That a group of men gather to sing bhajan hymns is not something people appear to care very much about. It is just a part of everyday life.

--picture 1--

This particular bhajan has its home in a neighborhood – twah – in the heart of the Newar town of Kirtipur, in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, not so very far from the great cities of Kathmandu and Lalitpur. The singers have their own room in a pati (resthouse), just inside the shrine to Ganadya, or Ganesh.

--picture 2--

My paper here starts out from neighborhood bhajan singing. This type of cultural event, as we will see, is a good starting-point for exploring forms of change in Newar music-making. So let us stay with this particular bhajan session for a few more paragraphs! In certain respects, this is a social event where a group of friends and neighbors assemble to do something together. The man at the triangle, for instance, doesn’t sing much and the reason for his taking up this comparatively soft-sounding instrument seems to be that he doesn’t quite keep the time. Tea for a refreshment break is brought from a nearby shop, and more tea – cooked on an electric clay-stove inside the pati while the singing goes on – is taken before the party breaks up.

Participation, rather than for instance musical accomplishment, is a key value in the event, and people invite each other to take turns at the harmonium and the nagara drum.

Throughout, the harmonium is used to guide the singing. There is also an assortment of percussion instruments which we will come back to presently. The hymns are sung in a certain sequence which starts with a hymn to Ganesh, includes one to Bagh Bhairav, a deity important in the town, and closes the event with a final hymn labelled as arati during which the oil-lamp is burnt. To give a brief note on the hymns as such, their melodies are labelled ragas, and are often recognizable from the large stock of song melodies that are part of the Newar music culture.
The texts, on their hand, are often in Nepal bhasha or Newari, the Tibeto-Burman language of the Newar. But there are also texts in what people point out as the Maithili language – more specifically, songs “by Vidyapati” (the famous 14–15th century poet). Other texts are said to be translations of Vidyapati texts into Nepal bhasha.

Unlike the drum traditions that we will meet here today, and unlike the venerable form of hymn-singing called dapha, the bhajan is not a specifically Newar form of music – it is met throughout the subcontinent. (To rule out a possible source of misunderstanding here: I use the word “bhajan” to refer to the relatively modern forms of hymn-singing only, and not to the dapha though this tradition also can be referred to as (dapha-)bhajan.)

And unlike the visually and musically spectacular festivals – the jatras – the bhajan is a low-key event. The wall to the street outside, as well as the partition to the shrine, consist of a grid of metal bars which gives free visual and auditory access to the singing for people passing by in the street, and for the women and men who come to worship – do puja – at the shrine. But there is no human audience to this hymn-singing, people pass by outside or do their puja at the shrine without acknowledging the bhajan particularly. In sum, and as said above, the singing is just a part of everyday life – in a place where religion is the prime vehicle for artistic expression.

The particular morning, just a short while ago, that I last visited this bhajan along with a musical friend, there were just two singers waiting for us when we arrived at the pati. One of these sat down at the nagara (a kettle drum played with sticks), another picked up a triangle; but to get the session started my friend sat down at the harmonium while I was assigned the bell – ghanti – which is played by pulling a rope. Obviously, without the nagara, the harmonium, and the bell there will not be any singing.

After a couple of hymns, however, more singers started to drop in, and in turn they picked up different pairs of cymbals until the combined forces of six percussion instruments – nagara, bell, triangle and three pairs of cymbals, all played in different ways – almost drowned the voices of the singers.
You should have been here before!

These singers are all in their fifties or sixties. When I first visited this bhajan, some 25 years ago, it was quite different. While there were a few more elderly singers also at that time, the pati seemed to be full of rather fresh recruits, people in their 20s and 30s.

In fact, one of today’s nagara drummers was here already then, a young man at that time. And also my musical friend, at the harmonium here, was part of the bhajan scene this many years ago – though he has now left bhajan singing for numerous other musical activities.

This bhajan group seems to have lost its ability to attract newcomers. Other ensembles have closed down. Though dapha hymns are still sung in some neighborhoods nearby, the dapha group of our own twah which was active still some 20 years ago, has now since long stopped. It would be easy to say that we should have been here before in order to get a glimpse of local Newar musical life in its full glory. But as a matter of fact, 25 years ago the local assessment was exactly that. ”You should have been here before!” Already then, people pointed to how the hymn ensembles had problems with, among other things, recruitment of new singers, and with making the singers actually turn up for performances and other events.

In his monumental study of the religiously encoded symbolic system that organizes life in the Newar town of Bhaktapur, Robert Levy came up with a metaphor to describe how this symbolic-social system has perpetuated over the centuries. Newar culture, he wrote, has gone on

in very much the old way, like a clockwork mechanism assembled long ago that no one had bothered to disassemble (Levy 1992: 15)

Is this clockwork now grinding to a halt?

So what is happening?

This is the question which is at the heart of this paper. What is happening in/with/to the Newar music culture? (For the purposes of this paper, ”the Newar music culture” is understood rather narrowly as that part of the musical life currently sustained by Newar that has obvious, traditional roots within Newar culture. That is, Newar involvement in rock music or in pan-
Nepali modern song is not in focus.) This is an important question. The French anthropologist Gérard Toffin – doyen of Newar studies, one might say – writes why he was attracted to this field:

I was fascinated by the lavish and outstanding culture of the Newar, the exuberance of their religion and rituals and the extraordinary complexity of their society (Toffin 2007: 2).

And Newar music is similarly rich, with its many genres, instruments, ensembles and repertoires, and with the many ways in which music is part of the symbolic, the cultural and the social systems.

Let me come up with an image of my own. The traditional, and much admired, picture of the townscape of a Newar town is that of continuous lines of red-brick houses, with wooden windows, three stories, sloping tiled roofs. Nowadays, it is easier to find a row of houses that looks like this:

The traditional houses are still there. But many have been demolished to give way for a variety of new architectural styles. Also the way of constructing houses has changed. From houses where brick walls bear the weight of the whole structure, with wooden beams for the floors, to the so-called ”pillar system” where the brick walls are added only after erecting the basic structure of reinforced concrete. Maybe the situation for the bhajan and other traditional forms of Newar music corresponds to that for the traditional houses – still there, but clearly on the way out. Or are there other things happening here?

**New venues, new forms – traditional content?**

Nothing says that the ways that people lived in the old house will be thrown away after moving in to a new one. Just consider the very event we are about to take part in here. The Singhini Ensemble from Lalitpur will present ”Music and sacred dance from the Kathmandu Valley”. I’ll leave a closer presentation of Singhini to the ensemble itself, but it is clear that behind this troupe of visiting musicians is an organization with much wider aims: the Singhini Research Centre.

A somewhat similar development is the Department of Music at Kathmandu University, Bhaktapur. Both these organizations focus upon Newar musical traditions. And in both, the
hands of foreign scholars can be more than glimpsed. But there are similar efforts also from a more local base. In various ways – reaching new audiences, promotion activities, teaching and so on – organizations such as these preserve and publicize Newar musical traditions. The focus here is upon these traditions as artistic heritage: a given inventory of musical elements that might be refined but essentially should be preserved rather than changed.

However, there was a similar wave of new efforts and new institutional forms already in the 1950s and early 60s. At that time, scholars and artists such as Prem Bahadur Kansakar and Kancha Buddha Bajracya set up their own organizations (sansthas) – such as the Nasah khala in 1956 — to safeguard and develop their cultural heritages.¹ And the efforts of Thakurlal Manandhar – working together with Siegfried Lienhard to translate texts of Newar songs (hymns as well as secular) – can be seen in the same light.²

**More potential performers: lowering the barriers of caste and gender**

Nowadays, people frequently mention that there are now traditional ensembles with women performers. These ensembles – as well as most of Newar music as a whole – are traditionally a strictly male task (Wegner 1987). When women now are seen as potential performers, the base for recruitment of course doubles. Instead of grinding to a halt, Levy’s clockwork seems to have been updated.

Just like in the case of the new, promotional organizations, this type of change does not much affect the music itself; the gurus teach these newcomers to the musical scene how to perform the music in the regulated way. But it does involve other important changes, as Gérard Toffin (2007 ch. 13) has observed: the numerous rituals involved in learning and performing music, as well as significantly the music god, Nasah dyah, himself, are traditionally out of bonds to women.

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¹ As I learned when talking to Mr. Kansakar and Mr. Bajracya in 1986-7. Mr. Kansakar (or Kasa) has a private collection of manuscripts, has issued several anthologies of Newar songs, edited and published several other Nepal bhasha texts from manuscripts.

² Published in several editions as Nevarigittimunjari and as Songs of Nepal. When I talked – or rather, listened – to Mr Manandhar in 1985, it was evident that he had assembled a wealth of information on many aspects of Newar culture, music included. He is also the editor of a well-known Newari–English dictionary, has taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, has co-worked with scholars such as A. A. Baké, Siegfried Lienhard, Anne Vergati, and published a number of articles as well as collections of texts of Newar songs.
It is interesting to note that the bhajan appears as an harbinger of this relaxation of rules. Already 25 years ago, women were taught hymns to be sung as part of jatra processions (see Grandin 1989). On the whole, the bhajan – as compared to other traditions – is less rigid as to who may take a part. Though the exact nature of them differs from locality to locality, caste-rules regulate who takes part in the various ensembles – the ensemble X is only upheld by the caste Y in Kathmandu whereas both caste Y and castes Z and W have joint ensembles in Lalitpur, and the like. The bhajan ensembles that I visited in the 1980s, on the other hand, insisted that this type of devotional work cannot be restricted to certain castes only. Similarly, in the music performed for an audience and from a stage – a latecomer on the Newar musical palette – caste and gender restrictions were notable by their absence already 25 years ago.

The relaxation of gender and caste barriers thus started in relatively "new" cultural forms – bhajan, stage program singing – and has now gone on into older and more thoroughly regulated musical forms. We can see this as one, new, way to safeguard the traditions, by successfully finding a new set of people to recruit performers from.

Mixing

In the cases of new organizational forms and of lowering barriers, the music – as noted above – is left pretty much unchanged. But in other cases, elements from Newar music traditions enter into new musical contexts and give shape to new musical forms. Or vice versa, elements from outside this tradition are taken in. We cannot go into all this in any detail here, but I’ll just point to some cases.

Newar songs – or just the melodies of these songs – have become widely disseminated during the recent decades. You get 16 hits on iTunes store for (the Newar folk song) "Rajamati”, the successful recording by Sur Sudha not included! Though maybe on a more local scale, many songs and melodies now feature on various cds, video-cds, in stage performances and so, performed by anything from what could be called a "Nepali folk instrument” ensemble (with or without Newar instruments), to a sitar- or flute-based semiclassical group, to a computer in a recording studio.

Similarly, emblematic Newar instruments such as the dhimay or khi drums have taken up residence in fusion groups such as Kutumba, who use them when playing both traditional (from a number of sources) melodies and material they have composed themselves.
Also when it comes mixing, the bhajan is a forerunner. Actually, the standard bhajan ensemble today makes use of a *tabla* drum-pair beside the harmonium – not the *nagara* and the bell. These belong to older – pre-harmonium – hymn-singing traditions. In the bhajan we met above, the harmonium has been assimilated into the older ensemble – or rather, bearing in mind that this particular group was founded in 1952, the older instruments have been assimilated in the standard bhajan. Dapha hymns and ragas used in the dapha have been taken over into the bhajan. The bhajan is also open towards new repertoire such as singing *Gyanmala* Buddhist hymns\(^3\) in amongst the songs to Hindu deities – or even singing secular songs aimed to raise people’s awareness.

### Specialists and audiences

Already a quarter of a century ago, there was a visible trend of musical specialization. This trend means that we get music performed by specialists instead of participatory, ”amateur” music; and that as a corollary, we get an audience. As we can see from what is said about mixing and about new venues above, this trend seems to have gathered further momentum. Also the increasing involvement by women in Newar music is part of this trend, if we go by the examples given by Toffin (2007: ch 13): organizing women’s flute ensembles to perform at the stage programs given at the New Year according to Nepal Samvat (see further below).

To give other instances of such specialization, we can take the dhimay-player in *Kutumba*, who has taken a Master’s degree in tabla in Allahabad. Or we can take my friend the music specialist whom we met in the bhajan above. To be sure, he started by learning music in both bhajan and dapha ensembles, in such religiously coded tuition sessions that these ensembles traditionally give. But he has then gone on to learning vocal classical music (of the Hindusthani type) as well as to being a music teacher himself in various schools. Moreover he devotes much time to stage performances. Here we find the traditional *performer* in a new role as a specialist. Conversely, with Singhini and others we find traditional *music* in a new role as specialist-provided music performed for an audience. Moreover, music groups from a ”traditional” setting now publicize their efforts, bring out cds and so on – instead of just performing as a routine feature of everyday life.

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\(^3\) On Gyanmala hymns, and their role in the revival and reconstitution of Newar Buddhism, see LeVine & Gellner (2005).
Disembedding, re-embedding

Much of the change that we have surveyed here implies that music becomes more art or cultural awareness than dharma (religion). This is to say that music has become disembedded from its context and re-embedded in a new context. The traditional cultural meaning is no longer there when, for instance, a dyah laegu (invocation of the gods) becomes more of an item of concert repertoire. And similarly when pieces of the repertoire are written down in notation, the transmission of musical knowledge is disembedded from the religiously coded tuition sessions, with a number of specific rituals to be conducted at specific stages in the learning process.

So in what way is Newar music, and its elements, re-embedded?

This is Newar culture!

Much of the developments sketched above can be understood as part of a movement promoting Newar culture and Newar cultural awareness. The yearly celebrations of New Year according to Nepal Samvat (the Nepal Era) with musical stage performances (and in many other ways) is part of this movement – which has institutionalized as well as informal components. All this was recently embodied by a big event on the Kathmandu Dasrath stadium where a Newar “national anthem” was presented.

A veritable who’s who of Newar artists – including my friend the music specialist as well as the dhimay-player from Kutumba – were there to sing, and suitably, not only the newly adopted Newar flag but also large dhimay drums were prominently displayed.

The melody for this anthem, however, has no audible roots in Newar tradition, or even in South Asia. Instead Tirtha Mali, the composer, starts out from alternations between D Major and G minor chords. The text of the song is written by the famous janakavi (people’s poet) and Newar

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4 The notion of embeddedness is used in Economic Sociology and, among other things, it is used to point out that any economy is “embedded” socially in interpersonal networks, by means of socialization, etc. See Swedberg & Granovetter (1992).

5 See Widdess (1997) for a study of these processes in the case of the Tantric Buddhist carya song and dance tradition.

6 As he told me, his melody is not on the base of a raga – “where would you find such a raga?”
cultural activist Durga Lal (Shrestha). Durga Lal’s songs, promoting Newar culture and cultural awareness, are also found on CDs including one significantly called *Jhi Newa* (we Newar).\(^7\)

So this, I would argue, is one very significant way in which Newar music – disembedded from its ritual and everyday significance – is currently being re-embedded. In the process, musical elements lose the caste (and gender) identities and instead assume new significance as common, Newar heritage. (Interesting questions announce themselves here. Is this a living heritage? Museumized heritage to be contemplated and displayed, but not actually used in everyday life? Or just assorted icons of Newar identity?\(^8\))

**A rusting clockwork?**

Before wrapping up this presentation, let me return to Levy’s metaphor of a cultural clockwork. It is such a powerful metaphor! But when it comes to understanding (musical) change, it obscures more than it clarifies. In fact, it rules out gradual change altogether. Once assembled, a clockwork cannot be expected to change its nature. It can just break down. The metaphor of houses works better here: houses can be torn down and replaced, but this does not necessarily mean that every item of life as it was lived in the old houses is thrown out in the process. Moreover, there is not just ”traditional” and ”modern” in Newar architecture and house-construction but evolving architectural styles and fashions when it comes to such things as facades and windows.

To return to the bhajan, this was not a part of the original clockwork – which Levy thinks of as essentially rooted in the Malla Kingdoms of the pre-1769 Kathmandu Valley. Instead, different ways of singing bhajan hymns (that is, communal and public hymn-singing outside of the dapha) have evolved. The present-day bhajan is as much a product of musical change as a product of the traditional Newar music culture.

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\(^7\) The composer who has made all these Durga Lal lyrics into songs is no one else than Gujya Malakar, my friend the musical specialist from the bhajan. A great many thanks – once again – to Gujya for his help and friendship over the years!

\(^8\) On this, see further Grandin (1995).
What about the participatory, religiously coded musical life?

Music, like houses, grows from a surplus of man-hours and other resources. The surplus that has founded the Newar musical traditions is based on a very specific economy – an economy that also continuously produced rituals, festivals; arts and crafts; literature, drama, painting, sculpture; food; housing; clothing; raw materials such as clay, bricks, stone, wood; paper; and of course food. Religion is a key to this economy – both products and the apparatus for production are defined in religious terms. And as we have seen, religion is transformed into arts. Religion is a source for artistic expression in the arts of painting, woodcraft, stonemasonry, metalwork, architecture, literature, religion is turned into cultural performance in ritual, ceremony, festival, music, dance, drama. If we think of Levy’s clockwork not as a definite symbolic-social machinery, but in a more general way as precisely this religiously encoded mode of production, the metaphor still has heuristic value.

It is in all this that Newar music traditionally was embedded – and now, as we have seen, is disembedded from. However, by being re-embedded in the Newar national culture, ”traditional” Newar music seems to have acquired a new life. What will happen in the long run remains to be seen – will the new (or revised) ”clockwork” be as musically and artistically productive as the traditional one? Religion is the driving force behind the generation of the rich traditional music and musical life. Can, say, Newar cultural awareness and musical specialization be equally potent?

And, finally, where does all this leave the bhajan? I’d say that bhajan is less likely to be adopted by organizations working to preserve and promote Newar musical culture – it is much too common and much too little Newar for that. We’ll probably not hear a Newar neighborhood bhajan here at Yale! For the same reason, bhajan singing in the way we have encountered it here is not likely to be a part of the Newar museum of national heritage.

And in the local setting, the very low-key nature of bhajan singing makes it hard to sustain. To attract people to the spectacular religious festivals does not seem that much of a problem – but maybe it is easier to mobilize people once a year, or once every twelve years for certain festivals, than to make people turn up at 6 o’clock morning after morning for the everyday bhajan.

Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, the bhajan, rather than any other of the many Newar musical forms, is the best index we may have on the health of Newar traditional music, as a participatory, religiously encoded cultural practice.
Works cited


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