June 2018

Making a Living as a Musician in Nepal: Multiple Regimes of Value in a Changing Popular Folk Music Industry

Anna M. Stirr
University of Hawaii Manoa, stirr@hawaii.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol38/iss1/18

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.
This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.
Making a Living as a Musician in Nepal: Multiple Regimes of Value in a Changing Popular Folk Music Industry

Acknowledgements
Many thanks to all the artists who provided their varying viewpoints in the Cats and Dogs debate, and agreed to be interviewed on what was a contentious topic at the time. Thanks also to the editors of this special issue, Andrew Alter and Noe Dinnerstein, for seeing this project through to fruition.

This research article is available in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies: https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol38/iss1/18
Making a Living as a Musician in Nepal: Multiple Regimes of Value in a Changing Popular Folk Music Industry

Anna Stirr

This article examines the moral and material economy of “being a musician” (Neuman 1980) in Nepal’s popular folk music industry, which includes the broad genre of lok gît (folk song) and the more specific subgenre of lok dohori (folk duet song). Through ethnographic attention to a debate about what it means to be an artist, and how musicians can both make a living and earn prestige and honor, I argue that rather than one system of value and exchange dominating social and economic interactions in this music industry today, instead, multiple regimes of value shape artists’ choices. I give examples of how musicians in this industry navigate these multiple regimes of value and prestige, and show how fluency in moving among them is increasingly important in making a living as a musician in Nepal’s popular folk music world today.

Keywords: Nepal, music, ethnomusicology, prestige, honor, economy.

Introduction

One afternoon in May 2007, I got a phone call from Nepali lok dohori singer Badri Pangeni urging me to come quickly to a meeting about an urgent matter. An album called Cats and Dogs had been released by producer and lyricist Subhas Regmi, owner of Bindabasini Music company, containing ‘lok dohori (folk duet)’ songs whose lyrics strongly criticized the performers and producers of Nepal’s popular folk music industry. The cover design sums up the album’s message: in the usual position occupied by artists’ headshots, this cover instead had headshots of a cat and a dog. The use of these images implied that artists were no better than cats and dogs; that is, that they lacked the honor and moral sense that are central to respectable and prestigious social personhood.

At the meeting, members of the Folk and Dohori Song Academy Nepal who represented artists, and members of the Nepal Music Business Association who represented companies and producers, gathered in the large hall of Nirmaya Dohori restaurant. The offending lyrics were read aloud, speeches were made condemning them, and the assembled artists decided to take to the streets. Marching through the streets of Kathmandu, they chanted slogans like “down with Subhas Regmi!” and “we artists are one!” The artists paused to tear down and burn Bindabasini Music’s signboard, then continued on to a radio station to demand they stop playing the songs from Cats and Dogs. In the next few days, the Academy and the Music Business Association publicly called for the album to be banned.
The Academy filed a criminal court case accusing Subhas Regmi, the album’s producer and lyricist, of ‘sarvojanik aparadh (crimes against the public).’ According to my conversation in 2007 with Chanda Thapa, a US lawyer who is originally from Nepal, this is the legal category of crimes in Nepal that corresponds to the US category of ‘moral turpitude,’ which is mostly used when such a crime has been committed against multiple persons. Thus, Cats and Dogs began a debate—in the courts, in the press, and in the everyday talk of lok dohori artists and fans—on what bestows and detracts from honor and prestige in the lok dohori profession. The album and the debate exposed fault lines among multiple regimes of value in Nepal’s popular folk music industry (Myers 2001), shedding light on how musicians today struggle to make a living while also maintaining social prestige (Liechty 2003; Poudyal 2013; Rankin 2004; Sharma 2016).

These regimes of value and social prestige include: traditional forms of reciprocal exchange, hierarchical caste-based patronage, state patronage, and a neoliberal idea of artists as individualized, personal ‘brands’ within the private music industry. They each promote slightly different forms of selfhood or social personhood, from emplacement within kin, clan, or caste networks, to neoliberal or entrepreneurial selfhood. This article examines the moral and material economy of “being a musician” (Neuman 1980: 59) in Nepal’s popular folk music industry. I draw on 17 years of personal experience in Nepal’s music industries as a flutist, singer, and ethnographic researcher, and I focus mostly on the period from 2007-2017. Starting from the 2007 Cats and Dogs debate, I give examples of how musicians in the ‘lok git (popular folk music industry)’ navigate these multiple regimes of value and prestige. I show how fluency in moving among them is increasingly important in making a living as a musician in Nepal’s popular folk music world today.

The Popular Folk Music Industry and Relevant Regimes of Value

Nepali popular folk music is known also by the Nepali terms ‘lok git (folk song)’ and ‘lok dohori (folk duet),’ the latter emphasizing its most popular duet subgenre, dohori. The term ‘lok dohori’ simply emphasizes that these duets are sung to folk tunes, and is used primarily within the music industry. In Nepal, these terms describe a broad genre whose musical characteristics were solidified at the state-run radio, Radio Nepal, beginning around 1950. Musical characteristics include a reliance on existing folk genres drawn from throughout Nepal and especially from the central and western hills; an emphasis on the voice and lyrics; and an instrumentation including the madal drum, bansuri flute, and folk sarangi, in addition to a plethora of other instruments and synthesized sounds. Dohori song is a traditional practice of duets with improvised lyrics sung between men and women; recording studio versions use pre-written lyrics, rather than recording live improvisations. With a history in rural courtship practices, dohori enjoyed state patronage in the 1980s in the form of national competitions. Through commercialization, over the past twenty years, lok dohori has become both a popular nightclub phenomenon and, according to the CEO of Music Nepal, Santosh Sharma, as he emphasized in a 2007 interview with me, it has also become the financial mainstay of the popular folk music recording industry. This national-level promotion, plus ten years of conflict between Maoist rebels and state security forces in the rural areas (1996-2006), and related increases in rural-urban and overseas labor migration (Gurung and Sneddon 2003), have greatly contributed to the growth of lok dohori as a genre representing a rural-oriented version of the Nepali nation. Performers and fans see lok dohori as expressing the emotional worlds and day-to-day life experience of the rural populace and the migrant working class. As others have noted about similar genres, such as Brazilian Caipira (Dent 2009), Japanese enka (Yano 2003), and North American country (Fox 2004), lok dohori performers and fans describe the music as expressing the shared ethos of a moral community based in ideas of rurality and rusticity, and rooted in practices of reciprocal exchange at rural songfests, especially among janajâti indigenous ethnic groups (Stirr 2017).

The music itself has not changed much in its ‘mediatization’ (Grandin 1989); it continues to follow the genre conventions of folk song styles in rhythm, melody,
poetic meter, and song topics. Rather, it is the modes of lok dohori production and circulation that have changed. I focus here on the recording industry rather than on live performance, though both are closely connected. ¹ Professionalized and commodified popular folk music is usually adopted right back into noncommercial performance immediately following a song’s release, and there is a strong degree of musical and social continuity in this process. ² It is precisely because these spheres of music-making are so closely associated that different regimes of value interact so closely with each other. This article is thus not a lament for the commodification or folklorization of rural tradition, nor is it meant to be a simple celebration of a residual form of music. Rather, it examines how Nepali popular folk music in its commercial incarnation involves varied systems of socioeconomic logics, from various kinds of traditional exchange relations, to neoliberal ideas of the artist as an individualized personal business.

Professional performers of music, theatre, and dance in Nepal today refer to themselves as ‘kalākārharu (artists)’. Within the community of professional folk performers, the term kalākār represents a type of personhood connected to the value of creative production, that came into being with folk song professionalization in the 1950s. Kalākār has prestigious connotations, but nevertheless, to be a professional performer in Nepal today can require negotiating a complex line between adulation and stigmatization. The ‘songfest’ social exchange context for performance values exchanges of song as a means of creating social equality. In contrast, professional performance in a caste-based patronage context has historically been associated with low social status (Hoerberger 1970; Singh BK 2016; Tingey 1990; Weisethaunet 1997). Yet classicization, folkloricization (Grandin 1989; Greene 2002; Henderson 2002), and globalization processes (Grandin 2005; Greene and Rajkarnikar 2005; Liechty 2003, 1996) brought changes to traditional and state patronage relationships. Recontextualized in the present commercial music industry, these previous songfest and patronage contexts now interact with alternative models for being a musician. The term kalākār flexibly accommodates these ideals with the idea that an artist is a professional who deals in the range of human experience.

The nature of lok dohori’s moral community and its hierarchies of value are frequent topics of debate, linked to larger issues of defining Nepali national identity. The Cats and Dogs debate took place a year after the People’s Movement that ended direct royal rule and brought the Maoists off the battlefields and into the political mainstream. Since then, caste, ethnic, regional, and other forms of identity politics dominated discussions of restructuring the state in a more inclusive and egalitarian image of the nation. Both sides of the Cats and Dogs debate saw the popular folk music industry and the music it produces as closely linked to national identity. Thus, this debate about the morality of lok dohori professionals’ public actions was also a debate about their role in representing and shaping national prestige and morality, similar to that which ethnomusicologist Ryan Skinner examines in his analysis of ‘artistiya (artistic personhood)’ in postcolonial Mali (Skinner 2015). The worry is that if artists, as representatives of the nation, cannot set a prestigious moral example through their music and public image, the nation itself will be shown to be a sham. The Cats and Dogs debate gives us clues regarding the central issues in the ongoing process of negotiating the nature of lok dohori’s moral community, and what might define a kalākār’s version of national culture and heritage.

Music and Social Reciprocity: Egalitarian Ideals

Noncommercial, non-professional systems of exchange relations to which ‘songfest’ song and dance performance is central, take different forms in different regions of the country and among different ethnic and caste groups. These models of music and material exchange idealize egalitarianism, and are primarily (though not only) associated with janajāti ethnic groups’ traditions. Two examples are particularly relevant for today’s popular folk music industry. The first is the Gurung system of rodhī, which are youth associations that arranged nighttime song and dance gatherings and daytime labor exchange, common throughout the central and western hills (Andors 1976; Macfarlane 2003; Messerschmidt 1976; Moisala 1991; Pignede 1966). Rodhī has become the rural model for urban performances of popular folk music (Stirr 2017a). The second is the Newar guthi system of “societies by which musical groups are traditionally organized, based in particular localities and communities” (Widdess 2013: 5), especially in relation to dāphā (devotional music) song and percussion ensembles among farmers, an example rooted in the Kathmandu Valley (Gellner and Quigley 1999; Parish 1994; Widdess 2013). Studies of music-making and social exchange in rodhī and dāphā groups emphasize both hierarchical and egalitarian aspects of how musical performance is central to creating social status and prestige, sometimes simply by belonging to a performance group (Widdess 2013: 120), and other times by participating in exchanges that involve sponsoring musical performances and performing for others (Moisala 1989). Participants strive to produce equality through
cycles of reciprocal exchange, and participation brings prestige because performances hosted by groups that take turns reaffirm these idealized relations of social reciprocity. Performers can earn further prestige through demonstrating exemplary musical competence. Literature on Gurung rodhi (Moisala 1991) and Newar guthī and dāphā groups (Toffin 2008: 312-15) asserts that they may both be on the verge of disappearing, yet no one is ready to consign them to oblivion quite yet, as revivals and recontextualizations continue to occur, both in rural villages and in urban spaces (Stirr 2017b; Widdess 2013: 136). As these systems persist through socioeconomic changes, a modern kalākār can gain prestige from demonstrating commitment to similar networks of reciprocal social obligations, especially regional and/or ethnic organizations.

Caste-Based Patronage: Hierarchical Models

Traditional systems of exchange are not all based on egalitarian ideals of reciprocity. Artisan-caste musicians have long been bound to patrons in caste-based relations, whether in long-term riti-bhagya (patron-client) relations like the Badi and Damai musician castes’ traditional caste-based obligations to upper-caste landlords (Cameron 1998; Tingey 1990), or short-term patronage relations such as the Gaine (Gandharva) musicians’ reliance on the generosity of strangers as they traveled through villages performing in exchange for food and sometimes cash (Weisethaunet 1997). Artisan castes were considered ‘dalit (untouchable), and this created a less-prestigious association between professional musicianship and low caste status. Yet, in some cases, these relations bestowed prestige in an association with auspiciousness—without the musicians’ performances, auspicious occasions like weddings or rice plantings would not be complete (Tingey 1990). This aspect of artisan-caste musicians’ prestige survives to this day. It is a significant component of the ambivalent politics of Dalit caste identity, in which members of these castes value and want to promote their traditional creative occupations, yet also want to reject these occupations because of their associations with exploitative and feudal patronage relationships.

Court Patronage

The monarchy was part of the feudal patronage systems that relied on caste inequality, but court patronage was not only based on caste obligations. Closeness to the monarchy—the seat of both spiritual and temporal power—also bestowed prestige on those performers with close relationships to the palace. The ‘mangalinī (high-caste women who performed auspicious songs for the Shah palaces), are a group of folk performers who gained prestige in this way (Tingey 1993). These performers shared with the artisan-caste groups a ritual and religious set of roles that they, and they only, could perform, and that contributed to the perpetuation of the religiously understood order of things under the Shah monarchy. Prestige here came from these roles in maintaining the spiritual and temporal order of the nation.

Outside of such relationships of ritual obligation, other palace-performer relationships echoed those in nearby South Asian courts. The Rana and Shah royalty would choose talented individuals from various places around Nepal and nearby regions of India to become performers in their palaces, giving them a place at court and providing them with training in music and dance. Musicians supported in this way include the classical lineages of palace performers brought from Banaras (Regmi 2005); the pāncai bājā and naumati bājā (ensembles of five or nine percussion and wind instruments); dāphā ensembles of singers and percussion; military performers from local traditions supported for entertainment purposes (Tingey 1993, 1990; Widdess 2013; Shah 2006); and non-hereditary courtsees like Melawa Devi (Gurung 2008). Men in these groups enjoyed prestige through association with the monarchy, while women who were chosen to perform at the palace received ambivalent respect because of widespread suspicion of the potential sexual nature of their relationships with palace patrons. At its heyday in the Rana period (1854-1951), this type of palace patronage, with a few modifications, would inspire forms of palace-backed yet bureaucratically run state patronage in the mid-20th century.

Institutional State Patronage

In 1951, a pro-democracy uprising successfully brought the Rana autocracy to an end, and restored the Shah kings to power. The short-lived constitutional monarchy (1951-1960) and the subsequent 30-year one-party monarchical state (1960-1990) continued court patronage of musicians, and also developed modern media institutions. When state-run Radio Nepal opened in 1951, more artists could now be chosen to represent the nation. The selection process was meant to be more transparent, and the venues for musical production were no longer limited to the closed rooms of the palace, but included national radio and public cultural organizations. There were auditions and competitions for singers, instrumentalists, and dancers, and those who passed became ‘Raśtriya Kalākār (National Artists)’, and received a salary. The symbolism of receiving
Private Music Companies and a New Path to Prestige

With the advent of private music companies in 1982, the capitalist free market emerged as another alternative to feudal or state patronage for professional, commercial music-making. Music Nepal, Nepal’s first private music company, was incorporated in this year and began to pay its artists royalties. Their first folk album release, *Jayananda Lama’s Folk Songs 1*, made Jayananda Lama wealthy enough to buy a motorcycle. Lama on his motorcycle became a symbol of a new kind of artist: no longer servants of the state and bound to perform in praise of the monarchy, such artists could make music for the people of villages like their own, and market it to them on cassettes at affordable prices rather than having to work the land themselves. The prestige that came from having a jāgir reflected both this distance from manual labor and closeness to the monarchy (Bhatt 2003: 263). Later, jāgir came to stand for any form of salaried government service, including musical service. Also, until 1990, there was a censorship board that vetted songs. Along with auditions and competitions, censorship helped foster an idea that it took talent and dedication to become a National Artist. This in turn gave being a professional musician under state patronage a sense of exclusivity and elitism. Musicians who were not given the state’s stamp of approval had lower social status and lower prestige. Those excluded from this system of state patronage included many folk performers whose music did not fit the categories that the state supported. This system was just fine for musicians who preferred to remain nonprofessional and noncommercial. But for folk musicians who wanted to perform commercially, yet did not fall into state-supported categories, exclusion from state support rankled (Stirr 2012).

Neoliberalization and its Limits

After the democratic revolution of 1990 and the significant drop in state patronage that followed, another regime of value slowly emerged in the world of popular folk music. This is the idea of the individual artist as creative entrepreneur, more an individualized ‘neoliberal self’...
than a collectively-oriented kalākār. The terms ‘neoliberal self’ and ‘entrepreneurial self’ have been used to describe a generalized model of selfhood emphasizing personal initiative and creativity in a precarious labor market (McGuigan 2014). Amanda Weidman notes that South Indian performing artists adopting neoliberal models of the artistic self emphasize “flexibility, self-management, entrepreneurship, and self-marketing” (2014: 175). In Nepal, these ideas began to take root along with the state and international NGOs’ market-oriented policies after the mid-1980s (Rankin 2001; Shrestha 2010), and a concomitant increase in neoliberal social logics in neighboring India and its popular media after 1992 (Beaster-Jones 2016; Morcom 2015). Neoliberal ideas of selfhood began to influence Nepali popular folk music artists’ models of successful artistic personhood as costs of music production increasingly shifted from companies onto artists.

In the early 2000s, three music companies dominated the popular folk music scene: Music Nepal, Dhaulagiri, and Kalinchowk. They followed the model of the state-run companies (see Grandin 1989), and generally held a great deal of authority over music production. Usually, it was the writers/collectors of the melody and/or lyrics who would consider the album their own, retain copyright, and receive royalties (if they did not sell the rights to the music company). Once a song’s melody and lyrics were communicated to the company’s arrangers, the company controlled the production. The singers and instrumentalists who performed on the albums were most often hired as session performers and paid a flat rate by the music company. With the rise of mp3s and file sharing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the mobile phone boom after 2006, songs copied off cassettes and VCDs circulated easily among fans, and music companies lost income. No longer reaping the profits from song sales, the companies could not pay for production and distribution costs, and increasingly began to pass them on to artists. Most companies continued to use cassettes until it became obvious that they would need to change, yet after holding out for so long and losing money in declining sales, they were not financially equipped to make the change. In interviews with Dhaulagiri owner, Indra Shrestha, and Kalinchowk owner, Dinesh Khadka, in 2008 they both said they felt like they had lost control of the music industry they had previously nearly owned. Music Nepal initiated digital distribution at the late date of 2008, and it is the only music company incorporated in the 1980s to have survived.

New, smaller music companies with different business models capitalized on the changes of the 2000s, which were more than just technological. After 1990, foreign employment increased (Gurung and Seddon 2003). Upon returning during the civil war years, many of these international workers were stuck in Kathmandu with their newly earned capital due to armed conflict and potential extortion in their home districts (NIDS 2010). They also happened to be members of the demographic most likely to be fans and performers of mainstream popular folk music (Stirr 2008a). Their presence in Kathmandu and other major cities fueled a boom in live performance venues for popular folk music (Stirr 2017b). Along with the growth in live venues came a boom in recording production, as a growing number of returned migrant laborers used their savings to record and release their own albums. New music companies popped up by the dozens to take advantage of this demand for album production by artists who paid to record. Some even became conduits for unscrupulous foreign employment agencies to launder the money they illegally obtained from villagers desperate for jobs abroad. In this environment, anyone who could pay could record a song, and the popular folk song market was flooded with songs of varying quality. Those who could pay for the best recording quality, the best marketing, the best music videos, and for the radio and TV stations to play their songs, were the ones who achieved fame and success through hit songs. Such fame and success became an alternative route to prestige, qualitatively different from the kinds of prestige achieved in other regimes of value, but described as ‘ijjat (prestige)’ nonetheless. Artists trumpet their success under this entrepreneurial system by emphasizing their individuality and the fact that they have not used (potentially corrupt or nepotistic) connections to become famous, but have done it all themselves through hard work and talent.

Yet looking at entrepreneurial artists closely shows that they do not achieve prominence through musical hard work and talent alone. Take the example of Sunita Dulal, a singer specializing in Teej songs, with a multifaceted business model that highlights her ‘personal brand’ of fashionable modern woman. She models clothing and jewelry in addition to singing, and has a lucrative business selling saris. She wears these saris in her music videos as advertisements, and takes suitcases full of them on tour, to great profit. Other popular folk music artists regard her business model with some disdain, criticizing the quality of her songs or asserting that her music and modeling are just gimmicks to sell saris. Because it is not based solely on musical acumen, her critics refuse to count her fame and financial success as ‘prestigious,’ and debate whether she deserves to be known as a kalākār. Her critics also note that her success hasn’t exactly been achieved as an individual, as she has relied on significant family
connections to rise to prominence. In fact, no artists today achieve prominence following the ‘rules’ of any one regime of value; perhaps they never have. Within these co-existing systems of musical exchange, artists can gain prestige through commitment to the social relations each form of exchange entails, including those expressed through musical competence. Returning to the *Cats and Dogs* debate, we can identify how Regmi’s positions and those of the artists’ organizations each draw on these multiple regimes of value. Their expressions of discomfort and confusion give us clues to how they may be trying to reshape musical and national values, and ways of defining prestige (Myers 2001: 54).

**Cats and Dogs: The Offending Lyrics**

*Cats and Dogs* contained two thirty-minute songs, each filling up a side of a cassette, as is customary for *lok dohori* duet songs. Subhas Regmi wrote the lyrics for both of them, while the owner of another company, Prem Baral of Barahi Music, wrote the music. The singers were both relative unknowns within the *lok dohori* recording industry: Devi Gharti, the female winner of the 2005 national *dohori* competition who had yet to make a name in the recording world, and Birahi Karki, a veteran restaurant and competition performer who had also been struggling to break into recording. When I interviewed Subhas, he emphasized using new talent instead of the same old top singers, but others took his use of unknowns as a sign that he knew no established singer would dare touch his songs. The album’s two songs, “I’ll Raise Cats and Dogs,” and “Hey Resham,” had melodies in the style of Nepal’s western hills, and lyrics written in the *sawai* poetic meter traditionally used for storytelling songs and songs about political events.

The lyrics of both songs accused *lok dohori* artists, producers, and distribution companies of misbehavior on many levels. One of the first couplets of “I’ll Raise Cats and Dogs” goes,

‘Baru ijjat kukura ra birālāko pani
Bejjatako bhumāri paryo loka gīta pani.’

Dogs and cats have more honor than this;
Folk song is caught up in a tornado of dishonor.

The lyrics attacked the sexual morality of both men and women; they accused the artists of disloyalty, breaching contracts, stealing each others’ songs, and misrepresenting who actually sang the songs on recordings; and they accused production and distribution companies of financially exploiting the artists. Sometimes naming names, they referred both explicitly and obliquely to widely reported public events in which artists and companies had committed inappropriate or otherwise embarrassing acts. According to then Academy Chairman, Durga Rayamajhi, and former Chairman, Amar Birahi Gurung, both of whom I interviewed several times, two topics bothered the Academy the most. These were the assaults on Academy members’ characters that made them into sexual harassers at worst and rakes at best, and stated that they weren’t even worth keeping as servants:

‘Gāũgharakā sojhsājhā cheli āunchhan gāuna
Lobha moha dekhāera phasāune kai dāumā
Yastāle ni lok dohori ko sansthā kholne āre
Kati āśa nayā sraṣṭā yinkai kāraṇ mare.’

Innocent sisters from the village come to sing
Showing them greed and attachment, they seduce them with all sorts of tricks
It’s these kinds of people who opened a dohori organization, we hear
So much hope and new creations died for this reason.

And:

Dherai album bikyo bhanī khokdai hīḍchhan gāyak
Gharmā halī rākhnalāī chhainau timī lāyak.
Saying “I’ve sold a lot of albums,” singers go around coughing
You are not even worth keeping as servants.

In a conversation in 2007, Amar Birahi Gurung commented on these latter lyrics:

What it’s like here is that the lowest classes of society, or the unluckiest, those who don’t have enough food and clothing, those who don’t know where they’ll eat or sleep at night, those who don’t have homes or land, these are the people who go to work in others’ homes and are called *halī*. Now that’s—that’s totally disrespectful to say that of artists. Everyone objected to that.

The issue of sexual harassment is important to address, and like all other fields, the popular folk music industry in Nepal certainly has its share of people who have engaged in it, and who have been called out publicly. Yet Regmi’s lyrics blamed it all on the Academy. The main issue that angered Academy members and sparked the debate, then, was that the members of the Academy felt
that they, as an organization that represented artists, and thus all other popular folk music artists by extension, had been severely insulted in one of the most public forms possible—a recorded song that was being broadcast daily on multiple radio stations around the country. The insults suggested that they weren’t worthy of their status as kalākār. And, they called into question what exactly it meant to be a kalākār.

Subhas Regmi’s Perspective: A Call for Self-Development in the Service of the Nation

The songs on *Cats and Dogs* took an individualist perspective on what it meant to be an artist, while continuing to situate artists as representatives of the nation. Regmi called for artists to improve themselves individually, mainly by becoming more educated. He equated higher education with higher levels of moral development, and thus higher levels of prestige and value to the nation. But in doing so, he also rejected an important ritual framework for political criticism and satire, placing his version of self-development over an established way of expressing grievances that preserves honor and prestige of all those involved.

*Cats and Dogs*’ type of scolding in song is not unprecedented in Nepal. It is particularly associated with the festival in August known as Gai Jatra, or Cow Procession, in which families honor their dead in a carnivalesque procession through the sacred spaces of the cities of the Kathmandu Valley. As anthropologist of religion Greg Grieve (Grieve 2005) has noted, the rituals of Gai Jatra provide a way for people to creatively construct and structure their lived worlds in terms of enduring connections to ancestors, gods, and place. Gai Jatra is a festival known for performances of political and social satire and hierarchical inversion, so much so that there is an adjective derived from it, gāįjātre, that describes anything farcical or satirical published or performed at any time of year and places such satire within this festival’s ritual framework. Improvised dohori songs can also contain insults, but these are usually included for their humorous effect and always within a bounded performance context—for them to get personal and mean is a breach of etiquette. What teasing dohori songs, wedding abuse songs, the songs of Gai Jatra, and anything dubbed gāįjātre have in common is a ritual context in which satire and abuse are allowable, and do not transgress the widespread moral proscription against embarrassing others in public.

Subhas Regmi asserted that this ritual contextualization would neutralize his arguments’ critical force. He went to great lengths in the press and in our interview to stress that *Cats and Dogs* was not gāįjātre and should be taken as a serious call for artists and companies to improve themselves. Instead of locating *Cats and Dogs* within the ritual genres of scolding and gāįjātre satire, Regmi compared his album to the works of some of Nepal’s most famous authors who were persecuted by the state for exposing social injustice. He stressed the importance of individuals’ responsibility for their actions, arguing that his aim was to make people aware of their mistakes so that they could then correct them, thereby bringing the lok dohori community in line with his idea of propriety and worthiness to represent Nepal.
days after the protests in May 2007, he told me he hadn’t expected such a response from the artists; rather, he said, “I thought the people in this field would realize that they were really actually naked, and take a look at their bodies for once.” In throwing off the context of gājīatre satire, his moral message echoed the ideals of enlightenment rationalism, rejecting a nationally respected, existing framework for the ethical expression of criticism in favor of individual reason as a bestower of moral authority. In order to emphasize the development of individual reason, he also emphasized higher education as a path to prestige and moral authority.

In the song as well as in print and in our interview, he accused lok dohori artists, especially those in charge of the governing bodies, of lacking formal education and thus the ability to tell right from wrong. The lyrics of “Hey, Resham” ask, “When will intelligence come to you, and when will you learn?” In an op-ed Subhas wrote in the Nepali-language music magazine Music Diary in response to the Academy’s case against him, he says: “The culture of immorality and irresponsibility within the apparently unknowledgeable and uneducated group of folk song professionals is the necessary concern of all upstanding persons” (Regmi 2007a). In our interview in May 2007, he confirmed that he was talking about the Folk and Dohori Song Academy, showed me exaggerated respect based on my level of education, and characterized members of the Academy as lacking in intellectual capacity. He said, “An academy means a place where wise people meet. There’s no one wise in that academy. They’ve all failed 8th, 9th, 10th grade, at the maximum they’ve passed the SLC. This will never be wisdom. I think to be wise you at least need a [Master’s] degree. According to what I’ve heard and understand.” With no regard to the considerable musical and lyrical improvisatory skills required to perform lok git and lok dohori, he made formal education the only criterion for recognizing prestige, wisdom, and moral authority in an organization devoted to music. He saw himself as an outsider from a higher class, yet one who had the duty to improve the field of national folk music as a concerned Nepali citizen. In an article in Music Diary published before he released Cats and Dogs, he asked, “Don’t creative artists have a duty toward the nation?” (Regmi 2007b).

**Individual Creativity**

The term ‘sraṣṭā (creative artists)’ also carries the connotation of individualized artistic entrepreneurs. Regmi uses this term several times in his lyrics, especially when calling on artists to take responsibility for improving the state of the popular folk music industry, and thereby improving the state of the nation. Along with his calls for self-improvement, his use of the term sraṣṭā further individualizes what it means to be an artist.

This emphasis on individual creativity is a step away from the idea that popular folk music is ‘folk’ in the sense of coming from the people (Thapa and Subedi 1985). Rather than an argument about copyright (at least in this immediate case), the shape that individual creativity took in Cats and Dogs and its surrounding debates was an exhortation to sing one’s own songs as a singer-songwriter with an identifiable style and brand, rather than claiming to be the ‘main’ artist on an album containing multiple voices. Two verses of “Hey Resham” address the common practice of more than one singer singing together on popular folk song recordings. “Raju” below refers to singer Raju Pariyar, who at the height of his popularity in the mid-2000s was recording up to fifteen songs a day. His voice would be mixed with those of others, and his headshot on the cassette cover ensured sales to his fans. Up until this point, mixing several voices together but emphasizing one singer’s headshot had been standard practice, based on the origins of these songs in group singing. The convention was that whoever got the money together to make the album would get the royalties, and get to call it ‘their’ album. But after a high-profile case in which Raju’s voice was put on an album and not given credit, Regmi, valuing individual ownership, argued that the person who advertised the album as ‘theirs’ and the best-known singer who sang on the album should be one and the same person. In other words, unknown singers coming back from jobs abroad shouldn’t be able to buy their way into being kalākārs without talent of their own, then put someone else’s voice on their album and reap the financial rewards. Hence, being an artist in sraṣṭā terms took both singing and songwriting talent, and such pay-to-play artists shouldn’t be able to ‘hide behind the voice’ of Raju Pariyar, and then collect all the royalties from people who buy the album to listen to Raju sing.

‘Hey, ali ali māna hai gāyak bhandai hiḍña
Srotale ni lāisakechhan aba timilāī chinna
Arkāko swar kina kati dina samma ṭikchhau?
Kaile timro buddhi auncheha ani kaile sikchhau?’

Hey, pay a little attention, you who go around calling yourselves singers

Listeners know who you are now

Why do you remain behind others’ voices for so long?

When will intelligence come to you, and when will you learn?
"Hey, gīta gāune Rāju kāle aru banne bhāle
Yasari nai bariṣṭa gāyak banna thāle
Lāja chhaina sabko aghi maile gāko bhančhan
Aphaile nai aphailāī sachhai ṭhulo ṭhānčhan."

Hey, this guy Raju sings the song, someone else becomes the crowing cock,
This is how people have begun to become top singers
Without shame, they say “I sang it” in front of everyone
They think really highly of themselves.

"Hey, srotale ni rāmro sanga gītalāī sunera
Balla kyaseṭ kinnuhosa manamā gunera
Gīta gāune eutā hunchha rākhchhan āphno tāuko
Britta nai ho jastai gari luṭi tinkā bāuko."

Hey, listeners, after listening well to songs
And repeating them in your hearts, only then buy the cassette
Someone else sings the song, and they put their own heads [on the cassette cover]
Acting like they have the right, stealing from their own fathers.

Among all the scolding lyrics on the *Cats and Dogs* album, these had the most immediate impact, though not the impact Subhas Regmi or Raju Pariyar were envisioning. The lyrics in the last couplet seem to be exhorting consumers to buy albums only when they are sure that the singer advertised on the cover is actually the person singing on the album. Regmi seems to have thought that such attention would lead to greater credit for Raju and others like him on the albums on which they sang. But in fact, the opposite occurred over the following year. The (perhaps) less-talented singers began to release their albums anyway, singing everything themselves, without relying on a hit singer to help sell the album or carry the vocal part. The assumption that vocal lines would be sung by either groups or individuals moved toward a preference for individuals, and these new, paying singers stopped hiring the top singers to fill out the vocal parts of their songs. So, if in 2007 Raju Pariyar sang 15 songs a day, by 2009 his output was down to 15 songs per week. Moving to an individual artistic entrepreneur (*sraṣṭā*) model did not turn out to be a way to ensure that excellent singers like Raju Pariyar got the credit they were due. Instead, the number of new folk singer-songwriters recording solo increased dramatically, as did the use of auto-tune on their voices.

People like Raju Pariyar, who could no longer depend on studio gigs and music companies to the extent that they could before, had to turn to other ways of making a living as musicians. Most people in the popular folk music industry now claim live performance as their primary musical source of income, and an increase in programs abroad is helping many of them continue to make a living through performing, while also increasing the prestige that comes from being a widely-traveled artist (China Daily 2016; Neuman 1980; Wang 2016). These artists also perform live in Nepal, record studio albums, and increasingly work other jobs from music teaching, to nursing, to politics, to military service, to various forms of unskilled labor. This kind of professional diversification is now becoming the norm for musicians. This situation differs from that described by Weidman (2014) among female playback singers, in which the industry is placing greater demands on singers to have a lively stage persona in addition to a good studio voice. Live performance has always been part and parcel of Nepal’s popular folk music world. Some well-known singers, like Rita Thapa Magar and Prajapati Parajuli, have based careers almost wholly on live performance, never expecting their album sales to make up more than a small percent of their musical earnings. *Cats and Dogs*’ criticisms thus primarily affected those few artists who made a high percentage of their income from studio recordings, requiring them to redefine their personas and move towards more live performance in order to maintain their incomes. But although such changes may require the flexibility and creative self-redefinition associated with a neoliberal sense of personhood, the ways that artists try to remain professional musicians in this changing economy draw on multiple logics at once. The term *sraṣṭā* has not caught on among the *kalākār* community. Its idea of one individual in control of all the creative aspects of musical production remains but one among several available to artists seeking musical livelihoods and social prestige.

**A Return to State Patronage?**

In contrast to its advocacy for the model of artists as entrepreneurial selves, *Cats and Dogs* also seems to advocate a return to state patronage, with its curatorial role of both promotion and evaluation. Interestingly enough, a return to state patronage and evaluation was also what the leader of the anti-*Cats and Dogs* protests,
Academy chairman Durga Rayamajhi, also advocated. In an interview that I conducted with Rayamajhi several months before the protests, he had expressed his wish for a national censorship board that would set benchmarks for acceptable song lyrics on moral grounds. He lamented the fact that the Academy could only make recommendations, and had no legal authority. Subhas Regmi even expressed a similar desire for a specific organization to regulate commercial folk and dohori song, but he continued to stress that artists and companies should know right from wrong without having to be told.

In *Cats and Dogs*, beloved state-sponsored artists from the Panchayat era are held up as models of artistic excellence. Note how Regmi focuses on them as individuals, without discussing the role of the state in creating their prestigious personas:

‘Katā gayau Tārā Kolī ani Harī didi?
Ke kāraṇle lok sangitko yasto bhayo vidhi?
Katā gayau Kalyaṇ Sherchan Dharmarāj ra Nāraṇ?
Vikritikō bhanāidinos ke holā ni kāraṇ.’

Where did Tara, Kolli and older sister Hari go?
What’s the reason for folk music coming to this fate?
Where did Kalyan Sherchan, Dharmaraj and Narayan go?

Please tell us the reason for this degeneration.

The artists referenced in this verse are female singers Tara Devi (1945-2006), Kolli Devi (b. Radha Basnet, 1937-2007), and Haridevi Koirala (b. 1958), along with male singers Kalyan Sherchan (1947-2011), Dharmaraj Thapa (1924-2014), and Narayan Gopal (1939-1990). All of them were stalwarts at Radio Nepal, and enjoyed the support of the state long after the coming of democracy in 1990. They are all revered as great artists, and the only living member of this group, Haridevi Koirala, continues to enjoy high prestige. But the fact is, no one can occupy these positions anymore; artists will pass the voice test and become National Artists, but will never get a salary that goes as far as those artists used to receive, and neither will they get as much radio play or opportunities to record and circulate albums through jobs at the national radio. What they do still receive is prestige. Having passed the radio’s tests is still a badge of honor despite the diminished financial opportunities it offers, and being a National Artist still means a great deal to artists in the popular folk music industry. Thus, others, in addition to Regmi and Rayamajhi, feel nostalgia for the former financial security and prestige bestowed by state institutions. A subtext to Regmi’s reference to “degeneration” is the idea that without the state as a paternalistic institution watching over cultural patrimony, commercial folk song in a capitalist market can degenerate to whatever happens to make the most money. While also expressing desire for a state regulatory body to curb excesses of capitalist individualism, the Academy members put greater responsibility on the collective to work toward creating conditions for all artists to be able to make a living while maintaining prestige.

**The Academy’s Case**

Rather than debating the points that Subhas Regmi made in his lyrics, the artists of the Academy took another tack, emphasizing artists as a collective group for which unity was paramount; highlighting musical competence as a bestower of value and prestige; and reaffirming a commitment to the ritual framing of Gai Jatra as necessary for critical songs that have the potential to be taken as personal attacks.

In filing the case of ‘crimes against the public,’ they emphasized artists’ collective responsibilities; “In the name of civil liberties, you can’t just say whatever you want,” wrote Durga Rayamajhi in *Music Diary* (Rayamajhi 2007). They represented themselves as ordinary people concerned with maintaining relations among themselves as artists, between themselves and their fans, and maintaining the public face of the Nepali nation that they claim to represent. In other words, they appealed to a moral authority beyond that dictated by the letter of the law, with a greater concern for the collective determining of values.

The Academy members’ use of rhetoric also contrasted with Regmi’s. In the *Music Diary* articles, Durga Rayamajhi phrased his public arguments in simple language and in short sentences and paragraphs, which stood out as clear and coherent next to Regmi’s high-level, literary Nepali. Also, in their protests against the song, Academy members upheld one of lok dohori’s central aesthetic and moral values: that of indirectness, a value associated with authenticity, rural folk song performance, and superior competence as a lok dohori performer. Noting that Regmi’s lyrics followed no narrative pattern of questions and answers but were merely a list of scolding couplets, they located him outside of the true circle of lok dohori artists, in an attempt to render his criticisms irrelevant. These moves echoed the earlier protest chants of “we artists are one,” as rhetorical appeals to a unity based on prestige that comes from musical competence rather than formal education.
Finally, they berated Subhas for refusing to label his songs as gājātre, thereby (as they saw it) rejecting the one ritual framing that would have made his songs acceptable. Durga Rayamajhi wrote in the Music Diary debate issue:

We protested it because it started the wrong kind of tradition. Any individual can have faults and weaknesses and can make mistakes, but if we start putting these things into song, then tomorrow it will become a tradition for everyone to make songs about everyone else. If there had just been dohori between papers, if these things had been said in the situation of the media having raised some questions, if the degeneration in folk music had been addressed in press conferences and statements issued in that context, even if it had been like Gai Jatra, they would probably have been able to handle it. (Rayamajhi 2007)

The Gai Jatra ritual framing signals an appropriate context for fans to interpret what they hear and to draw their own conclusions. But refusing this framing, Rayamajhi argues, makes the songs inappropriate, immoral, and even criminal.

The Academy’s choice to file a case of ‘crimes against the public’ expressed their desire for the law not only to guarantee individual civil liberties, but also to define and to help uphold models of moral, prestige-producing behavior. Both Regmi and the Academy members, in their nostalgia for state patronage and their desires for the legal system to work in their favor, appeared to want someone to create a set of rules that would define a regime of value for lok git and its artists. Regmi and the Academy members seemed to agree that these were confusing times, and that what made it possible to make a living as a musician while also being moral and attaining prestige was no longer easily defined. The law upholding an idea of individual civil liberties favored Subhas Regmi and his liberal individualism. But, the community of artists and other companies joined together to try to set clearer standards about ethical behavior in the recording industry, which upheld the practice of contextualizing critical songs in relation to Gai Jatra and thus affirming a relationship based on kinship, place, and religion, between both parties in the debate. The law and this social exchange-based version of morality both retained their authority in their own ways, and both had to be acknowledged as important.

**After Cats and Dogs: NGO Sponsorship, Politics, and Social Exchange**

Looking at the outcomes of the *Cats and Dogs* debate over the next year (2007-2008), it’s hard to say if anyone ‘won.’ The court cases were dismissed, and the debate between Regmi and Rayamajhi was mediated by the Nepali Congress, the political party to which both belonged. The public debate did seem to have an effect on subsequent songs of criticism, and such songs, along with parody songs, continued to be made, but they were less personal and clearly contextualized where the Academy had insisted they belong: in the realm of gājātre comedy and satire. This suggested that ritual framing remained important to most artists, regardless of whether or not they agreed with some of Regmi’s criticisms. The Academy continued to run lok dohori competitions throughout Nepal, and Regmi’s company, Bindabasini Music, started its own music awards program. Thus, the Academy and Regmi’s company took up the responsibility for determining the quality of songs, regardless of their ability to influence artists’ behavior. Despite Regmi’s and members of the Academy’s desires for more state oversight, the passage of a new National Cultural Policy in 2010 had little to no effect on the commercial music industry (Stirr 2016). When I talked to *Cats and Dogs’* female singer Devi Gharti in June 2008, she expressed what I believe remains the prevailing opinion about the album and the debate: Subhas Regmi “shouldn’t have written some of those things, but that doesn’t mean he’s wrong about everything.” The problems within the popular folk music industry still exist, and artists still struggle to create a secure way of making a living while maintaining a prestigious reputation.

In an interview several months after the *Cats and Dogs* debate, Amar Birahi Gurung said that it was mainly “people of lower castes and janajāti origin, rather than high-caste people, who were responsible for developing lok dohori’s culture, and it is they who will continue it in the future, even if Brahmins and Chhetris are financially ahead at the moment.” He further explained his perception that high caste individuals (like Regmi and Rayamajhi, who both ran music companies) were doing better financially now, but he saw the webs of obligation emphasized in janajāti-associated traditions of reciprocity as a better way to make a living as a musician and maintain the culture that fostered the music; prestige for him was more bound up with maintaining cultural traditions than it was with making money. Attention to the recent phenomenon of NGO sponsorship, not mentioned in the *Cats and Dogs* debate, sheds light on how caste/ethnic associations, many of which are also registered NGOs, play a role in helping musicians continue to make a living and develop social prestige at the intersection of regimes of value.

Popular folk music artists have increasingly begun to rely on local ‘civil society’ (NGO) sponsorship to fund album production and distribution. Private and NGO sponsorship...
has long been a standard practice for live performance, and the banners surrounding popular folk music stages bear the names of their corporate and/or NGO sponsors. Local NGOs began funding albums with development-related social messages in the 1990s, but these usually have sales rates far below mainstream romantic and comedic folk songs. Beyond music companies themselves, I am unaware of corporate sponsors having funded an artist’s album or single in the popular folk music world, though this does happen for film songs in the context of film production.

International NGO project funding, adopted more commonly by bands oriented to the world music market than by local popular folk music artists, tends to frame culture as a means to an end—the band Kutumba’s “Music for Peace” and the band Sukarma’s “Playing for Change.” In this way it can be seen as part of a move toward culture as ‘expedient’ in a global neoliberal age (Leon 2014; Yudice 2003). Yet, the idea of performing for charity is not foreign to local logics of reciprocity. I have discussed this phenomenon in terms of rural-urban migration and ruralization (Stirr 2017a); in a similar vein, Mallika Shakya has discussed the persistence of ethnic forms of organization in the corporate sector, along with neoliberal ideas and business practices, and the union politics of the democratic and communist parties (Shakya 2010).

Within the popular folk music industry, singers and songwriters have begun to adopt the private sponsorship model in recording albums. Organizations, too, have begun to see supporting albums as ways of expanding their own identities. The organizations that sponsor popular folk music albums are closer to home than the INGOs that sponsor albums for the world music market, and these local NGOs are bound up in local politics. One illustrative case is the decision of a Gurung ethnic organization (this one itself a registered local NGO) to sponsor two of its member artists in recording an album. These two artists were also involved in the Folk and Dohori Song Academy, having participated in its competitions; they were up-and-coming artists at the time of the Cats and Dogs debate. Their album was not released, but the ideas behind its conception reveal the mix of logics of exchange that went into it, and that represent the combination of regimes of value affecting artists’ lives today.

This case involved Maya Gurung and Ganesh Gurung, both members of the same ethnic group and distant relations to each other, who were artists affiliated with a regional Gurung ethnic organization. Maya is a talented singer who, at the time, had some success in live performance but less with her studio recordings. She had released several of her own albums before, and lost money on all of them. This was partially because of her own inexperience, and partially because she had been working with an inexperienced company, which did not provide quality recording, mixing, or any other type of services. They made terrible music videos and spent nothing on distribution, leaving that all up to Maya, and requiring her to purchase the first 500 copies. An unsuccessful businesswoman who valued Gurung practices of social exchange over individual entrepreneurship, Maya ended up giving many of her cassettes away for free, cementing social relationships rather than accumulating cash. Ganesh Gurung, at the time, was less well-known as a studio artist or concert performer, but one of his albums had done quite well. Both of them performed regularly in Kathmandu restaurants.

In 2008, Maya and Ganesh entered a Gurung organization’s competition at the Gurung New Year Celebration. This organization was an umbrella NGO that aimed to unite all the Gurung organizations in Kathmandu, like the one to which Maya and Ganesh already belonged. Maya and Ganesh thought they might just win a cash prize, which they did, but the organization’s board was impressed and decided to fund the recording of an album. The Gurung organization framed their decision in terms of heritage preservation, and intended to emphasize an idea of Gurung culture from the rural hills in the music videos. While the songs were recorded, the videos were put on hold, and for reasons of which I am unaware, this album was not released. However, the organization did go on to sponsor Maya and Ganesh in various other capacities.

While private sponsorship of artists by a civil organization like this one may be understood as part of a neoliberal displacement of state responsibilities into the private sector, the connection with Gurung identity politics also links this organization’s choice to sponsor artists’ albums to agendas for reforming the state. Affirmative action has become a primary means for members of marginalized ethnic groups, like Gurungs, to make claims on the Nepali state (Shneiderman and Middleton 2008). So, Maya and Ganesh’s success as artists owes something to the Gurung organization, and the Gurung organization hopes that any artistic endeavors they fund will contribute to their efforts to promote rights for their ethnic group at the national level, by increasing the visibility of the group and its performed cultural heritage.

There are pre-existing patterns of social exchange at work in this situation, which fit into neither narrative of hierarchical patronage nor individualizing entrepreneurial selves. Maya and Ganesh are members of another Gurung organization that falls under the umbrella of the larger one that held the competition. Their win solidified their responsibilities to this organization, a regional ethnic
association run according to relationships of kinship-based reciprocity and hierarchies governing social obligations (Andors 1976; Doherty 1975; Macfarlane 2003; Moisala 1991; Pignede 1966). Such regional ethnic associations exist in Nepal’s cities and throughout the Nepali diaspora, and extend the relationships of exchange that cement social ties in rural life across time and space (Hangen 2014). Maya and Ganesh were obligated to perform for free at weddings and other celebrations whenever this organization called on them. The sponsorship they were receiving for the album was, to them, part of a reciprocal relation of obligations between a Gurung community and the artists who were a part of it, in the same way they would fulfill social obligations in their villages. Everyone’s respectability depended upon their doing so. Thus, what might look like a neoliberal context from one perspective remains bound up with other pre-existing patterns and assumptions about reciprocal exchange and social relations.

It is instructive to look at Maya and Ganesh’s subsequent trajectories. Both have left their nightly performing jobs. Maya has continued to specialize in live performance, especially concerts. She has songs that she might someday use on another album, but is waiting for the right combination of sponsorship and felicitous conditions for release. Ganesh has become more of an entrepreneurial artist, branching out into acting, filmmaking, and club ownership, while continuing to perform live, and maintaining ties to the Academy as well. Both artists maintain their ties to the Gurung organizations and their broad kinship-based obligations, viewing these as essential to their identities as kalākār, and to their continued social prestige in general. They would not think it wise to eschew such ties in favor of an entirely individualized idea of entrepreneurial selfhood. In contrast to more individualized artists, they emphasize their reliance on social connections when discussing any of their achievements; for them such social webs of obligation are central to what being an artist means.

Conclusion

The Cats and Dogs debate brought to light the multiple regimes of value that exist in Nepal’s lok git or popular folk music industry. In an approach that assumes that socioeconomic relations, or modes of production, replace each other in succession as material conditions change, some might argue that due to the global dominance of neoliberal capitalism, pre-existing patterns of social relations and exchange in Nepal are being co-opted by neoliberal logics of entrepreneurial selfhood. But, in Nepal’s popular folk music industry today, I do not see one form of social relations predominating. Rather, musicians continue to draw on the frameworks available to them. Of a Kathmandu Valley town in the 1990s, Katharine Rankin wrote, “Today the residents of Sankhu feel strongly the transition to ‘open market’ policies—especially through the emerging labour and commodity markets these policies generate—but the structuring force of caste and gender ideologies still prevails, shaping the experience of macroeconomic change” (Rankin 2004: 2). She reminds us that older socioeconomic paradigms are not necessarily better than newer ones, and each has its own configuration of inequalities and hierarchies. Further, despite global dominance, neoliberalism in Nepal has not attained hegemonic status. As Ben Tausig notes about musicians in Thailand’s protests, neoliberalism has affected their activity yet has in turn been shaped by their own moralities (2014). What Raymond Williams (1977) described as ‘residuals,’ persistent yet marginalized holdovers from earlier forms of socioeconomic relations, can be less marginal than they might appear to be at first glance. This is true whether such residuals are thought to be desirable or undesirable. As artists—kalākār—in Nepal’s popular folk music industry negotiate different, simultaneously existing socioeconomic paradigms, fluency in multiple regimes of value helps them increase their ability to make a living as musicians, and to continue to define themselves as holders of a special kind of social prestige that comes from being an artist.
Anna Stirr (PhD Columbia University, 2009) is an ethnomusicologist who specializes in the performing arts of the Himalayan region, particularly Nepali-language song and related music, dance, and drama. She is the author of *Singing Across Divides: Music and Intimate Politics in Nepal* (Oxford University Press, 2017). She is Associate Professor of Asian Studies at the University of Hawaii Manoa, and has previously taught at Oxford University and The New School, and has also held a postdoctoral fellowship at Leiden University. Her research interests include music, intimacy, politics, and religion, in relation to systems of social and ecological exchange.

Many thanks to all the artists who provided their varying viewpoints in the *Cats and Dogs* debate, and agreed to be interviewed on what was a contentious topic at the time. Thanks also to the editors of this special issue, Andrew Alter and Noe Dinnerstein, for seeing this project through to fruition.

Endnotes

1. For an extensive discussion of live performance, please see Stirr (2017b).

2. In Stefan Fiol’s discussion of similar processes in Garwhal (Fiol 2011), the musical difference between studio recordings and village dance-songs is much greater than in Nepal. In Nepal, the same people are involved in various types of commodified and noncommodified performance, even within the course of a day, and often a studio recording does little more than add more instruments and a few rhythmic cadential flourishes to an existing song, or a new song composed according to traditional genre conventions that privilege the vocal line over all else. This process is described by those in the industry as ‘decoration’ of the tune, implying that the melody with its particular rhythms is the core of the song, while everything else added in the studio is the proverbial icing on the cake. The practice in Nepali studios for popular folk music so far is not to disguise the cake with too much icing: to do so would be to move over into a different genre, lok pop (folk-based pop), so called because it retains elements of folk song styles but departs from existing folk genre conventions.

3. For further discussion of how this works in Gurung rodhi traditions and their multiple modern incarnations, see Stirr (2017b), chapters 2 and 3.


5. As Peter Manuel (1993) notes, there was similar rhetoric of cassette industries as democratizing music production in India in the 1980s as well.

6. 2006 is a watershed year because Nepal had been deregulating and privatizing its telecom industry incrementally for the past six years; prices of mobile phones reached a new level of affordability worldwide; and the end of the conflict made it easier for rural users to obtain SIM cards. Mobile internet did not become widespread until 2011, and remains an unreliable way to purchase music due to slow speeds and spotty connections.

7. There is, of course, more to the story; in a forthcoming article, I discuss ringback tones and middle-man companies that made deals with telecom service providers and music companies. While Music Nepal developed its own digital distribution platform in 2008, Dhaulagiri and Kalinchowk failed to embrace digital distribution. Kalinchowk went out of business completely, while Dhaulagiri maintains a showroom and has been working on digitally distributing its back catalog since 2016. Some artists in 2016 expressed interest in releasing their songs under the Dhaulagiri label, and owner Indra Shrestha hopes that the company may experience a slow comeback.

8. This and all translations from Nepali are mine.

9. My survey data from 2007 show otherwise (Stirr 2008b). The SLC was a test taken after Grade 10 before students could progress to further education.

10. It is possible that Raju may have turned a blind eye to some recordings that paid him but did not give him credit. He may not have minded when he got his performer’s fee and the songs faded into oblivion rather than becoming hits; in this scenario Raju bears part of the blame for the situation Regmi criticizes in “Hey Resham.” But, slightly before *Cats and Dogs*’ release, Raju’s demands to be given credit for singing on the hit album *Sīrī Sīrī Hāwā Bāhunjel* brought this issue into the news.

References


