

CARYĀ: THE REVIVAL OF A TRADITION?*

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The disappearance of old and once highly-valued cultural traditions is a familiar phenomenon the world over. Whether the reasons for the decline of a tradition are primarily economic, aesthetic, social, political, or religious, the end result may be a decisive termination, when the last person who knows a particular oral repertory or the technique of a particular instrument dies without transmitting his knowledge to any successor. Long before this point is reached, repertory and performance practice are remembered imperfectly or incompletely by successive generations, no new items are added to replace those that have been lost, fewer and less competent performers are recruited, patronage dries up and occasions for performance become ever less frequent. Such decline is not always terminal, but may stabilise for a period, the tradition surviving on continuing but minimal support from the community; traditions in this situation are very vulnerable to small fluctuations in resources, but they can also bloom like a flower in the desert if a new source of patronage presents itself. The process of revival, however, may entail varying degrees of change and transformation. A case in point is that of the *caryā* tradition of Buddhist ritual music and dance, of which an advanced stage of decline, and the seeds of a possible renewal, are both apparent today.

The Sanskrit term *caryā*, or its Newari equivalent *cacā*, refers to a particular repertory of song, instrumental music and dance, hitherto employed exclusively in Newar Buddhist Tantric ritual. It is believed to be one of the oldest cultural traditions in the Kathmandu Valley, having originated either in the valley itself many centuries ago, as some local

informants insist, or in mediaeval Indian Buddhist practice, as historians of South Asian culture normally assume. Suffice it for present purposes to observe that songs with esoteric texts, together with dance and drum music, have played an important part in Buddhist Tantric ritual and festival since the time of the *Hevajra Tantra*, a Sanskrit text dated to the 8th century at the latest (Snellgrove 1959, I :101-2); and that the now famous *Caryā-gīti* collection of song-texts written in an eastern Indian vernacular around the 11th century, and surviving in a single manuscript preserved in Nepal, are regarded as belonging to the same tradition (Kvaerne, 1977). Newar *caryā* songs are today composed in Sanskrit, and their texts are preserved in numerous manuscripts in the libraries of Kathmandu and in the private collections of Vajrācārya priests. Their function seems to be essentially unchanged since the time of the *Hevajra Tantra*: through singing, dancing and playing instruments (the three-headed drum *kvatāh*, the double trumpet *pvātā*, and the small cymbals *tāh*), the Vajrācārya priests and other initiate performers meditate upon and identify themselves with the Tantric divinities in whose honour the ritual is performed.¹

Like some other traditions of religious music in Nepal, *caryā* songs are attributed in the manuscripts and by their singers to melodic modes or *rāga*, and rhythmic modes or *tāla*, the names of which were, in many cases, current in mediaeval India; whether their musical forms today resemble those of mediaeval India is a matter of debate.² Research into these aspects of the tradition is restricted by the difficulty of access to its performance, for most *caryā* songs and dances are normally only performed in the Tantric shrine (*āgam-chē*), and only initiated members of the Buddhist community may attend. Ritual performances are in any case only rarely held because of the expense and the decreasing number of competent performers; this is especially so in the case of large

¹ *Hevajra Tantra*, I.vi.10—17, trans. Snellgrove 1959; Bake 1957; Kalamandapa 1986; Widdess 1992

² Bake 1957; Widdess 1992. This question is considered in an article in preparation, "Cacā and Indian music: Nepalese Buddhist ritual song in a South Asian perspective", which argues that in general the *caryā* songs do not show features that characterise the development of music in India since the 16th century, such as the use of scales with augmented seconds, or *tāla* with symmetrical structures.

* I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for supporting my research on *caryā* during 1991, 1992 and 1994, as part of a collaborative project with C. Tingey and G.M. Wegner. I am also indebted to the British Council for support in 1996. Above all I have to thank Ratnakaji and Prajwal Bajracharya, for their teaching, kindness and encouragement, and offer this small tribute to their courage and dedication.

festival celebrations, traditionally held at intervals of twelve years or more, where there may be over 260 persons involved in the preparations and rituals, and a period of three months' preparation is required to teach the music and dance to all the performers.³ Those who still know the tradition tend to be highly secretive about it, fearing the wrath of the Tantric deities and of their peers if they divulge any of its secrets, and they sometimes deny that it exists at all. It is thus impossible to establish how many are still competent to teach and perform *caryā* music and dance, but Vajrācārya typically assert that 'hardly anyone is learning nowadays', and that in consequence, '*caryā* is dead'.

Fortunately for our knowledge of this tradition, its isolation from the outside world is not absolute. The sounds of *caryā* music can occasionally be heard emanating from behind the barred upper windows of Buddhist *vihāra*. Rare performances take place in public (for example the annual celebration of Buddha Jayantī at Svayambhūnāth); the songs and dances performed on such occasions are not considered to be 'secret' (*guhya*). The instrumental music is also treated as somewhat less secret than the songs and dances. Although the uninitiated are normally discouraged from taking an interest, distinguished outsiders may be invited to attend celebrations from which the public is excluded, as Arnold Bake was on two occasions in 1956. And some individual bearers of the tradition see it as their duty, not to conceal their heritage, but to enlist the interest of outsiders in order to ensure its survival.

The first and, so far as I am aware, only extensive recordings of *caryā* music were made by Arnold Bake (then Reader in Sanskrit at SOAS) in Kathmandu in 1956. A Vajrācārya priest recorded 20 *caryā* songs, some of them more than once. He also allowed Bake to film one of the corresponding dances, under conditions of great secrecy; but the priest then suffered a serious illness, which he attributed to divine displeasure, and which prevented any further filming or recording.⁴ In 1990–91 Dr Gert Wegner, then a Leverhulme Research Fellow of SOAS, learned the drum repertory, which is quite separate from the

vocal music and performed independently. His teacher was Ratnakaji Bajracharya, a widely respected scholar of Buddhist ritual and culture, who was and is prepared to risk censure in order to ensure the survival of *caryā* music and dance by promoting its performance openly. In 1991–2 I studied the vocal repertory with this same teacher, learning five complete songs in different *rāga* (a tiny fraction of the total repertory). Wegner and I also discussed with him various aspects of the ritual and cultural context of *caryā*, and compared his versions of the songs with those recorded by Bake. Bake's priest had been one of Ratnakaji's teachers, and indeed their versions were closely similar, though separated in time by 35 years.

In an attempt to compare Ratnakaji's tradition with others, Wegner also worked with a Vajrācārya priest in Bhaktapur, who willingly taught him the complete repertory for the drum again. A number of differences between the two traditions emerged. In 1994, however, my attempt to learn the vocal repertory from the same teacher in Bhaktapur failed; for unknown reasons, possibly because of pressure put on him by other members of the Vajrācārya community, the teacher ceased to co-operate further after the first lesson. Attempts to find an alternative teacher or a singer willing to record in Bhaktapur were also unsuccessful; all denied knowledge of the tradition or declined to share what they knew.

This secretiveness contrasted with the eager willingness with which singers of *dāphā*—Hindu temple devotional music performed daily in public—taught me items of their repertory in the summer of 1996 and allowed me to record them. It is however a common feature of Newar religious culture, and it makes all the more remarkable the courage of those few who attempt to lift the veil on their own traditions. In the case of Bake's priest, it seems to have been understood that the recordings and film he made were for foreign consumption only: elaborate precautions were taken to ensure that the filming of the dance, in particular, was not observed. Ratnakaji's objectives are different. While welcoming foreign pupils and scholars, he is also concerned to spread knowledge and understanding of Newar Buddhist traditions within Nepal. His numerous publications in the Newari language on various aspects of Tantric Buddhism, including music and dance, are

³ Gellner 1992:305 f.; Ratnakaji Bajracharya, pers. com.

⁴ Bake's recordings are now located at the National Sound Archive (British Library), and his films at SOAS.

highly respected; they testify to his desire for the open dissemination of information and appreciation of Newar culture by Newars as well as others.

In the 1980's, concerned at the rapid decline of *caryā* dance (of which he is himself an expert performer) and its accompanying music, Ratnakaji began to train a number of pupils in this art. They included Rajendra Shreshta, and Ratnakaji's son Prajwal Bajracharya, both of whom have since established reputations as *caryā* dancers. The main forum for *caryā* dance performance by Ratnakaji's pupils was the Hotel Vajra in Kathmandu, where regular programmes were held in the hotel's small auditorium. At the performance I attended in 1991, the audience was composed almost exclusively of foreign visitors. In 1986 a small booklet appeared entitled *Buddhist ritual dance*, containing the texts and Indian-style music notation for a number of items of the repertory of this dance-group, and photographs of dance poses and costumes. The introduction in English, evidently addressed to foreign readers, explains the background to and functions of the music, and is translated by the distinguished scholar Fr John Locke; but authorship of the booklet itself is concealed behind the name of an institution, 'Kalamandapa'. At about the same time Ratnakaji received and accepted an invitation to perform *caryā* dances in Japan, presumably the first occasion on which this art-form had been seen outside Nepal (apart from Bake's film). Thus foreign interest enabled Ratnakaji and his pupils to remove *caryā* music and dance from its original, closed context and present it in a new light.

The transposition of *caryā* to the public stage involved some transformations, as the performers themselves acknowledged. The dancers wore colourful costumes and masks, reflecting the character of the deity represented in each dance, in place of the priest's traditional white robe; the performers said they had studied Buddhist iconography in order to create these costumes. The dancers also admitted that they exploited the full width and depth of the stage in their movements, whereas in the Tantric shrine the space available would be very limited: in Bake's 1956 film the priest's movements are largely restricted to hand and arm gestures, with some small movements of the feet but

essentially no change of position in a very small performance area.⁵ The most striking changes, however, were in the performance style of the music. The songs were sung to traditional melodies, preceded and followed by the traditional *ālāp* or *rāg*; the *tāl* was indicated by the traditional *tāh* cymbals. But the singers (in 1991) were two young women, although women would never perform this music in the ritual context. Their rendition of the melodies was considerably less ornamented than that of Bake's priest. Accompaniment was provided by a harmonium and *tambūrā*, neither of which would ever be used in the Tantric shrine. The effect of the *tambūrā* drone was to impose on the melody a fixed tonal centre which is not necessarily apparent in the melodies themselves: in unaccompanied performance the melodies often seem to be tonally ambiguous or to move from one emphasised pitch to another. The effect of both instruments was to make the music sound more 'Indian' in style, and their use was perhaps intended to cater for the perceived musical tastes of the tourist audience, or was a consequence of the performers' training in Indian classical music.

A new phase in the revival of *caryā* began in 1996, when a group of dancers and musicians called 'Dance Mandal', under the leadership of Prajwal Bajracharya, were invited to Germany to perform in the 20th Festival of Traditional Music, organized by the International Institute for Traditional Music (based in Berlin). The group now comprised both male and female dancers. The elaborate costumes and ornaments worn by the dancers again expressed the iconographic characteristics of the divinities represented in the dances. Despite these transformations in the dance, the music had reverted to a more 'authentic' presentation: two male singers sang to the accompaniment of cymbals only, the harmonium and *tambūrā* having been dispensed with. The performances in Germany were intended for a foreign audience, but the departure of the group for their foreign tour was preceded by a public performance in Kathmandu itself, which was advertised and reported in the Kathmandu press. The printed programme, in English but with a

⁵ The film was taken in a forest, where more freedom of movement would have been possible than in the tantric shrine, but the priest nevertheless dances 'on the spot'. Similar on-the-spot dance movements were observed by the author at a public fire sacrifice (*homa*) performed by Vajrācāryas in Kathmandu, October 1991.

summary in Newari, proclaims the dance as 'Secret /Spiritual/ Visualization', and explains: 'The goal of Charya Nritya is to perfect the visualisation [of Tantric deities] and to awaken within oneself specific qualities that the deities embody'. It is paradoxical that the secrecy with which the tradition was surrounded in the past is now presented as part of the attraction of performances that are no longer secret. In a similar context, the revival of *dhrupad* in India, Delvoye has observed that 'Despite their modernity and their cosmopolitan and urban background...audiences are often more responsive once they are assured of the genuineness, purity and serious character conferred upon a musical genre going back to ancient times.'

In the same year (1996), Ratnakaji Bajracharya published an anthology of 180 *caryā* song-texts 'old and new' (Vajrācārya 1996), including many traditional Sanskrit *caryā* song-texts and a small number in Newari of perhaps more recent composition. This volume, which Ratnakaji published in Newari under his own name, is clearly addressed to the Nepalese, and specifically the Newari-speaking community. Both this book and the performances of the Dance Mandal included 'secret' items of repertory that are not likely to have been previously published or performed in public: evidently the time for caution was now felt to be past.⁶

It remains to be seen whether the response to such performances and publications from the public in Nepal is favourable to the continued development of *caryā* as a non-ritual art-form for public performance. If it is, it will not be the first case in which a tradition of sacred music and dance has been transferred from a moribund ritual context to the public stage in South Asia. For example, the Orissi and Bharatanatyam dance traditions in Orissa and Tamil Nadu respectively have already successfully undergone this transition. In these cases the performing art was not only transferred to a new context but also taken up by a new class of performer, since the temple dancers or *devadāsī*

were stigmatized, and even prohibited by law from performing in the temple context, because of their association with prostitution. Both dance styles were revived by Brahman performers, partly by reference to temple sculptures and ancient texts rather than to the surviving bearers of the tradition (Marglin 1985: 27 f.). In each case the desire for a local 'classical' tradition distinct from those of other regions of South Asia no doubt played a part in the revival process. In the case of *caryā*, this desire may also be a factor, but here the leaders of the revival are themselves members of the ritual tradition, and come from a respected social class; this may help to ensure a degree of continuity between the ritual tradition and public performance practice.

The 'revival' of *caryā* as a public, non-ritual art-form raises many questions of interest to the ethnomusicologist, and would reward more detailed and continuous observation than has been possible for the present writer. On the one hand it has brought to a wider audience music and dance of considerable beauty and historical significance, which would otherwise have remained almost totally inaccessible. On the other hand, given its de-contextualization, or rather its relocation in an entirely new context, and the changes in performance practice which inevitably ensue, it may be asked how far what is now presented justifies the claims made for it as an ancient religious art. Here Bake's historic recordings and film play a vital role in representing the tradition as it was before any 'revival' began. What the functions of this revived art-form might be in its new context remains to be seen. It may be destined for a primarily emblematic role: as a national Nepalese 'classical' dance and music, distinct from those of neighbouring India; as a contribution to the international Buddhist cultural heritage; as a symbol of Newar cultural identity; and as a Newar Buddhist response to the challenge of Tibetan Buddhism, with its colourful traditions of ritual music and dance, now prominently performed (in a ritual context) in the burgeoning monasteries of the Kathmandu Valley. Furthermore, although the revelation of hitherto secret aspects of their traditions may be viewed with misgiving by some members of the Newar Buddhist community, the revival of *caryā* in the public domain may have a revitalizing effect on the surviving tradition of ritual performance.

⁶ The programme for the Dance Mandal concert included the *guhya* songs 'Nairātmā', 'Māyājāl' (a song traditionally used in *śrāddha* rites), 'Vajrayoginī' etc. These three songs are amongst those recorded by Bake, all of which, according to Ratnakaji, are secret.

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