

Sovereignty and Honours as a Redistributive Process: An ethnohistory of the temple trust of Manakamana in Nepal

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Introduction

In the late eighteenth century, as the British East India Company expanded and consolidated its rule in most of the Indian sub-continent, an army from the small hill principality of Gorkha in the Himalayan foothills extended its rule over a geographically and culturally diversified region. In 1814 the two powers clashed in war, which ended in defeat for the Gorkhali two years later. The peace treaty marked the end of seven decades of Gorkhali expansion and left them in charge of somewhat reduced but still large territories in the Tarai, the hills and the high mountain region. Ever since, Nepal has been a sovereign state, conceived by its own rulers as the only true Hindu kingdom, unspoiled by Western and Muslim invaders. Its physical barriers, the mist-shrouded Himalayan peaks and the lush tropical forests created natural borders with India and China that have inspired the Western popular image of this Hindu kingdom as living in splendid isolation from both British colonialism and the globalising economic market system.

Our article¹ looks at a hitherto unexplored aspect of this kingdom – how one mountain temple and its surrounding locale, by then called Kaphyāk,² played an essential role in the nation-building process during the period of expansion and later. In the ethnographic and historical research on Nepal, emphasis has been placed on temple architecture, temple economics and temple ritual, but without viewing the temple as an institutional whole.³ The Manakamana (Manakāmanā) temple's historical role up until now is largely undocumented. The few studies that exist (Unbescheid 1985, Khattry 1995, Bhattarai 1998) do not analyse the state-society relationships inherent in temple organisation and cult practices. To remedy this

¹ This is one of a number of articles resulting from the project *Livelihoods and Environmental Change in the Hills of Nepal*. Our gratitude goes to the Norwegian Research Council and Chr. Michelsen Institute for funding this project. We are also indebted to the project's Principal Researcher Dr. Ram Chhetri and the Assistant Researchers Sandya Gurung, Gopal Thapa, Anjana Sakhya and Kapil Dahal. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Govind Tandan and Ludwig Stiller made helpful comments on drafts. In the paper, Nepali transliterations are based on Turner (1965). Diacritics are omitted in names of widely known kings, lineages, castes, deities, sects and places. When proper names of deities are borrowed from Sanskrit, we refer to Nepali local versions of names.

² This locality was called Kaphyāk in official correspondence from the late 17th century. Kaphyāk was a central territory within the kingdom of Gorkha.

³ See Allen (1975), Bernier (1979), Regmi (1978), Michaels (1990), Bhattarai (1998).

oversight, we examine how daily temple politics and the temple institution's structural features were formed by and formed the Nepalese institution of kingship over more than two centuries. We do this by considering the temple trust (*guthi*) of the Goddess Manakamana, which from the late medieval period onward constituted an interface between the local society and a nascent Nepalese state ruled by a god-king. The temple trust has remained a locus for royal protection and patronage ever since. The Nepalese trust system, which encompasses various kinds of institutions responsible for a wide range of religious, social and charitable functions, has its parallels elsewhere in the South Asian continent and in Europe.⁴

Stein (1980), Dirks (1987) and Inden (1990), amongst others, have documented how Indian kingship underwent radical changes as the Indian princely states that remained outside the British Presidency were profoundly transformed under British colonialism. Unlike the Indian kings, who were gradually turned into ceremonial figureheads during the late 18th and 19th centuries, the Gorkhali kingship remained at the apex of personified rule well into the 20th century. This regime was based on ceremonial display, on the politics of gift and service giving, on taxation of production and trade, and on monopoly trade, all features associated with the ancient, pre-colonial regimes of India. Thus, the continued dynastic and religious foundation of the Nepalese state epitomised in the divine kingship renders it an interesting case for comparative political sociology. Except for the works of the late Richard Burghart (1983, 1984, 1987) and Bouillier and Toffin (1989), few have taken up this challenge. Our article is but a modest contribution towards remedying this neglect, through an exploration of the links between the historical past and the ethnographic present of a single temple.

Though we focus mainly on this ancient temple's locally integrative and nation-building functions in the past, its current role - at a time of ethnicization, armed struggle and the state's distributive failure (Nepal Human Development Report 1998, Pfaff-Czarnecka 2000) - can not be emphasised enough. In the early 1970s, before a highway was built in the vicinity of the famed temple, the numbers of annual visitors was around 25,000. In 1998 the late and ill-famed Crown Prince Dipendra inaugurated a modern cable car⁵ offering effortless transport from the low-lying highway to the doorstep of the mountain temple, increasing the number of Nepali and Indian visitors to about 50,000 in the following 12 months.

Some in Nepal are currently making astonishingly rapid fortunes. Many more survive on the margins of the new, very unequally-divided affluence - resorting to wishing for better luck. The Goddess's reputed wish-fulfilling powers hold an

⁴ There are the *vaqf* systems of India, Syria, Iran and Iraq and the *dharmada* and *devottar* tenure systems among Hindus in India and the *mortmain* tenures in medieval Europe (Regmi 1978a: 630).

⁵ A local prominent business house (Manakamana Darsan Pvt. Ltd.) financed the project and built it with Austrian technical assistance. The investors also run the enterprise. For a discussion on the cultural and economic impact of the cable-car see Bleie 2003.

enormous appeal to both excluded and affluent, Buddhists and Hindus, castes and ethnic groups. Ancient religious ideas of the efficacy of pilgrimage to sacred mountain realms ruled by deities converge with a modern preoccupation with particular tracts of Nepal's countryside as ideal, pictorial landscapes to be viewed. The latter perception of landscape is a result of rapid economic growth, the emergence of leisure time among salaried urbanites and the business community, new opportunities for rapid travel and a surge in nationalist sentiment. The beautiful pagoda-style abode of Manakamana in a serene, emerald green hill setting has become a multivalent national icon.

The ethnohistorical approach

Historians have explained the unification of Nepal into one empire and the continuing nation-building process, which some would argue is yet to be completed, mainly as the results of military achievement, political alliances and a political system in which a ruler's words were commands (cf. Stiller 1973, Shaha 1990, Regmi 1995, Sharma 1997). We suggest that inadequate attention has been paid to the cultural dimensions, although there are important exceptions (cf. Höfer 1979, Burghart 1983, 1984, 1987, Bouillier 1989, Whelpton 1991, Pfaff-Czarnecka 1989, 1993, 1997, 2000, Lecomte-Tilouine 1993, 2000 and Ramirez 2000). Filling these conceptual and empirical lacunae requires considerable scholarly effort.

The complex interrelations between the cultural, social, economic and political foundations of the kingship and of the Manakamana trust constitute a central theme of this and an earlier work of ours (Bleie and Bhattarai 2001). This article covers both the early transformation from a minor (1743-1769) to a great monarchy (1769-1814), and the continuing process of unification and consolidation of the Nepalese state under successive Shah (1768-1846) and Rana (1846-1951) rulers. We present new evidence about the specific political and religious circumstances that seem to have influenced Prithvi Narayan Shah's donations to the Goddess Manakamana, whose realm of influence had hitherto been limited to Gorkha. When this historic case is examined in the light of other evidence about the many other land endowments of Prithvi Narayan Shah (1743-1775) and his successors, we better understand the role of royally sponsored religious rites and trust institutions in the nation-building process of the early empire period. The autocratic Prithvi Narayan Shah's generous donations to major temple institutions (Regmi 1978a: 631-636) in the newly conquered Nepal (originally Nepal designated the Newar city-states in Kathmandu Valley) were motivated by his need to be conferred authority in a public, representative domain wherein the political and the religious were fused. Prithvi Narayan Shah's expanded patronage of Manakamana, the royal Shah lineage's long-established protective deity, was arguably a reciprocal act. Through royal ritual appropriation Manakamana contributed to the successful outcome of the conquest of Nepal. Religious festivals such as *Dasāī* and the lesser known *Barṣabandhan* in

Manakamana represented a powerful mode of public legitimisation and commemoration of Nepalese kingship in all phases, from conquest, through formal installation as great king, and later in the regular display of sovereignty. This kingly sovereignty had to be convincingly demonstrated to ensure continued allegiance of deities, nobles and commoners.

We specifically aim at describing the ethnohistorical dimensions of particular personae, localities and institutions which were part of the nation-building process in the “heartland” of modern Nepal, a term applied by the Nepali historian Regmi (1995: 14-15). The heartland, in Regmi’s sense (*op.cit.*: 14), included Gorkha and the wider Gandaki region. This was a central geographical area of strategic, political and economic importance. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, quite a number of the ruling families in Gandaki were recruited into the new ruling Gorkhali political elite. The territories outside this core area in the eastern hill region, in the Terai and in the Far West (beyond Bheri River), the “provinces” in Regmi’s terms, were considered no more than colonies.

Our analysis of this trust’s history is mainly based on early modern inscriptions, land and other administrative records, other textual sources relating to local chiefs and kings of the 18th, 19th and the 20th century, and scholarly works on the history of late medieval and early modern Nepal. Our interpretation of past events and institutional changes is firmly grounded in our understanding of the ethnographic present, in particular ritual practices, forms of social organisation and oral history.⁶

Anthropological history and ethnohistory - the hybrid labels behind which we strive to study the interface between history and culture - depend on a combination of methodologies, methods and theory from history and anthropology (Cohn 1980: 216, Dirks 1987: 11, Dube 2001: 2-4). The virtues of a description within the rather narrow spatial confines of one temple institution and of certain aspects of social life are those of circumstantiality, density and particularity. Our collection of the traces which the trust of Manakamana has left of the past deserves the term ethnohistory, rather than history, in view of our focus on the present, i.e. on the structural and cognitive ways in which these traces are embedded in actors’ contemporary meaning systems. Use of the labels “anthropological history” and “ethnohistory” has to be explicated cautiously in the current tense political situation. We share with current Nepalese ethnohistorians, many of whom are political activists, their commitment to contribute to “a history from below”. Yet our approach is not confined to rewriting the history of one or more ethnic groups. Neither do we presume in advance that configurations between the state and ethnic categories and groups⁷ have always been

⁶ We treat “myths”, legends and tales as in need of being sorted into distinct cultural genres. These have distinct forms, contents, narrative logic and particular arenas for (re)production. Myths often speak of history in the particular.

⁷ Ethnic categories are aggregates of people who share some cultural practices, a real or mythical association with a territory and an ancestor/ancestress. An ethnic group can be

based on dominance-submission or that ethnicity is an archaic cultural phenomenon. Our evidence on the political and institutional context for the local configuration of caste, and indeed of the Magars as “a dominant caste”⁸, may in certain respects question both the *bāhun* (Brahman) conceptions of caste and dominance and those of certain ethnic activists. From a research point of view, the principal questions of agency, power and dominance in this historical and moral context are certainly more tangled than these political combatants are willing to admit.

The role of temples in Nepal

Appadurai (1981: 8) has said that the temple is the quintessentially South Asian institution. A number of informative studies have highlighted the connections between the Indian state, kingship and temple institutions (Mudaliar 1974, Appadurai & Breckenridge 1976, Appadurai 1977 and 1981, Dirks 1987, Stein 1980, Inden 1990, Price 1996, and Dube 2001). Apparently however, only few scholars who study Nepal have followed a similar line of enquiry. This is somewhat surprising in light of the recent surge of scholarly interest in state formation and nation building (Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka & Whelpton 1997, Pfaff-Czarnecka 2000). This interest is spurred by the recent democratic, constitutional reforms and the rise of ethnic movements, including one militant faction which since 1996 has been fighting a guerrilla war against the government and its allies.

First of all we should explain what we mean by a temple. Our main attention is given not to its most obvious feature, the temple as a demarcated sacred space, an architectural structure that harbours the abode of the deity enshrined within it. Rather, like Appadurai and Breckenridge (1976), we are preoccupied with the cultural models which underlie its well-ordered sacred space and the ideas that inhere in the ceremonial practices which unfold in that space. The temple is a system of particularly persuasive symbolic acts. These symbols create and dramatise very basic ideas about agency, authority, submission, exchange and worship. In these arenas both intra-community and local-state relations are renewed, confirmed and sometimes contested.

mobilised around an overarching identity, which may be used to raise claims on states or non-state institutions.

⁸ We cautiously use Raheja's (1988) definition of dominance. Unlike the Gujars (of north-western Uttar Pradesh) who possess nearly all land and were the *jajmāns* of all the other castes, the Magar and in particular the Lāhe lineage of the Thapa Magar held only a privileged right to land. The Lāhe, unlike the Gujars, saw themselves, and were seen by others, as bringing about wellbeing and auspiciousness not only for the entire village, but for the whole kingdom.

Manakamana as a deity is arguably sovereign in a number of distinct yet related senses. The king established the deity as a sovereign⁹ with her own territory by alienating some of his crown land, granting a tract to Manakamana. This was a reciprocal act since we argue that tantric rituals earlier empowered the king to succeed in conquering his new territories in the first place.¹⁰

As much as the deity is a sovereign over a domain, she is the ruler of a redistributive institution. In developing this analytical perspective we make use of Sahlins' (1972: 188) argument that redistribution and reciprocity should be kept analytically distinct, since they are embedded in different social organisations. Redistribution is characteristically a form of collective action. The resource flow demarcates social boundaries and meets at a centre, in this case mainly at the temple, but also at the state treasury, and then flows outward. Reciprocity defines a relation between two distinct interests. The exchanges express mutuality, but a relatively fragile one, since distinct interests may come to jeopardise future exchange. In Manakamana the analytical use of redistribution and reciprocity helps us to clarify the modalities underlying different forms of worship and the potential tension between the temple as a chiefly redistributive institution, the kingship and the nascent bureaucratic state.

As stated above, the Goddess is a ruler in her domain, which incorporates her own abode with surrounding temple precincts, lands, settlements and forests. The pagoda temple stands on the edge of a ridge high above the terrace-cultivated hillsides and the lush river valleys. Local worshippers liken her temple with surrounding courtyard to a palace, with regalia and rituals similar to those found in the royal palace in Kathmandu.

As we shall try to demonstrate, there is a continuous flow of transactions between the worshippers and the deity. We will concentrate on the kinds of services and resources offered by her worshippers and returned by the deity in the form of shares (*prasād*) from food offerings to the deity, later distributed as sacred substance. By consuming these edible shares the devotees are incorporated into her domain. This incorporation ensures not only fulfilment of the devotees' wishes, but also the proper running of the cosmos. In a previous article we have in rich detail analysed the process of redistribution of rights in the goddess's land and of pooled resources. These resources devolve back to the temple institution in the form of material for the deity's daily and calendrical worship and wages for her servants, the temple staff (Bleie & Bhattarai 2001). Our rendering of these transactions as "dual" is a purely

⁹ It could be argued that the king thereby recognises the deity's superiority to himself as a human god. The king retains the moral authority as the ultimate protector of the universe.

¹⁰ Burghart (1984) has argued that there exists a native concept of the royal functions, based on three distinct spatial notions: total territorial possessions (*muluk*), realm of ritual authority (*deśa*) and the smaller countries (*deś*) inhabited by distinct ethnic groups. Burghart may be right, though more meticulous ethnographic study is needed before arriving at any firm conclusion whether vernacular usage or ritual codification support his scheme.

pragmatic device, allowing us to divide a complex and rich material between two papers. It is essential to underline that these transactions are indigenously conceptualised as an inseparable whole.

The rise of the goddess Manakamana

A rich contemporary body of legends explains the specific background of the Goddess's ascendancy on a particular lofty mountain ridge, which has been her abode ever since. This corpus of legendary tales, kept alive not only by the population in the locale surrounding the temple but also in other locales of southern and central Gorkha, bears evidence of an unbroken tradition that predates the reign of Prithvi Narayan Shah. This tradition, with its gallery of personae and events, has played an important role in creating and sustaining the collective memory of the Devi's emergence, her kinship to the royal house of Gorkha and her affinity to a Magar from Kaphyāk named Lakhan Thāpā.

Legends recount the affectionate relationship between one of Ram Shah's (1603-1633) queens and her faithful Magar advisor. There are no direct hints at any carnal love. This Queen led a secret life as a Goddess (Manakamana), known only to Lakhan Thāpā who became a *Siddha* (accomplished tantric ascetic) under the guidance of Guru Gorakhnath (of the Kanphata Yogi sect), until her husband and King discovered his queen's true nature.¹¹ This revelation led to a dramatic turning point, resulting in her husband's death and her own decision to commit *satī* (self-immolation). Before entering the pyre, the queen promised her grieving advisor and devotee that she would reappear in divine form and obliged him to become her first devotee and caretaker.

While there are more- and less-Sanskritised versions of the queen's re-emergence as a divine being, most legends concur in narrating how one day a Gurung farmer struck a black stone with his plough. The ploughman unearthed the stone. Blood and milk flowed from the furrow cut by the plough.¹² This discovery, which showed signs of divinity, immediately became known and was connected to

¹¹ Tantrism is a historical current within the larger South Asian religious tradition. Tantric practices often have a magical character and centre predominantly on *Śakti*, empowerment through the feminine principle. Compare Unbescheid's (1980) and Bouillier's (1989) important works on the tantric Kanphata sect in Nepal.

¹² The oral and written evidence is as yet inconclusive, but gives support to the Thapas' (Lāhe) claim that they have taken care of the shrine ever since Manakamana first manifested herself. It is also possible that the first caretakers were Gurungs since the origin myths recounted to us by a number of Gurung, Magar, and Brahmin-Chetri informants all say that Dhandhoj Gurung found the stone while he was constructing a terrace on the ridge of Kaphyāk.

the deceased queen's promise.¹³ Lakhan Thāpā and some other local villagers raised a small shrine over her stone manifestation.

In these tracts of Gorkha, people currently conceive of the queen (whose name varies in the tales),¹⁴ Lakhan Thāpā, and Gorakhnath as “historical” persons and contemporaries, whose lives and destinies became tangled through their affiliation with the royal court. Local legends' elaboration of Lakhan and Gorakhnath as great *Yogīs* in control of occult forces, performing great miracles, establishing shrines and protecting kings, is part of a Himalayan tradition in which *Yogīs* are associated with conqueror kings (Bouillier 1989). In this ontology, ordinary human beings may turn into deities through, for example, meditation and self-immolation. Also, divine agencies intervene in human history by temporarily taking on human form. Deeds do not belong to any linear past, but manifest themselves in the present through narrative practices and through sacred geographies. From our historical perspective the life and deeds of Ram Shah are uncontroversial. Whether any historical queen formed the background for the mythologies of Manakamana's ascent to divinity is considerably more problematic to verify. We may only speculate that the queen in question came from a local chiefly clan of Magars or Gurungs. This could explain the deceased queen's reappearance in Kaphyāk as a return to her natal community. We face to some degree similar problems in verifying the historical Lakhan Thāpā, as the royal chronicles (*vamsāvalīs*) simply contain references to the legendary tradition elaborated above (Pant 1984, 1986, 1988, 1993). In the absence of other circumstantial historical evidence we have to admit that there are various alternative scenarios explaining the emergence of a proto-version of the currently existing corpus of legends.¹⁵ These intriguing issues cannot be solved at this stage of research.

Most certainly, before the unification period the cult of the Goddess of Manakamana was a well-established ancestor cult.¹⁶ This cult epitomised the social, cultural and political bonds between a locale predominantly populated by Gurung and Magar clans, and the ruling house of Gorkha.

¹³ See Unbescheid (1985) for a detailed analysis of blood and milk as the most pregnant symbols in Sanskrit versions of the origin legend.

¹⁴ In legends we have collected she is referred to as Candramukhī ('having the appearance of the moon') or Līlavatī (having beautiful appearance). Historical documents also refer to the queen as Mahimāvatī.

¹⁵ The many narratives of the disciple-guru relationship between Gorakhnath and Lakhan Thapa cannot be literally historically interpreted in a Western sense. The historical founder of the Kanphata sect probably lived in the 11th century.

¹⁶ Due to her unnatural death the queen initially became an uncontrollable, potentially malleable spirit (*vāyū*). By installing the spirit in a shrine her powers could be appropriated for beneficial purposes. References to *vāyū* cults can be found in the early royal chronicles.

Kingship and the temple trust of the goddess Manakamana

The institutionalisation of the *guthi* of Manakamana is intrinsically linked to unification into a great empire by force. Until the latter half of the 18th century, the Gandaki region was a patchwork quilt of shifting chiefdoms and principalities. Some aspiring rulers actively built up a tradition of royal authority. In 1559, one aspiring royal lineage (with the title Shah)¹⁷ wrested parts of the territory of Gorkha from local Gurung and Magar chiefs by establishing a basis for its own legitimate authority, which demanded continuous renewal through a righteous (*dhārmik*) rule, sponsorship of village rituals and use of military force. These principalities, which belonged to a league of twenty-four (*Caubisi*), surrounded the kingdom of Gorkha's western and southern flank, and engaged in nearly continuous competition and confrontation with both Gorkha and each other. Gorkha comprised a territory bordering on Tibet in the north, the inner Tarai in the south, the principalities of Lamjung and Tanahun (members of the league of twenty-four) at its western border, and the prosperous city states of Nepal (Kathmandu, Patan and Bhadgaun) in the east. The Gorkhali rulers had since the early 17th century (Regmi 1995: 4) nurtured an expansionist ambition of overtaking these city-states.

The chosen time for the royal grant of land to Manakamana might not be coincidental. In 1763 the Gorkhali king (Prithvi Narayan Shah) issued the endowment of about 200 *muri* of irrigated (*khet*) land in the name of the Goddess and the *Siddha* (the enlightened one). In that year, Prithvi Narayan Shah's military campaign had succeeded in conquering the strategically important state of Makwanpur, whose location in the southern plains gave control over the Bhimphedi-Hetaura trade route connecting the commercial towns in the Kathmandu Valley with the North Indian plains. The Gorkhali king had still not succeeded in taking the three Malla kingdoms of Kathmandu Valley.

The warrior king's intent when making the donation was most likely not simply to show off his religious sentiment. He knew donations of land were meritorious acts of devotion, which would boost the morale of his soldiers and deter adversaries in his rapidly expanding territory and in the many chiefdoms that had actively resisted his rule. During worship he might have made a vow to the Devi. His lineage had already for generations, perhaps dating 150 years back to King Ram Shah, served her as one of their ancestor deities.¹⁸ His ancestors paid homage to the Devi by constructing her house, a beautiful, pagoda-style temple.¹⁹ So far there is no historical evidence in

¹⁷ The founder of this royal house was Drabya Shah (1559-1570), a prince from the neighbouring principality of Lamjung.

¹⁸ In popular opinion Manakamana and Gorkha Kalika are classified as the Shah dynasty's "chosen deities" (*iṣṭadevtā*). The Shah dynasty has officially proclaimed Kalika as their only *iṣṭadevtā*. The royal sponsor of *Barṣabandhan* at Manakamana temple has been rather unique, indicating the deity's special relation to the royal line.

¹⁹ We have no evidence stating the name of the donor or time of construction or date of inauguration of the temple.

support of Unbescheid's contention (1985:99) that Ram Shah granted land for the upkeep of worship of Manakamana.

A copper inscription plate²⁰ fixed to the wall of Manakamana temple for more than two centuries provides the earliest and best documentation we have about the land grant. The plate provides evidence that the royal donor had in mind a wider sacred geography. This holy landscape encompassed the nearby shrine of the god Bakreśwar, his huge *liṅgam* identified with Shiva and the holy caves of the *Siddha* (the enlightened one) - the legendary tantric Lakhan Thāpā who was the proto-historical ancestor of the priestly Lāhe lineage of the Thapa Magar clan. The initial grant by Prithvi Narayan Shah of royal crown land ensured a sound resource base for maintenance of the shrine, for daily worship and ostentatious ceremonies undertaken by local temple officials. They acted on behalf of a ruler who, in spite of some temporary military setbacks, proved overwhelmingly successful until his death in 1775.

With a reasonable degree of certainty we are able to establish the circumstances in which the *gūthi* of Manakamana was established and the ritual of *Barṣabandhan Pujā*²¹ became a royally sponsored biannual event. Our findings are based on a number of written sources, oral material and published material about the economic and political history of the period of forced unification (1745-1815).

One documentary source is a magnificent embellished bell hanging in front of the temple gate. The inscription states that Prithvi Narayan Shah offered the bell on the auspicious Full Moon Day, Monday, 15th of Baiśākh (April-May) 1828 V.S. (1771).²² This coincides with the earliest date on which *Barṣabandhan* was celebrated according to our written and oral evidence. Hence it is probable that the king donated the bell to the Goddess during the first ever royally-sponsored *Barṣabandhan* ceremony. The time of Prithvi Narayan Shah's bestowal of the bell thus was three years after the Malla kingdoms had been conquered. The Gorkhali king still aspired to conquer the league of twenty-four (*Caubisi*) principalities that clustered south-west of Gorkha. We have to consider two likely pragmatic political concerns, which may explain the King's conspicuous devotional act.

The donation may have been the fulfilment of a vow the king possibly made during previous worship appropriating Manakamana's divine, protective powers, which had effect during the last dramatic phase of warfare (in 1867-1868) against the

²⁰ The full text is published in Bhattarai (1998) and in Unbescheid (1985).

²¹ *Barṣabandhan* as a royally-sponsored ceremony is as far as we have been able to ascertain only observed in Manakamana and in Hanuman Dhoka in Kathmandu. In numerous temples *Barṣabandhan* is part of the ritual cycle, but an insignificant event observed without any state sponsorship.

²² The original bell was broken and replaced by a new one, on which parts of the original inscription are still preserved.

three city states of Nepal.²³ Burghart (1996: 220) has found similar evidence of divine appropriation before this attack. Three days earlier, Prithvi Narayan Shah's younger brother offered a bell to the Goddess Bhairavi at Nuwakot.²⁴ Another possibility is that the donation was intended to ensure Manakamana's divine support for the Gorkhali's campaign against the *Caubisi* chiefdoms Lamjung and Kaski, launched in the same month of April 1771. Both these hypotheses could explain what motivated the king to donate the bell on that particular *Barṣabandhan*. The Gorkhali conquest was crowned with success that time, a success in which Manakamana got her recognised share.

Successfully in occupying Kathmandu, Prithvi Narayan Shah chose the city as his new imperial capital. Having entered the city, the warrior-lord ordered the installation of Bhagavati at Basantapur near the palace he was about to take over from the Malla king. The palace-temple became the new centre of his religious realm. Our interviews with the Gubhāju priests responsible for the calendrial worship there have revealed that the historical lunar date of the official consecration and installation of Bhagavati (still re-enacted annually in the Kandelchok *Barṣabandhan* ceremony) occurred one lunar month after the donation of the mentioned bell. To us this seems not entirely unintentional, as we shall explain below.

An ancient legend handed down through several generations of royally appointed Gubhāju priests²⁵ until the present contains certain historical clues. This legend builds on a mythology which claims that the king received the precious living image of Bhagavati²⁶ from his patron saint Gorakhnath. The legend contains three main narrative themes. One is about the successive movements of Bhagavati (from Gorkha to Nuwakot and later to Kathmandu) at every stage of the military conquest. On a second level the legend elaborates the Buddhist high priests' magic-religious feat through tantric rites, which successfully settled Bhagavati in Kathmandu. A third story-line tells about how the king as a token of appreciation appointed them as god-guardians. These appointments included duties and honours for the Kandelchok and Nuwakot Bhagavati and also for the quite distantly located Manakamana Devi in her

²³ In March 1767 the strategically located city of Kirtipur was captured after a massacre. Controlling Kirtipur, the Gorkhali could enclose the three city-states in an effective blockade. Kathmandu fell in September 1767 and Bhadgaun and Patan a couple of months later.

²⁴ Nuwakot was conquered in 1744. The conquest enabled Gorkhali participation in the very profitable trade between Tibet and Kathmandu. Income from the trade provided the financial base for continued and expanded warfare and was the main reason behind the decision to move the capital.

²⁵ We thank the Vajrācārya priests from Jhwābahāl *ṭol* Kathmandu, who for generations have held priestly responsibilities at Kandelchok and Manakamana, for sharing this legend with us.

²⁶ The stone image is not a symbol. The living deity inheres in the stone(s), and she/he must thus be attended to as any human ruler.

mountain abode in Gorkha. The legend obviously serves to legitimate why this lineage of Gubhāju priests has held the right to this temple honour ever since.

The legend's last narrative sequence, about two Buddhist Gubhāju's royal part-time appointment, also indicates that they became responsible for a royally-sponsored ceremony, which almost certainly was *Barṣabandhan Pujā*. Local oral tradition in Manakamana narrates that a royal entourage, including the Buddhist Gubhāju and other high-ranking officials, officiated at the ceremony.

The legend's three main narrative themes²⁷ invite further, less obvious interpretations. The narration of how the deities' spatial movement followed each phase of the conquest implies that the territorial expansion could only occur through a parallel enlargement of the cosmological realm which had its centres in Gorkha. This realm was metaphorically elaborated in a kinship idiom. Manakamana, Gorkha Kalika (whose shrine was within the Gorkha palace precincts) and Nuwakot Bhagavati were conceived as "three sisters", and Manakamana as the eldest of the three. The third narrative element implies that the final movement could not have succeeded without the Gubhāju's own assistance. The narrative indirectly states that these Newar high priests, themselves subjects of the conquered nations, played an active role in legitimising the conquest of Kathmandu. We also suggest that there was a reason why the subsequent dates were chosen for the consecration of the powerful Bhagavati and for the royally sponsored regular worship of Manakamana.

The new overlords needed to broadcast and institutionalise a collective memory (Connerton 1991) about what was indigenously conceived as the deities' instrumental role in the unification itself. The decision to institute two public ceremonies (in Kathmandu and Manakamana) on the two subsequent auspicious full-moon dates, created two spectacles of royal splendour and protective strength, in which the this-worldly and the cosmological were fused. When the conquering Gorkhali entered the Kathmandu Valley they went to the major temples of the conquered Malla kings.²⁸ The Mallas' major tutelary deities had instantly to be worshipped, to express submission to the gods' sovereignty in *their* own realm.²⁹ The Gorkhali thereby managed to receive the deities' blessing. The blessing lent the necessary honours and legitimacy to their rule in the new territory.

²⁷ Unbescheid (1985: 106-107) has published a somewhat different version of this legend. In its initial sequence the King first forgets his Bhagavati at Nuwakot, and then with the help of the Newar goldsmiths installs another image to reign undisturbed.

²⁸ The Basantapur Kumari was the living manifestation of Taleju Bhavani. According to *vamśāvalī*s, the last Malla king of Kathmandu, Jayaprakash, instituted the royal worship of Kumari. There is evidence indicating that the king performed more propitiatory rites of Taleju and other goddesses as the threat of the Gorkhali invasion grew (Allen 1975: 18).

²⁹ The supreme god in standard Hindu texts is termed *Bhūvanpati*, which means "owner of cosmos". A king can only rule through the deities' conferral of authority in circumscribed religious and political realms.

Text-based evidence - a series of four red sealed (*lāl mohar*) royal letters issued in 1850 V.S. (1793 AD) by King Rana Bahadur Shah (Prithvi Narayan's grandson) provide insights into the organisation of the ceremony.³⁰ The letters were issued to the *caudhari* and the *adai*³¹ at the royal palaces in Nuwakot and Gorkha and contain instructions about procuring worship materials for use in the *Barṣabandhan Pujā*. The *lāl mohar* to the storekeeper at Gorkha Palace shows that the ceremony had already become a regular royally-sponsored ritual. This letter, which contains detailed information about all items for worship to be sent up to Manakamana from the two palaces at Gorkha and Nuwakot, makes it evident that by 1793 the size of the income from the *guṭhi* did not suffice for this rather resource-intensive, royally sponsored ceremony. Later the royal authority improved the *guṭhi*'s income base.

One later royal order (issued in 1841 by King Rajendra) describes in great detail the new and old sources of income - which should cover all expenses, including worship, wages and maintenance.³² The same letter also mentions a caretaker of the *guṭhi* house (*guṭhi ghar citāi garnyā*), who was to accompany the palace officials to Manakamana. We do not know if the earliest caretaker arrived in Manakamana upon royal appointment or by his own effort. We do know that the first family entrusted with this duty settled close to the temple precincts and established a flower garden for the Goddess. Over time the family who had this caretaker function, a menial outer-temple staff duty considered suitable for lower castes, gradually gained enough social influence to claim a more prestigious role as *guṭhiyār*. The *guṭhiyār* functioned as the king's representative during the *Barṣabandhan Pujā*. We have not been able to trace any evidence about the actual circumstances under which the caretakers successfully negotiated entry to an inner-temple function. The fact that they did is suggestive of the existence of fluid caste relations in the first half of the 19th century, a theme we will return to below when analysing the division of labour between inner- and outer-temple functionaries.

During the latter half of the 19th century the Rana-led government introduced a national Legal Code which is generally assumed to have enforced a more rigid caste system in Nepal (Höfer 1979). The National Code of 1854 had few noticeable effects in Manakamana. Local Brahmins did not manage to use the Code to increase their share in the temple honours. The pork-eating Magars (classified in the Code as non-

³⁰ Royal orders to *caudhari* at Gorkha Palace; to *adai* Rup Narayan Lakshmishankar of Gorkha, to *adai* Hari Padhya of Nuwakot, to *umrāu*, *dwārya*, *jeṭhāburā*, *kaṭuwāl* of Kaphyāk, Bakrang, Siling, Banauti and Bhogteni, regarding *Barṣabandhan Pujā*, from King Rana Bahadur Shah, Saturday, 1st bright half of Baiśākha (April-May), 1850 V.S. (1793 AD). All orders were found in the archives of Guthi Samsthan (Guthi Corporation), Kathmandu.

³¹ In the hills the post of *caudhari* was as storekeeper of all supplies of oil, salt, ghee etc. at a palace. In the Tarai the same title was used for a high-ranking official responsible for tax collection in a Pargana (Regmi 1978: 128). The *adai* was responsible for the kitchen, and the supplies of flour and rice.

³² Royal order to Rajendra Newar issued Friday, 9th dark half of Māgh, 1898 V.S., archive of Ram Kumar Joshi, Manakamana.

enslaveable and ranked above the water buffalo-eating Newars) remained in control of the office as god-guardians. Key ritual functions within the temple community remained ranked and measured by the relative share in offices, temple honours, land, and other privileges granted by the king and his Devi.

Rivalry for the guardianship of the trust

Three royal orders (to be discussed below) which date back to the early 19th century bear evidence of rivalry for the position of the Devi's principal guardian (*pūjāri*). The conflict involved a Newar Buddhist Vajrācārya priest (Gubhāju or Bāṛā),³³ who according to the local folk tradition settled in Kaphyāk under quite extraordinary circumstances.

A corpus of legends that still hold a strong sway over the collective memory in the locality, irrespective of caste and clan divisions, recounts a time of natural calamities that coincided with continuous warfare by the Gorkhali king. According to the legends, the Goddess revealed in dreams to some locals that she demanded from her people the greatest sacrifice, of a human child, in order to be appeased. No family was ready to offer their child. Panic struck a small group of villagers, who set out on the strenuous journey to the new capital, where they presented their petition for assistance to their royal overlord. According to the legends, the palace ordered the *Vajrācārya* priest Gyānkar Bāṛā to accompany the villagers back to Gorkha in an attempt to appease the fierce deity. As the legend goes, Gyānkar mobilised his magical powers to create a substitute (human) sacrifice in a tantric ceremony. Through his tantric practices Gyānkar succeeded in satisfying the goddess's hunger for human flesh and blood. As the story goes, Manakamana was gradually appeased and pacified.

In the absence of text-based evidence we can only speculate whether the royal authority rewarded Gyānkar Bāṛā with a share, together with the Thāpā Magar *pūjāri*, in the priestly responsibility for both *Barṣabandhan* Pujā and for the daily worship of the Goddess. Possibly the villagers themselves, who must have been rather impressed by Gyānkar's superhuman powers, invited him and his family to settle with them above the temple.

This well-known legend's literal narration about the Devi as the destructive agency, causing havoc, contains a hidden sub-text, which refers to a specific historical situation. We interpret the expressions "the Goddess's anger" and "her impatience" as indirectly referring to the continuing Gorkhali warfare, which resulted in a very high death toll among young Magars, and to the subject population's own impatience over losing their young. The paradigmatic sovereign stands meta-

³³ In the official correspondence Gubhāju is used as a synonym to Vajrācārya. In local parlance the non-honorific term Bāṛā is in use. Only in direct conversation with Vajrācārya priests is the honorific term Gubhāju in use.

phorically for the martial kingship, which literally devours the children of Kaphyāk. One of Prithvi Narayan Shah's four regiments was composed of Magars only. The regiment's principal recruitment base was the Marga-inhabited villages of Gorkha, including Kaphyāk.

It seems to us that there was popular discontent in Kaphyāk over losing most of their young men in a seemingly never-ending war campaign, which had already lasted more or less continuously for decades. Such discontent could not be expressed directly in this political and cultural context. Any direct resistance would be taken as an expression of disloyalty and severely punished. The only politically acceptable and culturally meaningful mode of expressing discontent was through the language of their own deity. The legend directly describes their own Devi as the destroyer of prosperity, and the tantric priest becomes, by royal appointment and protection, the restorer of the social order.

The royal decision to send a tantric priest seems in our interpretation to have been intended to serve a dual purpose. The arrival of Gyānkar and his performance would gradually help in restoring the bond of loyalty between the monarch and his subjects in Kaphyāk. The king might have feared that the unrest in Kaphyāk could spread to neighbouring principalities. News about a successful, royally sponsored human mock sacrifice would circulate rapidly in the surrounding locality, ease the discontent and work to strengthen the loyalty of his supporters while instilling fear in his adversaries' minds. Unbescheid (1985: 101-103) has published one version of this legend, which he interprets as a narrative that explains the origin of the whole cult during the reign of Ram Shah. In Unbescheid's structural interpretation, this narrative element shows an underlying logic of reciprocity. The Queen-Goddess demands a human sacrifice to fulfil her promise to reappear as Goddess. The villagers request assistance from the outsider Gyānkar Gubhāju who creates a substitute child that is sacrificed to appease the Goddess. Unlike Unbescheid, we do not think these elements indirectly hint at a historical connection between the establishment of the cult and an actual substitute sacrifice. There exists absolutely no oral and written evidence for any Newar Buddhist presence in Manakamana before Prithvi Narayan Shah's time or for any ceremonial substitute sacrifice (re-enacting the original sacrifice) before its introduction as part of the *Barṣabandhan* ceremony some time during the 1760s.

Although the Bāṛā's settlement in the late 18th century was initially appreciated, it soon turned into a long and bitter "tug of war" between the Thāpā Magars and Bāṛās over gaining and retaining the exclusive right to the office of *pujāri*. The appointment entailed major honours, the rights to a certain portion of the grain revenue, and responsibilities for the temple administration and as the main guardian of the Devi. Thus, the stakes involved in the appointment were considerable. They included more specifically full responsibilities as revenue collector for all the Devi's tillers, rights to reallocate land if any cultivator failed to pay revenue, overall responsibility for the temple management, and full jurisdictional powers in respect of

five specified criminal offences. The position was renewed annually by the palace. The remuneration included rights to farmland, and the right to control the remaining portion of the total revenue after covering all expenditure.³⁴

Assessing three royal orders about renewal or transferral of the priestly position in the period 1814-1820, we find that a descendant of Lakhan Thāpā got his right to the office renewed in 1814. Somewhat surprisingly one Nabal Singh Bāṛā, possibly the son of Gyānkar, already the following year snatched the appointment from the Magar *pujāri*. Referring to the early order from 1814, another royal appointment letter from 1820 (1877 V.S.) again transfers all rights and responsibilities previously conferred to Nabal Singh Bāṛā to one Balamant Thāpā (descendant of Lakhan Thāpā).³⁵

The notable absence of similar archival evidence of rivalry over the position between 1820 and early 20th century cannot be taken as solid evidence proving that the Bāṛās and Thāpā Magars had ceased fighting for official approval of their assignments at the temple. Narrative elements in some folk stories indicate that they gradually came to an informal local agreement about a sharing of the daily offerings (*bheṭi*) to the Devi. From this period onward we have found evidence of intermarriages between the priestly Bāṛās and the chiefly Lāhe lineage of the Thāpā Magar clan. These intermarriages must have curbed the rivalry over the *pujāri*-ship fairly effectively. We do not preclude the possibility that breaches in caste endogamy occurred in Kaphyāk much earlier, as a response to the demographic imbalance caused by the high numbers of casualties and deaths among men who fought in the army during the Gorkhali empire period (1768-1814).

Kingship and rituals in honour of Manakamana

Barṣabandhan in Manakamana is the ceremonial year's most important ritual cycle,³⁶ celebrated both in the Devi's inner sanctum and in her temple courtyard. Unlike in Manakamana, in Gorkha town the main ceremonial worship of the royal lineage deity, the Gorkha Kalika, one of Manakamana's sisters, falls within the pan-Nepali celebrations of *Baḍā Daśāī* and *Caite Daśāī*.³⁷

³⁴ This right to a share of the grain revenue is clearly stated in official correspondence until the Rana Period (1846 AD).

³⁵ All three orders are published in Bhattarai (1998). These orders are to be found in the archives of the Guthi Samsthan in Kathmandu.

³⁶ Lecomte-Tilouine (1993) has documented that Manakamana is a rather prominent member of the local pantheon in the Magar-dominated parts of northern Gulmi District, located in the western-most part of the Gandaki region.

³⁷ Apart from *Daśāī*, other all-Nepali calendar festivals observed in Manakamana area are: *Mahāśivarātri*, *Kṛṣṇa Aṣṭamī*, *Tij*, *Śrāvaṇ Saṃkrānti* and *Nughāgī*.

Understanding *Barṣabandhan* as a *local* festival and *Daśāī* as a *national* one could easily be misleading. Firstly, it is correct that the religious festival is celebrated within the spatial confines of Manakamana. However, we would be wrong in using the term “local” in a more inclusive sense, involving context of origin and cultural meanings. Based on our insights about the particular political and cultural context in which *Barṣabandhan* was instituted, we argue that *Barṣabandhan* was, and has remained, a *localised* festival. *Barṣabandhan* represents an institutional arena at the interface between the state and Nepali society. Divine kingship is expressed in the root metaphors of both *Barṣabandhan* and *Daśāī*. The king emerges in both the ritual cycles as the first devotee and the victorious protector of the cosmos.

Barṣabandhan placement within the lunar calendar in relation to both Buddhist Newari and Hindu festivals provides us with certain clues by which we can grasp the underlying cosmological ideas. *Barṣabandhan* is celebrated in mid-May and mid-November, and falls some weeks before and after the four-month period (*caturmāsa*) when Vishnu is asleep.³⁸ Both the biannual ceremonies fall at significant points in the agricultural cycle. The spring *Barṣabandhan* is just before the main season of planting paddy seedlings and the autumn festival falls right after the golden sheaths of grain have been brought to the threshing floor.

The ceremony is initiated on the 8th day of the waxing moon, after *aṣṭamī* (in Baiśākh and Kārtik). The whole ten-day cycle (*Pañcamī Guthi*), is named after the only four days that are considered auspicious and devoted to both public and secret tantric worship. During the secret worship only the Gubhāju priest (currently representing the Guthi Corporation), the *guthiyār thakāli* (representing the royal devotee) and the *jeṭhāburā* (from the local *guthi*) are present. While the secret worship takes place in Manakamana’s shrine, Bakreśwor is also worshipped in his open mountain shrine situated in the sacred forest above. Also commemorating Gyānkar Gubhāju’s substitute sacrifice, the *Murkaṭṭā* - the beheaded torso- and the head (which is buried by Bhairab’s shrine) are secretly worshipped. The Gubhāju and the *thakāli* usually appear in the temple courtyard toward the end of the ceremony in the temple. There the Magar *pujāri* and a Brahmin priest await them to assist in sanctifying five goats and two buffaloes. The huge crowd of devotees observes carefully if the sacred acts proceed in the ritually proper manner.

In this essay we refrain from analysing the multi-layered meanings of the complex ritual sequences.³⁹ It suffices to say that since nearly all these worshipping implements are used in Newar Buddhist rituals, and most also in Hindu rituals, they

³⁸ Vishnu falls asleep on the 11th day of the bright half of Āṣāḍh (June-July) and wakes up on the 11th day of the bright half of Kārtik (October-November). We notice that most Hindu calendrical festivals (*Kṛṣṇa Aṣṭamī*, *Tīj*, *Daśāī* and *Tihār*) fall inside of this four-month period, an inauspicious period during which natural calamities often occur and both humans and animals often fall prey to diseases.

³⁹ Admission to these esoteric rites is generally restricted to the officiants only. One of the authors of this article was cordially granted permission to observe the rituals.

have both Buddhist and Hindu religious references.⁴⁰ The religious meanings of *Barṣabandhan Pujā* are thus multivalent and vary not only between religious specialists and commoners, but also between the various officiants conducting the ceremony behind the gold-plated barred doors of the inner shrine. We confine ourselves here to mention briefly two ritual sequences: *saṃkalpa* and *pujā* of the *Murkaṭṭā*. *Samkalpa* is an initial public act of worship that expresses a commitment. The declaration specifies the donors' names, date and place of the ritual, the types and amount of offerings, and the number of ritual specialists involved in the donation. Such a ritual declaration initiates each stage of public or esoteric worship during *Barṣabandhan*. The way the announcement is displayed demonstrates the relevance of one of our major theoretical contentions, that the ceremony is a spectacle – a representative arena for the royal devotee, his gifts and his subjects. In the secret *pujā* for the *Murkaṭṭā*, head and torso are ritually reunited. In spite of the secrecy surrounding the rituals, local people are aware of them. They take the symbolic reunification to re-enact the unification of Nepal. The head signifies the kingdom Gorkha and the body the possessed territories.

The signifying and transactional similarities that define the relationship between devotees and deities in both the public and secret rituals, and the relationship between commoners and rulers in other ritual contexts, are striking. The deities are indeed worshipped as sovereigns: bathed, clothed, adorned with royal regalia, fed and requested for help and intervention.⁴¹ Our interpretation finds support in much-recited scriptures, which hail the Goddess as the paradigmatic sovereign, as well as in popular notions. Indeed, common devotees liken this worship to a conjugal wedding ceremony wherein their deity is the bride and Bhairab her groom.

Since a Hindu warrior king more than two centuries ago instituted the ritual cycle of *Barṣabandhan*, it appears to have thrived throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in a strikingly non-competitive way between Buddhist and Hindu ritual specialists and commoners. The Devi's proximity to a righteous (*dhārmik*) kingship (*rāj*), annually renewed and displayed in *Barṣabandhan*; her powers as a sovereign in her own right, fulfilling individual wishes when approached through worship; the different caste backgrounds of her temple servants (staff) and of her *guthi* tenants – are all factors contributing to her immense popular appeal. People worship gods and goddesses like Manakamana not because they are pure, but due to their reputation as being powerful.⁴²

⁴⁰ Gellner (1992:146-162), in his study of Newar Buddhism in Kathmandu Valley, describes in rich ethnographic detail a similar situation.

⁴¹ At the heart of the *pujā* is the asymmetrical transaction of foods, which is both supportive and expressive of the distance between the deity and the devotee. A similar hierarchical distance marks the ceremonial feeding of members of the royal house.

⁴² Manakamana is considered by many to be a blood-drinking deity akin to Bhairab. We suggest the Goddess is placed in an intermediate category between blood-drinking and vegetarian deities, since the officiant takes every care not to allow any blood from beheaded animals to spill over her stone image.

That the Devi is a sovereign person is vividly expressed in the worshippers' attitudes, which shift from piety and veneration to awe, fear and enthusiastic subordination. The devotees observing the *Barṣabandhan* ceremony share a common understanding of it as a display of royal grandeur and authority. If properly enacted without any inauspicious signs or defilement, the cycle of ceremonies demonstrates to them the king's empowerment through their own local deity. Properly empowered, the king as a sovereign can ensure the orderly running of the cosmos, the transition of the seasons, the propagation of wealth and prosperity and the control of vengeful and mischievous spirits. Common people are themselves not merely passive observers of a display of royal authority. As worshippers entitled to receive some of the deity's *prasād*, they themselves become incorporated into the realm of sovereignty.

Manakamana has remained a national arena displaying a syncretistic and flexible religious politics. This emerges in particular when we look at how devotees have located themselves in relation to both Tantric Buddhist and Hindu symbols, and when we consider the shifting hierarchy between temple offices which admitted both newcomers and longtime residents from different caste and ethnic backgrounds. Even as political mobilisation around ethnic markers has become important in the late 20th century, the religious and political centrality of Magars and Buddhist Newars in this prominent temple trust have not been much used to forward sectarian ethnic or nationalist claims.

The role of the temple in the redistribution of honours

We have discussed the proto-historic role of the famous Vajrācārya priest Gyānkar Bāṛā who was warmly received in Kaphyāk village after his tantric feat of pacifying the vengeful Devi. Our examination of written and oral evidence leads us to conclude that the Buddhist Gubhāju's ritual role in *Barṣabandhan* has remained virtually unchallenged during a period of more than 150 years. We have examined other text-based and oral evidence, which shows that after the Gubhāju (Bāṛā) priestly household had settled in the village, its members claimed a larger share in the ritual honours in the daily worship at the temple. At least in the early decades of the 19th century, the Bāṛā and Lāhe sub-lineages battled for exclusive rights to the position of *pujāri*. The palace itself intervened regularly in this conflict, mostly by renewing the right of Lakhan Thāpā's descendants, but sometimes also transferring the office to the contesting descendants of Gyānkar Bāṛā.

The Bāṛā Newars were not the only Newar immigrants to arrive in Manakamana in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. We have discussed the settlement of another family (from Kathmandu), who first was appointed caretaker for the trust's office and later *guṭhiyārs*. As the idea of a caste hierarchy was reinforced outside the temple context of Manakamana in the latter half of the 19th century, the *guṭhiyār* position became an increasingly valuable asset in the lineage's marriage strategies.

The *guthiyārs* managed to establish affinal relations with Newar merchant castes settled in Gorkha town and elsewhere.⁴³

The occupational histories of the Bāṛā and of the *guthiyār* lineages (who eventually started using the high-ranking surnames Joshi and Shrestha) provide us with glimpses into the tactics employed by enterprising newcomers struggling for social rank and economic security. The Gorkhali rulers' tactic of "incorporation" of the Newars from the Valley comes to the fore in our case study. Offering official service to members of high-ranking priestly families, both Buddhist and Hindu, ensured loyalty. The royal appointment of descendants from one prominent Magar lineage as the god-guardians of Manakamana helped to strengthen the identification of the Magars of the Gandaki "heartland" (to use Regmi's term) with the Gorkhali "proto-nation" project. Another tactical strategy, hardly visible in Manakamana, yet important in Gorkha town and in the Gandaki region at large, was encouraging Newar traders, shopkeepers and goldsmiths to settle along established trade routes to establish new market centres and trading stations there.

In this subsection we argue that the redistribution of honours or precedence in the form of temple functions and in shares of the redistributed *prasād* of the deity were closely interlinked. Our examination shows a striking variability in the order of precedence of the ritual functions of temple officials and in their shares of the *prasād* in the three main forms of worship - the calendrical festivals, daily and monthly worship, and instrumental worship for the benefit of the worshipper. It may be analytically useful to conceive of "the sum" of any collective shareholder's rights in honours as their share in both the worshipping rituals and the redistributive process of the temple. "Summing up" shares in this context is no simple quantitative exercise. It demands solid contextual judgement.

Since we have previously discussed the ritual shares of the Gubhāju, the *guthiyār thakāli*, the Magar *pujāri* and the Brahmin priests in *Barṣabandhan*, we now turn to scrutinise their shares in the Devi's distributed *prasād*. *Barṣabandhan* is brought to an end when the officials traverse the crowded temple courtyard and enter the trust's office. Well inside, the Gubhāju and the Brahmin priest exchange a mutual greeting (*namaskār*). This obeisance deserves commentary since it expresses a notable absence of hierarchy between the two officials. The chief deities' holy *prasād* is then redistributed. This redistributive process confers honour on all the recipients, including the main officiants and the common worshippers. The redistribution of the sacred food follows a ranked order. The priests and the royal donor's representative come first, followed by the other temple servants and lastly

⁴³ The *guthiyārs* maintained their obligations for annual lineage worship in their hometown until well into the 20th century. For all other purposes the *guthiyārs* form their own localised patrilineage in Manakamana. The lineage has split into two sub-lineages. One holds the first right as *guthiyārs*. The other has the right to fulfil the duties at the temple when the seniors of the other lineage observe pollution. Sometimes during the festival this division of duties causes internal disputes over relative rank.

the common devotees. Here we choose to concentrate our discussion on the inside and outside temple officials' relative shares, which signal a changing configuration of rank.

The rights of the Magar *pujāri*, the Gubhāju, the two Brahmin priests and the *guṭhiyār thakāli* in the *prasād* do not signal any clear-cut hierarchical order. The participants themselves and the local devotees rather think the shares reveal a functional division of ritual work. For example, the Gubhāju priest is the only one to receive meat from the snout and mouth, as he is mainly responsible for uttering the sacred incantations. Similarly the *guṭhiyārs* get the ears and eyes as concrete symbols of the nature of their services.⁴⁴ Only the share of the untouchable service caste, who get the tail as it is said to chase away insects from any animal's body, is associated with the body metaphor - expressive of the lowest-ranking servant function.

Barṣabandhan is unquestionably the most important annual calendrical festival in Manakamana. *Daśāī* is another principal ritual. Since the Guthi Corporation was established in 1964, it has taken the responsibilities previously held by the royal authority as the major donor of sacrificial buffaloes for the worship of Durga, worshipped in the variant form of Manakamana Devi. During the 15-day ritual cycle, one of the two Aryal Brahmin priests occupies the central role in the rituals, relegating the Magar *pujāri* to an auxiliary priest who prepares materials, cleans the sanctum and consecrates the animals. The Aryal Brahmin, in this context, is a *mul purohit*,⁴⁵ performing the esoteric rites in the inner sanctum helped by the Magar *pujāri*. The distribution of *prasād* following the main ritual steps of *Daśāī* signals a more clear-cut hierarchical order than *Barṣabandhan*. The officiants interpret their relative rank in light of their unequal shares in the *prasād* and unequal roles in the rituals, and agree in according the Aryal Brahmin the highest ranked honour.⁴⁶

To serve the Goddess of Manakamana daily has been the Magar *pujāri*'s principal duty since the earliest days of the temple. The *pujāri* enlivens his Devi, invoking her by sacred formulas, anointing, adorning and feeding her before the temple opens to the public in the morning and reopens later in the evening. Also, the *pujāri* conducts regular worship, including blood sacrifice, during all full moon days (*pūrṇimā*), the first day of every Nepali month (*saṁkrāntī*), and on the two fortnightly *aṣṭamī*. On all these occasions the Magar *pujāri* holds the exclusive right to touch the living stone images, prepares the pure food to be offered and ensures the purity of all other worship materials.

⁴⁴ Otherwise the distribution to the other office holders is usually not based on clear rules, expressive of any hierarchy. It has however occurred, that the head is sent to the King.

⁴⁵ *Mul purohit*, or Main Priest, is a categorical designation for the top position within the hierarchy of priestly functions. In Manakamana the Aryal Brahmin is not conceived of as the temple's top functionary.

⁴⁶ During *Caitra Daśāī* these shares are inverted. The Magar *pujāri* has the right to the whole body, except for the left leg, which is the Aryal Brahmin's share.

The appointed drummers from the Damai caste⁴⁷ serve the Goddess in the mornings and evenings by playing auspicious (*maṅgal*) music during the daily worship and during calendrical rites and social festivals. The musicians have never been admitted to the inner sanctum, as far as we have been able to ascertain. They keep the instruments in their own houses. Since the instruments are considered the Goddess's holy possession, they are laid out before the Devi daily.

Throughout the entire historical period under investigation, the Magar *pujāri* has been the main officiant during worship for the personal benefit of the devotee (*bhākal pujā*).⁴⁸ The *pujāri* evokes his Devi, offering gifts of fragrant flowers, money, precious jewellery and appetising foods, including animal sacrifices or substitutes. All sacred food offerings, except the brilliantly red-stained rice (which is considered unfit to consume) are returned to the devotees. The *guṭhiyār thakāli* customarily keeps any offered precious jewellery under lock and key. It has been considered the *pujāri*'s privilege to retain the cash offerings to the Devi.⁴⁹ Many devotees think that the offered money transfers impurity and sins from them to the recipient *pujāri*. Even so, neither the god-guardian himself nor his co-villagers conceive of him as the repository of impurities.

Bhattarai (1998) has shown that there was a well-functioning temple organisation in the old capital Gorkha during the time the trust of Manakamana was established (1760-1800). The structure of the multi-caste temple organisation at Gorkha Darbar embodied a rather clear-cut hierarchy of priests (Brahmins), auxiliary priests (including Magars) and outer menial temple staff.

Unlike in Gorkha Darbar, then and now, the relative shares held by the various patrilineages and sub-lineages in the worshipping of Manakamana exhibit no consistent hierarchy. Employing the spatial metaphor "pyramidal" for the graded structure underlying the shares in *Barṣabandhan*, we find that the pyramid "flattens out" near the top. We say this since the (Buddhist) Gubhāju and (Hindu) *guṭhiyār thakāli* are undoubtedly the main officiants, while distinctions between the Magar *pujāri*, the Aryal Brahmin and the *jeṭhāburā*, who all function as auxiliary helpers, are hardly noticeable. In contrast to this fluidity, the Damai musicians' share confers on them the lowest rank.

⁴⁷ We have identified a *lāl mohar* from 1875 V.S. (1818 AD) in the archives of Guthi Samsthan which appoints Dhanya Damai as drummer and assigns land as wages. Regmi (1978: 795) refers to a *jāgīr* grant to Rupa Champa Damai at Manakamana Temple in 1847 V.S. (1790 AD).

⁴⁸ Some high-caste pilgrims choose to bring along their own house priest, who then takes over parts of the ritual actions otherwise performed by the Magar *pujāri*.

⁴⁹ The *pujāri*'s enormously increasing income is bound to become a very delicate political and legal issue, as the income of the priestly lineage at Pashupatinath Temple has already become.

The pyramidal form of shares and precedence at *Daśāī* exhibit a characteristically “pointed” form. The Aryal Brahmin, acting as *mul purohit*, holds first precedence, followed by the Magar *pujāri* and the Marahatta and Aryal Brahmin reciters. Strikingly, none of those Brahmin lineages that currently hold entitlements in the rituals have in their possession any written official documents certifying their rights. We therefore cannot completely rule out that the two patrilineages’ involvement is of a more recent origin than we initially assumed. *Daśāī* has on the other hand enjoyed some ideological and administrative importance as a state/royally sponsored event in Manakamana since the early days of the Trust.⁵⁰ From then onward Brahmin priests most likely had a limited stake in the temple’s ritual process, though they were not admitted as fully-fledged trust members with full rights to trust land (Bleie and Bhattarai 2001).

Drawing general conclusions about the total shares of the different sub-lineages in Manakamana is a challenge. This is so, not simply because of their varying precedence in different principal ritual events. We have also to explain the relative importance we place on scriptural orthodox notions and on popular ideas in analysing the religious significance of ranked honours entailed in daily and monthly *pujā*, calendrical public festivals and worship for the benefit of the devotee. From the scriptural point of view of both Vajrayana Buddhism and Hinduism, worship for instrumental ends represents the lowest form of worship (Gellner 1992). The Magar *pujāri* holds the main share in such worship. Furthermore, he is the main officiant of the daily and lunar worship of the Goddess. Such worship is indeed from a scriptural point of view *essential* for enlivening the deity, maintaining her protection and ensuring auspiciousness in and beyond the community.

Contrary to the scriptural point of view, the Goddess’s own tenants and the overwhelming majority of the worshippers do not consider *bhākal pujā* as a lower form of worship. Moreover, the Goddess’s own tillers understand the relations between themselves and the sub-lineages who hold privileged appointments in the temple as a functional division of shared responsibilities. They all depend on the sovereign Manakamana, whom they are obliged to serve and to whom they owe everything in life. The whole ritual process would break down, causing disaster for all if one function should fail.

Our ethnography therefore demonstrates how misleading it would be to base our analysis solely on a Brahmanistic theological notion of ritual purity, in which the Brahmin priests hold first precedence over a religious domain separated from a kingly political domain. In this ideal model of Brahmin priesthood, morally coded substance is derived both from birth and from a pure way of life. In addition, the Brahmin priest is differentiated from other ritual specialists by his special scholarly knowledge derived from a school of priests. These criteria are of minor if any

⁵⁰ The already mentioned copper plate over the entry gate from 1821 V.S. shows that the responsibilities for mobilising resources and organising *Daśāī* fell on the *guthi*.

importance in the vibrant, popular religion practised in Manakamana's honour. Neither the Aryal Brahmin nor the Magar *pujāri* are expected to spend hours daily in preparatory purification rituals. Both espouse a variety of rationalisations to justify their own omissions and display in conversation a limited grasp of the underlying theological meanings of the texts they recite from.

The *pujāri* position has until recently been considered by far the most powerful chiefly position in the whole locality by the trust members and indeed by the farming population in the wider locality. This position has entailed a comprehensive set of assignments as local headman (*amālī*) since the trust's early days. Since those early years the *pujāri*, in his capacity as headman, controlled the collection of revenue and the allocation of trust land to new settlers. Administrative changes in the early decades of the 20th century only formalised his position as a full-fledged chief. The prestigious appointment itself was a renewable gift from the supreme overlord in Kathmandu. The gift created a deep social bond based on loyalty, tested and affirmed through the cumbersome system of annual renewals. The royal appointment lent sovereignty to the *pujāri*, who became a minor "king" in Kaphyāk, with his own circumscribed domain. At *Daśāi* and at *Sāune Saṁkrantī* and *Tij*, the *amālī* appeared as a small "king" with his own "court" (*darbār*) of tax collectors and deferential co-villagers. In addition, the *pujāri* in Manakamana controlled many of the overall administrative and management functions at the temple elsewhere controlled by *gūṭhiyār*s (Regmi 1978a:708). Due to their royal assignments, the Lāhe (*pujārī*) lineage, the *gūṭhiyār* and the Bāṛā lineages have in Manakamana enjoyed privileges such as exemption from the onerous obligatory duty to offer labour to the central royal authority and to their own trust.

Based on the above we conclude that the *pujāri* position was at the centre of a double redistributive system of land rights and religious honours. The Magar *pujāri*'s total share in this double redistributive system remained larger than any other's share, at least until the rather sweeping political and administrative changes in the middle of the 20th century.

Until the downfall of the Rana-regime in 1951 the *gūṭhi* of Manakamana was dealt with by a unified royal capacity, which was both judicial and administrative.⁵¹ The *gūṭhi* enjoyed in some respects favourable treatment in the form of occasional exemptions from administrative changes in rates and forms of taxation. The royal authority's interference was basically in two forms: arbitration of temple disputes, such as the Bāṛās' and Lāhes' conflict over the right to the position as *pujāri*, and very occasional adjustments of tax rates and payment forms. The return of the royal Shahs as the key power-holders in the early 1950s, and the early attempts to

⁵¹ This was not the overall situation. Major changes in the structure of the Nepalese polity occurred from around the turn of the century; differentiation between the economic and the political occurred through step-wise changes in land tenure (see Burghart 1983, and Bleie & Bhattarai 2001).

democratise the mode of government, including the first steps towards a more legal-rational mode of bureaucratic government, separated Manakamana as well as other trusts from the Hindu monarch's direct control. A rapid bureaucratisation and a series of reforms occurred. These reforms in crucial ways came to alter the ancient relationship between the central state and the trusts.

With the establishment of the Guthi Corporation in 1964, the *guthi* of Manakamana came under its jurisdiction. Some years earlier, the system of local government was changed and the so-called Panchayat system was established,⁵² which radically altered the functions and relative status of the temple offices. In the 20th century the temple officials in Manakamana included the *pujāri*, the *guthiyār thakālī*, one drummer and two or three other musicians who played wind instruments, one messenger (*kaṭuwāl*), one worker (*kārbārī*) and one *jeṭhābuṛā*. The actual status of *kaṭuwāl*, *kārbārī* and *jeṭhābuṛā* declined as a result of the sweeping post-Rana local government reforms. The *pujāri* lost the vital judicial and most of the administrative functions he had single-handedly controlled before the new local Panchayat bodies were established. A part of the right as tax collector was also taken away, as the cultivators were to pay most of their dues directly to the District Land Revenue Office. The *pujāri*, the *guthiyār thakālī* and their kinsmen responded quickly to the threat of the shrinking power base of their offices and ran for election to the Panchayat Council. Empowered through their ritual rank and social status, these lineages have come to occupy most of the posts in the local electoral bodies in Manakamana until the present.

Conclusion

Our investigations of the relationship between the trust of Manakamana and Prithvi Narayan Shah cast light on the institution of kingship in the new Empire State. We have attempted to highlight the political and cultural context of the temple's establishment – particularly the underlying cultural categories of kingship, worship and authority – a context which motivated Prithvi Narayan Shah's intensified patronage of Manakamana and led him to establish a religious trust in her name. These acts of royal patronage were not only simply signs of victory, they may actually have had something to do with the military outcome. Certainly, the Gorkhali themselves were led by a model of causality which attributed success and defeat to their patron deities. At moments of military victory (or succession to the crown by other means) support of powerful *Yogīs* and deities' conferral of some of their authority on the new sovereign were both essential for establishing his legitimate

⁵² King Mahendra regarded the four-tiered structure at village, district, zonal and state levels, together with kingship, as well suited to promoting development in Nepal. All sovereignty was still vested in the king, and the panchayats had only an advisory function.

rule. The institution of Nepalese kingship formed a particular political economy based on a certain distribution of authority, which was intimately linked to resource allocation based on a particular cultural logic of redistribution.

The redistribution of offices, including their renewals, forged relations based on a hierarchical solidarity between kings and temple officials and trust-tenants, who all received their part of the honours by accepting the royal donations and by participating in the biannual royally sponsored *Barṣabandhan*. This continuous redistributive process not simply consolidated, but notably strengthened the resident Magar, Gurung and Newar clans' identification with the Gorkhali proto-nation project in the late 18th and 19th centuries.

The temple institution that evolved incorporated the two lower units of social organisation, the villages and the sub-lineages, within a single encompassing entity with ritual, political, economic and judicial functions. We have described the rights and the modes of worshipping and receiving temple honours. We find that the nature of participation is ranked if analysed with regard to the principal categories of participants: the royal donor, temple officials and common devotees. When we examine the temple officials' own notions of their relative shares in honours we find a structure characterised by functional interdependence rather than by hierarchy. *Daśai*, unlike the annually most important festival *Barṣabandhan* and the other calendrical festivals, shows a more distinctly Brahmanistic hierarchical order.

In Manakamana, Buddhist Gubhāju priests have played prominent roles, initially during the unification period as members of the royal entourage, then in the early 19th century as resident temple officials and in the late 19th and 20th centuries again as officials of the king and the Guthi Corporation. The result is an enduring Buddhist tantric influence on the form and content of *Barṣabandhan*. On this basis we say that at least this ritual process in Manakamana, as a national arena for a meeting between Buddhism and Hinduism, is not one of clear-cut hierarchical encompassment. Whether the syncretism of *Barṣabandhan* in Manakamana is an exception that confirms this rule in Nepal, deserves further investigation.

We have in this study combined ethnographic and historical approaches in an attempt to avoid the danger of substantialising categories and hierarchies by underestimating or misinterpreting the context and the process of change, and thereby assigning static meanings to fluid, if not egalitarian relationships stretching over a considerable time span. We have presented a temple-centric view of the social relations between kings, chiefs and commoners, arguing against a view which sees the temple as a secondary manifestation of kingship, kinship and caste. Instead, the Manakamana temple and indeed other principal temples in Nepal deserve to be analysed as constituting a central domain for constituting and renewing multiple social relations, indeed for solving conflicts as well as instituting submission.

In the case of Manakamana the same generous gifts from the royal centre to Manakamana in the periphery came to carry the seeds of destabilisation of the very

hierarchy the gifts were supposed to consolidate. The Devi's god-guardian became a sovereign in his own right, commanding respect and services from his subordinates. Some of the latter were at times envious and had enough standing and influence to contest his honours. In their capacity as protectors, the kings themselves for many generations mediated the rivalry for the right to the position. The gradual split between the administrative and jurisdictional functions, which finally led to the establishment of the Guthi Corporation, shifted the temple politics over rights to offices from the palace (*darbār*) to the courts.

Perhaps because Manakamana is a relatively small temple institution, we have found few serious disputes. Dynamism and flexibility have been its predominant characteristics, evident in the documented caste mobility, which seems related to the fact that the "dominant sub-caste" was a Magar lineage. This lineage has successfully managed to monopolise principal chiefly and priestly functions due to their royal patronage. We would stress that this mobility, so cleverly utilised by the Newars, was never open to the untouchable castes in the locality.

From being a divine protector of military prowess and source of authority to warrior kings, the Goddess of Manakamana gradually became - as an integral part of the nation-building process - a national wish-fulfilling and protective deity. Manakamana no longer granted personal protection and prosperity exclusively to the Shah rulers and her own tillers. Until this day, commoners as well as rulers concerned with their unpredictable fortunes and futures have found it deeply meaningful to appear in front of Manakamana in her imposing abode on a mountaintop in Gorkha.

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