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Review of 'Living Goddess' a film by Ishbel Whitaker

David Gellner
Oxford University

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LIVING GODDESS

A FILM BY ISHBEL WHITAKER AND MARK HAWKER, FEATURING SAJANI SHAKYA, CHANIRA BAJRACHARYA, DHARMA BAJRACHARYA, PREETI SHAKYA. MUSIC BY NITIN SAWHNEY.

Darkfibre films (87 minutes). Distribution: Alivemindmedia.com. 2007. Price: \$26.98; Educational price: \$234 (library/high school \$129).

REVIEWED BY DAVID GELLNER

The highest gods of Hinduism are Shiva and Vishnu, but it is the Goddess whose shrines boast the longest lines on a Saturday. The kings of Nepal may have been blessed by the dust from Pashupatinath's feet, but it was the mantra of the goddess Taleju that a dying Malla-dynasty king would attempt to pass on to his chosen successor as a guarantee of royal power (Toffin 1993: 45). When Prithvi Narayan Shah finally took Kathmandu in 1768, after "twenty-six long years" (Stiller 1973: 94) of trying to conquer the cities of the

Nepal Valley, he marched in and met no resistance. The city's inhabitants were exhausted from years of siege; and, despite the privations they'd had to put up with, they managed, so it is said, to be drunk and celebrating the Indra Jatra festival. (T.R. Vaidya, 1996: 215, ascribes Kathmandu's lack of fight to the population's terror that they might suffer the same fate as the inhabitants of Kirtipur in 1766, where all the men, having surrendered after initially putting up stiff resistance, had had their noses and lips cut off.)

Prithvi Narayan marched straight to the centre of the city and into the Living Goddess's residence, the Kumari House (*kumari che*), opposite the Hanuman Dhoka palace. There he sat down on the throne set out for King Jaya Prakash Malla, who had fled to Lalitpur. The Kumari bestowed upon Prithvi Narayan the *tika* blessing that was now, through conquest, rightfully his.

The Kumari cult had long been symbolically central to the Valley's Hindu-Buddhist culture: central both to legitimating Hindu kings and to the festival lives of Newars (Allen 1989; Gellner 1992: 87). Yet, at least in popular representation, the institution of the Kumari goddess being incarnated in a young girl of the Vajracharya-Shakya caste of Buddhist priests (the householder monks of Newar Buddhism) in order to be worshipped by the King, appears as relatively recent. Some accounts place the beginning of this form of the cult as late as the reign of Jaya Prakash



A SCENE FROM THE FILM.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALIVE MIND MEDIA

Malla himself, who was responsible for building the Kumari House and instituting her chariot festival, though others say it goes back two centuries earlier to Trailokya Malla (Allen 2000: 192; Slusser 1982: 311-12; Vaidya 1996: 277-9). Whether or not the specific form of the institution is old, and whether or not the chariot festival as found in Kathmandu associated with Indra Jatra goes back beyond Jaya Prakash, it is certain that worshipping virgin girls as the Kumari is a very old Hindu practice.

Foreigners have always been fascinated at the spectacle of little girls being worshipped as goddesses until they reach puberty and then abruptly become ordinary young women. There are probably more films and magazine articles about the Kumari than about any other Nepali religious institution. An article in *Marie Claire* in April 2002, began: "They start life as ordinary girls, yet by the time they are four, thousands, including the king, flock to worship them..." Rashmila Shakya and Scott Berry's book *From Goddess to Mortal: The True Life Story of a Former Royal Kumari* was published to make it clear that girls could survive, indeed thrive upon, the experience of being treated as a goddess and go on to have a normal, well-educated adulthood (Rashmila herself was studying computer science at the time her life story was published). This is in sharp contrast to the *Marie Claire* article which concluded that ex-Kumaris find it hard to grow up and adjust to life after being a goddess: "Emotionally unsophisticated, many ex-kumaris never recover from their former dream-like existence, spending the rest of their lives yearning for their childhood status." At least this particular magazine article did not repeat the story, endorsed even by Michael Allen (1989: 23), that "marriage to an ex-royal Kumari will prove disastrous for any but the strongest of men". Given that all or nearly all ex-Kumaris do marry, and given the Western Orientalizing proclivity to believe that it is dangerous to incarnate or approach a god, I have always been sceptical about this so-called Newar cultural belief, and have never encountered any solid evidence for it.

The Kumari institution has come under attack from human rights lawyers who argue that the girl's rights as a child—the right to a normal education and upbringing—are being infringed. (Newar activists respond that this is a Brahman-inspired attack on a key part of the Newars' heritage, an attack inspired less by genuine concern for child rights than by envy of the Newars' rich history and culture.) At the same time, the role of this, and other key religious institutions, in legitimating the monarchy came under the spotlight after the People's Movement II (the second street revolution that overthrew King Gyanendra in April 2006). Prime Minister Girija Koirala usurped the King's place and started attending festivals in his place as Head of State. In 2008 the newly elected President, Dr Ram Baran Yadav, took the Prime Minister's place.

Then in October 2008 the new Maoist Finance Minister, the Marxist ideologist Baburam Bhattarai, announced that

the government would not be subsidizing festivals such as Dasain and Indra Jatra that cost so much, that indeed, as a secular and religiously non-aligned government, it could not do so. Four days of riots erupted in Kathmandu and Bhattarai backed down. At around the same time a new Kumari had to be appointed in Kathmandu: the King's personal priest was ruled out, now that the King no longer has any official status. Instead a committee of priests connected to the Taleju temple and the Kumari House chose the new incumbent.

When, in early 2006 Ishbel Whittaker and her husband, Mark Hawker, came to Kathmandu to make a film about the Kumari, they probably were not fully aware that they were entering a politico-religious maelstrom of contested symbolism. Nor can they have anticipated that while they were in Kathmandu a revolution would take place that would sweep away the monarch who was the Kumari's number one devotee and receiver of blessings.

Their film, *Living Goddess*, cuts to and fro between the events on the streets of the capital in March and April 2006 and the lives of the Kumaris of the royal cities of the Valley. In fact the Kumari with whom they established the closest rapport was Sajani Shakya, the Bhaktapur Kumari. This is perhaps not surprising, since she has more freedom than the Royal Kumari of Kathmandu who spends her time in the Kumari House opposite the Hanuman Dhoka palace with a private tutor paid for by the government, instead of going to school. Many of the film's best moments capture Sajani's parents talking to each other or Sajani herself playing, interacting with her family, and walking or being carried through the streets of Bhaktapur.

It is a strength of the film that it does not confine itself to Sajani and her life in Bhaktapur. Interviews with other Kumaris are also included, among them Lalitpur's 'life-long' (*ajivan*) Kumari, who was eventually dismissed from her post in 1985 when already an adult, but continues to act as a Kumari and to be treated as such by many devotees. Politics, inevitably, intrude, not just glimpsed or heard on the TV in the background, but commented on directly by the Kumaris in their different ways. The film forces one to confront the questions, How did the Kumari institution legitimate the Shah dynasty? Why did that legitimation begin to fail to seem convincing in the early 2000s? History is conveyed by the device of having Sajani (or occasionally her mother) recite schoolbook accounts straight to the camera. Subtitles are used effectively to draw the audience in to situations, unlike the faux cinema vérité style of Michaels' and Gutschow's recent DVDs of Newar life-cycle rituals that, eschewing subtitles, leave the viewer forever on the outside looking in, like a tourist (Gutschow et al. 2005, 2008). I spotted very few, and relatively insignificant, mistranslations in the subtitles for *Living Goddess* (e.g. 'chocolate' for *coklet*, instead of 'sweet' or 'candy').

Most of the mixed student and faculty audience to

whom I showed the film liked it, particularly appreciating the intimate family scenes the film-makers were able to capture. Some thought more information should have been provided within the film. For example, the position of the older 'life-long' Kumari is never explained, one is never told what happens to the offerings that devotees bring, and viewers may easily become confused as to which of the four Kumaris featured they are watching as the film cuts between them without providing clues. Some audience members disliked the music of Nitin Sawhney, a modern British Indian composer, and asked why Nepali music could not have been commissioned for the soundtrack; others felt that its eerie sound captured the frightening atmosphere of the revolution very well. There is, it is true, one poorly edited section, in which the sarangi-playing of a young Gaine boy, Ruben, who can be seen and heard singing anti-monarchy songs in many of the shots of political protest, is drowned out by the soundtrack.

Over all, those who are interested in Nepal and religion in South Asia seem to enjoy the film with few caveats. The film is beautifully shot and the juxtaposition of the violence of animal sacrifice and the violence of political protests is very effective. Though the film-makers did not set out to do this, the film also captures the to-and-fro of contemporary urban Newar Buddhist life between Nepali (the language of classroom, of formality, and of outsiders) and Newari (the language of the home).

Those whom I have spoken to who know about films and editing find it a little long and repetitive. But for teaching about Nepal, for showing both how divinity is an everyday matter not cordoned off or radically different from the lives and bodies of ordinary people and how it is becoming marginalized in modern Nepal, and for raising interesting questions about the culture of the Nepal Valley and its relations to political developments, it is excellent.

In June 2007, Ishbel Whittaker brought Sajani Shakya to the USA for the World Premier of *Living Goddess* at the Silverdocs film festival in Maryland. While in Washington DC there she visited an elementary school and answered questions on what it was like to be a goddess, and had a tour of the White House. On her return, to the film-makers' consternation, she was stripped of her title for travelling overseas. After protests and apologies, she was reinstated. The following March she retired, because her family wanted her to perform one of the two puberty rituals that Newar girls must pass through before they achieve adulthood.

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David Gellner is Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford University.