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Nepal Mandala in an Early Modern South Asia Symposium

Louis Copplestone
Harvard University

Conference Reports

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The *Nepal Mandala in an Early Modern South Asia Symposium* was held at Harvard on 6-7 December 2019. The symposium coincided with the final week of an exhibition on Nepalese Buddhist art, *Dharma and Punya: Buddhist Ritual Art of Nepal,* on show at the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery at the College of the Holy Cross between 5 September and 14 December 2019, curated by Jinah Kim (Harvard) and Todd Lewis (College of the Holy Cross). In keeping with the aims of the exhibition and its catalog - which brought together many famous and lesser known objects of the Malla and the Shah periods to reappraise the relationship between ritual, art, and society - the *Nepal Mandala* symposium addressed the art and culture of Nepal in an expanded field, looking to the "early modern" period and trans-regionality specifically.

Focusing on the Kathmandu Valley, known historically as *nepāla maṇḍala*, the symposium brought together anthropologists, scholars of religion and art historians to discuss diverse but interconnected subjects such as the localization of iconography, art practices and technologies, deity possession, jewelry, trade, festivals, and art education. Thirteen presentations in four panels stressed the place of the Kathmandu Valley in an interconnected history of Asia from the fifteenth century onwards, revealing specific instances of trans-regional dialogue in an "early modernity" that complicates the perceived isolation of this place at this time.

The symposium opened with a keynote discussion between the symposium's organizers and curators of the coincident exhibition, Jinah Kim and Todd Lewis, in which they reflected on the challenges of the exhibition and shared insights on the value of interdisciplinary projects on the art and culture of Nepal. The first panel of the symposium established the parameters of inquiry in space—as the "*nepāla mandala*"—in three presentations starting with Eric Huntington (Rice University). Huntington presented, with visual guides drawn from painting and architecture, the core ritual of tantric Buddhism: the offering of a mandala and the re-creation of an entire cosmos within it. Drawing on examples from eastern India, the Newar tradition, and Tibet, Huntington revealed the often subtle differences between these to identify specifically Nepalese forms of this mandala practice and its manifestations is art.

John Guy (Metropolitan Museum of Art) continued this theme in his exposition of the Vajracharya crowns worn by ritual experts in Newar Buddhist communities, tracing these crowns and the history of these ritual experts back to the final phase of Indian Buddhism. Guy's presentation clarified the long history of these forms and their localization in Nepal besides hinting at a later trans-regional life of these objects. Gerard Toffin (CRNS, Paris) addressed the question of localization and "Newar-ness" again with reference to the god Indra as he is understood by the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley. Toffin looked at sculptures of Indra and at local stories to show how this Vedic god was recast in the Kathmandu Valley as a flower thief, restrained by local farmers, and how iconographic and religious innovations centered around the annual Indra Jatra festival emphasize this "culprit facet" of the god. These stories and sculptures, Toffin suggested, evince interactions between classical Sanskrit models and the specific cultural and religious practices of the Newars.

The second panel of the day brought this localized Nepal Mandala into an early modern era, associated by most panelists with the late Malla period (c. 1482 - 1768). Gundrun Buhnemann (University of Wisconsin-Madison) began by proposing that the rulers of the Kathmandu Valley's three independent kingdoms not only worshipped the goddess Taleju—as is well known—but from the mid-17th century onwards increasingly presented themselves as the servants of the divinity Hanuman. Exploring the promotion of Hanuman worship through sculpture and iconography, Buhnemann argued that forms of this deity, while popular across South Asia

at this time, exhibit specifically local traits in their fierce manifestations found particularly in the palaces of the Kathmandu Valley. Jinah Kim (Harvard University) turned towards the social history and technology of manuscripts in early modern Nepal to show how scribal and painting practices in the Kathmandu Valley simultaneously exemplify vernacularization and make trans-regional allusions. Focusing on manuscripts produced in the 16th and 17th centuries in particular, Kim discussed manuscript colophons and ritual scenes depicted in painting to show how "vernacularization" in language and practice accompanied experiments in paper format and in print that unveil trans-Himalayan connections. Kerry Lucinda Brown (Savannah College of Art and Design) investigated the use of public ritual celebrations by Newar communities in the late Malla Period to navigate an increasingly complex social and political context. Brown examined the gift-giving festivals of Pancadana and Samyak Mahadana specifically to demonstrate how Newar communities used art and spectacle to affirm cultural and religious authority in a Valley undergoing change.

The third panel of the day addressed later cases within this trans-region. Louis Copplestone (Harvard University) presented a large-scale 124-folio painted manuscript made in Kathmandu for an elite Rana patron in 1863. He suggested that this work mobilized an unprecedented and diverse range of painting techniques and technologies in a single work, revealing connections with similar projects and practices across South Asia and beyond. Copplestone argued that this painting presents an opportunity to explore how Newar artists engaged with a range of art practices by carefully and intentionally juxtaposing and synthesizing modes of European watercolor painting, "Rajput" painting, and earlier local traditions working from model books and transported artworks to aid the narrative, ritual, and social impact of manuscripts such as this Rana Devimahatmya.

Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz (Pennsylvania State University) explored efforts of localization apparent in the narrative of the Goddess Svasthani, asking what this folk story can tell us about Nepal's cultural and political positionality in the early modern period. As Birkenholtz showed, this story, which recounts the redemptive and punishing powers of the local Nepali goddess Svasthani, underwent a process of "Puranicization" between the mid-eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries, that reveals an engagement with social, religious, and political conversations taking place across South Asia. Notably, Birkenholtz argued that this text reveals a trans-regional consciousness in the lay population of Nepal despite the ruling elites' best efforts towards closing Nepal off in this period. Todd Lewis (College of the Holy Cross) continued to stress trans-regional connections between Nepal and beyond in this period in his presentation on the impacts of the British Younghusband expedition of 1904-5 to Lhasa on life in the Kathmandu Valley. Lewis Contextualizied this early twentieth century moment within a long history of trans-Himalayan interaction, and argued that this particular expedition brought significant changes to the Newar communities by opening up new routes, markets, and opportunities. Lewis focused on the histories of key "Lhasa Newar" merchant families and touched also upon hitherto unreported connections between Newar and Tibetan Buddhists in the first half of the twentieth century, such as the visit of prominent Tibetan Lamas to the Valley before 1959 and the relationship between the Karmapa and Newar tantric teachers. Dipti Sherchan (University of Illinois at Chicago) brought this panel to a close with a paper on the establishment of the first "formal Western-style art school" in Nepal in the 1950s. Sherchan brought together a wider range of archival material to emphasize the shift from a tradition of court painters to an emergent system of art schools, with clearly defined syllabi and modes of teaching, such as the Juddha Kala Pathshala. Sherchan contextualized this form of art education in Nepal within the shifting orders of patronage under the Ranas and the emergence of national art and a "modern" nation-state of Nepal.

The symposium ended with a panel addressing the Nepal Mandala in "global terms", opening with Ellen Coon's (Independent Scholar) discussion of instances of deity possession and its role in giving voice to Newar women at a time of rapid ecological change in the Kathmandu Valley. Coon's presentation identified a commonality between the Newars as "indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley" and the global indigenous movement – making this case with reference to their strong identification with place and "with the land that they call home". Coon explored how deity possession gives voice to Newar women in these global terms, defending the sacredness and value of the land against the "ecological disaster" that the Kathmandu Valley has witnessed in the decades since 1990. In the following presentation, Christoph Emmerich (University of Toronto) discussed the poetics and place of jewelry in Newar society with reference to a range of textual presentations of jewelry - including

the famous Newari folk song Rajamati Kumati - to give a new emphasis on the significance and role of jewelry in Newar efforts to situate themselves, to "spell gender and beauty", to celebrate, to stay safe, and to mark the extraordinary. This presentation suggested that Newars manage much of their lives through jewelry in ways that are both modern and old-fashioned, and both South Asian and more specifically Newar. In the final presentation of the symposium, Bruce Owens (Wheaton College) showed through video and photographs how the city of Patan's famous chariot festival of Rato Matsyendranath (or Bumgadyah) has changed in recent decades in response to ideas and processes that are emergent globally: intangible cultural heritage, population growth, urban sprawl, environmental change, health and safety measures, and the ubiquity of the journalist's camera. Depending on a wealth of personal archival material, Owens argued that is has, paradoxically, been through transformation that this festival has been preserved.

By way of a finale, participants in the symposium spent much of the following day at the *Dharma & Punya* exhibition at the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery at the College of the Holy Cross, where conversations continued in the presence of some of the world's finest examples of art from Nepal. This symposium and the exhibition made a rare and trans-regional assembly, both of art and academics.

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Symposium website: https://dharmapunya2019.org/symposium/

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Louis Copplestone
Harvard University