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## Migration, Gender and Nation in Nepali Dohori Performance

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analysis is now underway and the dissertation will be completed by April of 2007.

By analyzing the changing dynamics of household conditions and community contexts (i.e., socio-cultural, demographic and economic), this research establishes general relationships underlying subsistence behavior of mountain smallholders, their dependence on agricultural and forest resources, and the extent to which their behaviors are historically and spatially influenced by changing local demography, expanding market economy, shared cultural knowledge and institutional arrangements in use. It also detects the changes in land-cover patterns by analyzing set of multi-temporal Landsat data of 1984, 1994, and 2003 and their classification and thematic accuracy. In doing so, it identifies the proximate causes and the driving forces of LULCC

and places them within the context of longer histories of the coupled human-ecological system of the area. Finally, it also captures how an important cross-section of actors perceive, manage, and change agriculture and forest resources in the Nepal Himalaya—one of the environmentally critical regions of the world.

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## MIGRATION, GENDER AND NATION IN NEPALI DOHORI PERFORMANCE

My current research examines Nepali migrants' construction of gendered national identity through language and music. Specifically, it concentrates on the emerging commercial musical genre of improvised male-female duets known as dohori, in which romantic love, migration, and social issues are addressed through humorous lyrical play. Dohori has become widely popular over the past two decades, peaking in popularity during the past three years with the influx of migration from hill villages to Kathmandu. Previously rejected by Radio Nepal as unworthy of radio broadcast, dohori was embraced by the newly formed private music companies and FM radio stations in the 1990s. Dohori cassettes now provide the sales base of Nepal's major private music companies. Since the first dohori club opened in Kathmandu in 1996, the number of restaurants where dohori is performed has increased into the hundreds. Some view the rise of commercial dohori as a revival of a dying folk tradition, and it is increasingly presented in terms of national cultural heritage. This linkage of dohori with national heritage legitimizes it as a musical genre and as a profession for both men and women—moving to Kathmandu and finding a job as a performer in a dohori restaurant provides not only a source of cash income but also an opportunity to rise in social status within the profession through talent and skill. Yet, this valorization has both encouraged efforts to “clean up” dohori's trademark sexual innuendo, especially

on nationally circulating recordings, and led others to claim that the public, improvised matches of wits between men and women are indicative of rural hill women's relative freedom of sexual and intellectual expression (Dixit 2002). Urban middle-class sensibilities of suitable Nepali gender roles (Liechty 2003; Liechty 2005) and nationalist idealization of “free” rural life (Pigg 1992) thus come into conflict around gender and sexuality in musical performance, and in the lives that performers actually lead. With this in mind, I ask, how do migrant dohori performers address this tension, along with their own desires for belonging, social status, economic success, and changing forms of romantic relationships, in their music and in their lives?

I approach dohori's changing styles and status not as a revival but as a recontextualization (Bauman 1990; Bauman 1992), concomitant with the changes brought by political upheaval, increases in rural-urban and international migration, and the circulation of mass media. My research is based in the dohori restaurants of Kathmandu, a “midpoint” between the dohori improvised in village songfests and the composed songs recorded on cassettes. I accompany restaurant performers to recording sessions, on return trips to their villages, and on tour around Nepal, paying attention to gender dynamics displayed in performances in different settings, and to discussions about suitable songs and lyrics, and about differences between rural and urban performance. I am also conducting

interviews at music companies, studios, radio and television stations about the production of dohori recordings, videos and programs. Many producers, radio DJs, and television VJs are also dohori performers themselves. As the potential scope of my research is very broad, I am concentrating on various case studies that present themselves throughout the course of my fieldwork.

A case study I am currently conducting focuses on a song released by veteran dohori singer Komal Oli during Tj 2006. This song, *Poila Jaana Paū*, has become notorious due to regional disagreements over the meaning of the word *poila*. In Komal Oli's home district of Dang in Mid-Western Nepal, *poila* refers to a woman's husband's home. The phrase "*poila jaana paū*" refers to a woman's wish to get married and leave her parents' home for her husband's home—an appropriate topic for the festival of Tj. In Central and Eastern Nepal, and in the *Sabda Sagar* dictionary used by Komal Oli's detractors, *poila* refers to elopement, either running away from one's parents' home or from one's current husband—an inappropriate topic, according to the majority of society. The notoriety of this song was complicated by Komal Oli's performance in support of her brother in the mayoral elections in their village in Dang. He is a member of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, and after her performance for his campaign, the United Marxist-Leninist party banned her cassettes. In Kathmandu, this was interpreted as a reaction against the "inappropriate" lyrics of *Poila Jaana Paū* and served to undermine arguments for the song's suitability based on regional linguistic variation. Recently, Komal Oli was asked to record a dohori song for an NGO, focusing on condom use. She is ambivalent about accepting the offer, because she's slightly worried that her career will forever be associated with controversial gender- and sex-related topics. However, she stands firmly in support of *Poila Jaana Paū*, speaking on radio and television about the need for awareness that words have different meanings in different places.

Though Komal Oli defends *Poila Jaana Paū* on the grounds of linguistic variation, it can be argued that the song still challenges social norms, as women of most social groups in Nepal are not encouraged to express wishes for love or marriage (Ahearn 2001; Bennett 1983). The song's release during Tj, a festival with its own genre of women's songs that express strong emotions, perhaps legitimizes what could be seen as a woman's brazen expression of desire (Ahearn 1998; Skinner 1994). Other factors specific to Komal Oli's own background could have further fueled the backlash against her recording of the song—her family's associations with the monarchy; her high caste and class; her high level of education and her stated preference for musical innovation are all items that have been used as ammunition by her detractors.

Case studies such as this one, focusing on the discourse surrounding a song and singer, are intended to examine in

detail the relationships between such factors and larger ideologies regarding national identity in music, language and gendered behavior. Other planned case studies will focus on the upcoming national dohori competition; a group of Gurung performers' tour of Nepal; and the social dynamics within several Kathmandu dohori restaurants. Through this research, I seek to understand the expressive means by which Nepali migrants negotiate the massive changes in their daily lives, and the changing ideas of gender and nation emergent in this musical discourse.

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#### FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

2007. Cultural Heritage as a Resource in Tibetan TV Comedy. Forthcoming in *Modern Tibetan Culture*, eds. Robert Barnett, Leigh Miller Sangster and Susan Chen. Leiden: Brill.

2006. "Blue Lake": Tibetan Popular Music, Place, and Fantasies of the Nation. In *Tibetan Modernities*, eds. Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz. Leiden: Brill.

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