectively.

81. The *kalāpariśads* introduced in Thimi and Nagadesh provide further examples of a new organisational frame, in this case to the local *devī-nāc* performances displayed during Gāiyātra (personal communication by Rajendra Shrestha).
82. Historical accounts referring to dance performances during the Malla reign leave no doubt that dancers were paid in goods and money for their performances if invited by the palace. (Vajrācārya 1996, 15, and Pradhan 1985, 50). An update of such a practice, with respect to household economies increasingly depending on income-creating activities, might enhance a regular compensation of the performers according to their time investment.
83. Personal communication by Bālakṛṣṇa Prajāpati, who is one of the three dance *gurus*, all of whom in their youth were members of the dance troupe that performed up to 1965.
84. This overview does not include the performances on stage of an entertaining character and the *devī-nāc*, *bhaila-pyākhaḥ* and *lakhe-pyākhaḥ* performances still practised in the Kathmandu Valley mainly during the spring and summer festivals.  
The names of the divine members of each troupe are given but in one writing, without the local variants being taken into account.

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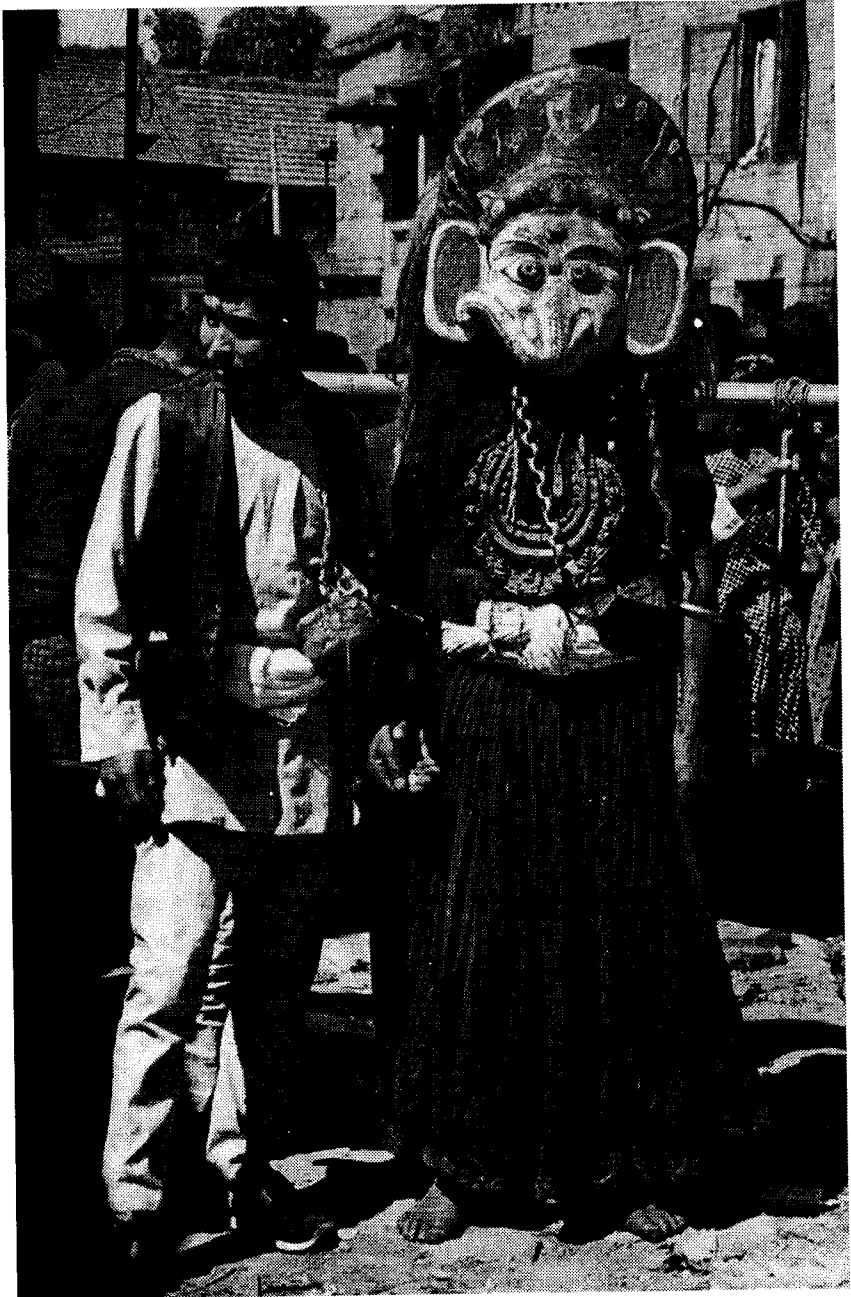
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Theco Navadurgā-pyākhah: the Gaṇeśa *deutā* with his *nāyo*



Theco Navadurgā-pyākhaḥ: Siṃhā, Dumhā and Bhairava dancers with their masks, awaiting the distribution of *mohanī-sinha* by the Gaṇeśa *deutā*



Theco Navadurgā-pyākhaḥ: Vārāhī offers rice-beer in the scull bowl to Rudrāṇī



Khokana Sikālī-pyākhaḥ: performance venue in the village



Halcowk Ākāśabhairava: street scene with Ākāśa-Bhairavī displaying her bow and arrow; to her left, Parvatī/Maheśvarī, and to her right, Varāha and Dakṣiṇakālī



**Khokana Sīkāli-pyākhaḥ: Kumārī dances in her full garb displaying her sword**



Halcowk Ākāśabhairava: street scene with Gangā, Mahādeva and Pārvatī/Maheśvarī





Kathmandu Naradevī-pyākhaḥ: dance scene with Kumārī and Śvetakālī



**Bode Nīlavārāhī-pyākhah:** the four Vārāhī-dancers during procession worshipped by the public



Patan Aṣṭamātrkā: Vārāhī during a rest