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A YOUNG PERSON'S GUIDE TO THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE KATHMANDU VALLEY: THE SONG *KAULĀ KACHALĀ* AND ITS VIDEO

Ingemar Grandin

There is no doubt that the Newar culture of the Kathmandu Valley has attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Scholars who themselves belong to the Newar community have contributed prominently to the literature (for instance, Malla 1982; Shrestha 2012), yet it is the involvement of scholars from almost all over the world (from Japan in Asia over Australia and Europe to North America) that is particularly striking. It seems that whatever aspect of the Newar civilization you think of – say, its arts (Slusser 1982), use of space (Herdick 1988), its performances of dance, music and drama (van den Hoek 2004; Wegner 1986; Toffin 2010), its specific Hinduism (Levy 1990), or its equally specific Buddhism (Gellner 1992) – you will find it covered at length by foreign scholars in many articles and in at least one book-length study.

The presentation of Newar culture that we will focus upon here, however, is very different from this literature. It is made for Newars by Newars; it is in the form of a song with a video, not a scholarly text; and it is a presentation for children, not for learned readers. The song is called *Kaulā Kachalā* (which are the names of two months).

A study of this song will tell us something about Nepali music videos, and about Nepali children's songs. But the main reason for a detailed study of *Kaulā Kachalā* is that within its small format, it plays up a very rich picture of Newar civilization. What picture this is, and the multimedial (text, music, moving pictures) way the picture is created, will be investigated in the following pages. The questions of what purposes such an ethnographic song video may serve, and to whom it really is addressed, are equally important and will lead us to consider how the song relates to such things as ethnic politics and cultural heritage. The recent earthquake in Nepal, as devastating as years of civil war in terms of loss of human lives and even worse in terms of physical destruction, has made questions of heritage acute. But there are also other aspects of cultural vulnerability and sustainability.

Kaulā Kachalā is thus positioned in and illuminates a number of important problem areas and debates.

Nepali Song Videos

With what could be called a democratization of the means of production – with numerous studios for music recordings, with more recently comparatively cheap digital video technology, and with many FM radio and TV stations for broadcasting – there is now a large output of music albums and song videos in Nepal. (Still in the 1980s, there was not much beyond Radio Nepal and the newcomer, Music Nepal, for music recordings.) *Kaulā Kachalā* belongs to this output, and of course more specifically to the subgenre of songs in Nepalbhasha.

There are today VCD- (Video CD) and DVD-albums with Nepalbhasha music videos, they are shown on various television channels, and they are encountered on Youtube. (The *Kaulā Kachalā* video, which Gujje Malakar helpfully let me copy from his own digital file in 2010, can now be accessed via Youtube.)¹ The Nepalbhasha songs that we find in the contemporary output are often in modern musical idioms, typically that of modern song (*ādhunik gīt*) but also more rock- or rap-influenced styles. And similarly, their videos can show us present-day Nepali modernity (like it is analyzed in Liechty 2003): middle-class life with consumer goods being the setting for boy meets girl, or a tale of children living with loving parents in neat homes and doing their homework at the computer (to give one example). But there is also a sizable corpus of videos with traditional Newar songs – sometimes with new musical recordings, sometimes old ones, and sometimes re-makes of old recordings – and new musical compositions that audibly draw upon a traditional idiom.

And just like in *Kaulā Kachalā*, many song videos focus on Newar culture.

Children's Songs and Cultural Activism

The album *Jhī Newāḥ* (We Newar), where *Kaulā Kachalā* is included, was brought out by the musical artist and composer Gujje Malakar. The ten songs of the album, all with Nepalbhasha lyrics by the poet Durgalal Shrestha and with musical compositions by Gujje Malakar himself, were recorded

¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=fb1iLQYMO6s; accessed 28 June 2014.

in 2005. The composer then went on to ‘visualize’ the songs for television and with a VCD-album in mind. The visualizations are carried out according to the composer’s own ideas. He shoots – or rather, hires a film producer to shoot – the visualization of one song at a time, in a tempo dictated by the funds he is able to raise.

Though the cover presents the album *Jhī Newāḥ* as a “collection of songs by Newar kids,” songs *for* Newar children would be a more appropriate way of putting it: most of the songs are in fact sung by adult singers. But both lyrics and music are well tailored to be understood and sung by children and *Kaulā Kachalā* is indeed well within the general format of Nepali children’s songs (see Grandin 2005). This is what should be expected – Gujje Malakar, the composer, is among other things a seasoned music teacher, on the staff of two schools and with many songs and two albums to his credit. Unlike *Jhī Newāḥ*, his second (or really, first) album, called *Kāphal carī* (Kaphal bird), is entirely made up of children’s songs in Nepali and sung principally by children. Among the songwriters who have contributed lyrics to *Kāphal carī* we find again Durgalal Shrestha (see Grandin Forthcoming for further comments on the songs of this album).

Gujje Malakar has both a rich body of experience and a wide social network (singers, musicians, actors, dancers, choreographers, and songwriters as well as school-children) to draw upon for his work. Now in his fifties, he lives in the Newar town of Kirtipur, in the neighbourhood (*tvāḥ*) where he was born and raised, and where he learnt two genres of Newar hymn-singing: the more archaic *dāphā* as well as the more contemporary *bhajan* (on these genres, see Grandin 2011; Widdess 2013). More recently, he complemented this with formal studies in classical music of North Indian variety. But much of this experience he has gained as a cultural activist within the interrelated but distinct fields of progressive politics and the Newar ethnic (or national) movement.

Durgalal Shrestha has an even longer track-record as a poet and songwriter, and as a cultural activist in the same two fields. Durgalal is now in his seventies and when I interviewed him back in 1987 he had already a large catalogue of songs – both in Nepalbhasha and in Nepali – to his credit.

As Durgalal told me, he started out quite young, writing dramas to be staged at festivals. Soon however he went over to focus on poems, taking his form from folk songs and writing to folk song melodies from the Newar repertoire rather than according to the metric rules of poetics. This, he thinks,

makes his lyrics eminently singable: the musicality of the folk song meter carries over to a new melody composed for his text. And indeed, Durgalal's lyrics are much in demand among composers and singers. As a testimony to his ability to write himself into the Newar tradition, an early song of his, *Māyā re ratna* (Love, my jewel), is included as a "typical [Nepalbhasha] folk song" in Lienhard's (1984: 43) anthology of Newar folk songs and hymns.

It is only appropriate that it is Durgalal who has given the words to the *Newāh State Anthem* which was inaugurated at a big program in Kathmandu in 2009 (Shrestha 1131 n.s.; Shakya 1131 n.s.). We will return to this program towards the end of this article. As to Durgalal's progressive political work, some idea can be had from his song *Jhī garibayā garibahe pāsā* (We poor are the friends of the poor) from the 1970s (see Grandin 1995: 123–124, 134–136), or his contribution to the *Kāphal carī* album, *Timī bāhun* (You are a Brahman), from more recent years (Grandin Forthcoming).

As Durgalal explained to me, he is very careful about the way his songs are set to music. It is the melody, he said, that gives life and soul to the words. Melody and words must fit well together in meaning, and the composer must follow the rhythm that the lyric writer has given his text. Moreover, while Durgalal saw Newar folk songs as eminent models, writing on a Western model or copying Hindi film songs was something he denounced. In all these respects, as we will see, he has found in Gujje Malakar a congenial composer. (The composer, in his turn, told me that once you've been able to elicit a song text from Durgalal, he will expect you to sing your musical setting of his words back to him over the phone and await his verdict. If you hear Durgalal tapping the beat to your singing on his side-table, this is an auspicious sign.)

The cultural activism of both songwriter and composer is important enough when trying to understand what kind of statement *Kaulā Kachalā* presents, and in what debates and struggles it makes this statement. We will return to this towards the end of this article. Now, however, let us see what kind of text, music and visualization it is that the songwriter and composer have given us in the case of *Kaulā Kachalā*.

The Text

The lyrics of *Kaulā Kachalā* are simple enough. There are 58 unique words – expanded by recurrent phrases into a total of 88 words – divided into six couplets, each with two lines. The first line of each couplet states the names

of two months in Nepalbhasha, gives the corresponding ‘Nepali’ names, and then tells us the name of the season to which the two months belong.² The second line then goes on to mention a couple of events falling in that season. The second line of all six couplets ends *Jhīgu re* (pointing out that what has been mentioned is ‘ours’), rhyming with *rtu re* (*rtu* is ‘season,’ and *re* is a common final syllable in Newar songs – cf. Lienhard 1984) which concludes the first line of each couplet. In this way, each of the six couplets presents one of the six seasons, starting with *śarada* (the cool post-monsoon season that often is translated ‘autumn’), proceeding to *hemanta* (winter), *śísira* (late winter), *basanta* (spring), *gr̥ṣma* (the hot pre-monsoon summer) and ending with *var̥ṣā* (the monsoon).

Table 1: Overview of the *Kaulā Kachalā* Text: Months, Season and Events in the Six Verses

Verse	Newari Months	Nepali Months	Season	Events
1	kaulā, kachalā	asoḷ, kārtik	śarada	mohanī, svanti nakhaḥ
2	thimlā, pohelā	maṁsir, puṣ	hemanta	yaḥmarhi punhi, nhayagām jātrā
3	sillā, cillā	māgh, phāgun	śísira	ghyaḥ cāku saṁlhu, silā caḥrhe
4	caulā, bachalā	cait, baiśākh	basanta	pāhā caḥrhe, biskā nakhaḥ
5	tachalā, dillā	jeṭh, asār	gr̥ṣma	sithi nakhaḥ, gathām mugah
6	gumlā, ñālā	sāun, bhadau	var̥ṣā	gumpunhi, yemnyā punhi

With this, the verses all start out from what is specifically Newar (the names of months in Nepalbhasha), then zoom out to a more generally Nepali and even South Asian context (the names of months in Nepali, the names of the seasons) and then return again to the local scene (by mentioning festivals as they are known and celebrated in Newar culture). So the lyrics *both* focus upon Newar culture *and* take care to position this culture in its wider cultural and geographic context (see Table 1).

² On Newar months, see Levy (1990: 403–405).

The Music

South Asian songs, including Newar ones, typically make use of a refrain (*sthāi*, Nepalbhasha *dhu*) with which the song starts, which is then repeated in between the verses, and which is given a different, contrasting musical setting to set it off from the verses. *Kaulā Kachalā*, however, has no refrain and all six couplets are sung to the same musical setting. And this music consists of only four different musical phrases which for analytic purposes we can call A, B, C and D. More specifically the composition consists of two pairs of two-bar phrases A+B and C+D, one pair for each line of text. Here and throughout I will, for the sake of convenience, refer to one cycle of the four-beat *tāla* used in of *Kaulā Kachalā* as a ‘bar.’ The first beat (known as *sam*) of a bar is consistently marked out with small cymbals except in the prelude before the first verse (where a maraca performs the marking of the first beat). The tempo on the recording is 172 quarter-notes per minute, which makes each bar 1.40 seconds long. (However, the ‘feel’ of the recording is not that of a very fast tempo, so to put it in terms of half-notes instead – that is, at 86 beats per minute – might seem more accurate.)

The recording of the song makes use of two women singers – Rani Shobha Maharjan and Svasti Maharjan – and of (computer/synthesizer-produced) strings, assorted percussion, sitar, and *bāsuri* (bamboo flute), but also – in the musical interludes – a few Newar instruments: what sounds like (and is played like) the big barrel-shaped drum *pachimā* (or *khim*), the even larger cylindrical drum *dhimay*, and *bhusyā* cymbals used in combination with the *dhimay*. These Newar sonorities are used in the preludes before the verses whereas the verses themselves stick to a common pattern of accompaniment.

In the recording on the CD-album and in the visualization, each line of the text is repeated and so the musical format for each verse is consequently expanded to AB AB CD CD, 16 bars in all. Moreover, as the song appears on the recording, as a prelude to each verse, the corresponding Newar seasonal melody or *rāga* is played.³ For example, before the couplet on the subject of *basanta* (‘spring’), the melody or *rāga* called *Basanta* is played (see Table 2).

³ As we can see in Table 2, many of these seasonal melodies or *rāgas* have names that reflect that of their season. As per English usage, I will capitalize the names of the melodies/*rāgas* (*Basanta*, cf. ‘Vivaldi’s Spring’) but not those of the seasons (*basanta*, cf. ‘nothing is so beautiful as spring’). We need not go into all the details of Newar seasonal songs/melodies/*rāgas* here, but perhaps I should mention that there are also other seasonal melodies than the six appearing in *Kaulā Kachalā*, and that the actual time of performance can be different from what

Table 2: Musical Overview of *Kaulā Kachalā*

Prelude before the Verse	Sung Verse
a seasonal song melody/a seasonal rāga played on flute or sitar, with contrasting musical accompaniment as compared to the verses	the same music and similar accompaniment for every verse
Mohanī (Mālaśrī) (refrain), 8 bars + 4 bars modulation maraca (Mohanī melody); pachimā drum (modulation)	Verse 1 (the season of śarada) 16 bars
Hemanta, 14 bars pachimā drum	Verse 2 (the season of hemanta) 16 bars
Phāgu (Holī) (refrain) repeated, 16 bars pachimā drum	Verse 3 (the season of śiśira) 16 bars
Basanta (refrain), 8 bars pachimā drum	Verse 4 (the season of basanta) 16 bars
Sinhājyā, 16 bars dhimay and bhusyā drum and cymbals	Verse 5 (the season of gr̥ṣma) 16 bars
Silu (selections), 12 bars pachimā drum	Verse 6 (the season of varṣā) 16 bars
	Lā-lā-lā (outro) 20 bars

In the recording, the song starts with a flute playing the refrain of *Mālaśrī* with just a maraca for an accompaniment. As soon as the first verse starts, there is a 4/4 pattern from a drum, a triangle and a bass which then continues, in the same tempo but (as mentioned above) with various variations in the interludes, throughout the rest of the song.

The music of the first line of the text is made up by an ascent in two steps, each a two-bar phrase (A+B). This ascent omits two notes (*2/Re* and *5/Pa*) and takes us from the lower tonic to the higher tonic, which is circumambulated. The music of the second line reverses this, by descending back to the lower tonic again, also in two two-bar phrases (C+D). With its gap in the ascent the music for the first line – as the composer also pointed out to me – is close to the initial phrase of (the refrain of) *Basanta* and also to the first part of (the refrain of) the popular Newar song *Jhamjḥka māyā*.

the name of a melody would have one to think. Rāga *Basanta* is actually sung from Basanta paṃcamī to Holī punhi, that is, *before* the season of *basanta* (spring) [see Grandin 1997].

The descending phrases, however, are different from those of these two melodies. Unlike these two melodies, *Kaulā Kachalā* employs the flat version of the seventh note (7-/Nī komal) in its descent. Another traditional parallel comes to mind here: the melody of the popular folk song *Rājamati kumati* which moreover, like *Kaulā Kachalā*, has only verses, no refrain. And there is also another popular folk song that has the same kind of descent, and this is (the refrain of) *Va chu galli*.

Kaulā Kachalā in fact positions itself in a number of ways as against these four traditional melodies. It shares a gapped ascent with most of them, and a gapped ascent where precisely 2/Re and 5/Pa are omitted with *Basanta* and *Jhañjhka māyā*. It shares the circumambulating of the upper tonic 1'/Sā' with *Basanta* and *Rājamati*. It shares a seven-note, non-gapped descent with all of them, and the oblique shape of this descent with *Basanta*. It shares the use of 7/Nī (natural) in the ascent and 7-/Nī komal in the descent with *Rājamati* and *Va chu galli*. And, finally, *Kaulā Kachalā* shares the general ascent-descent outline of the melody with all the other melodies except *Va chu galli* (which has a more undulating melodic shape) and the four-bar format with all except *Rājamati* (where the melody takes up eight bars). To use the terminology of semiotics (which we will make more use of later in this study), we could say that *Kaulā Kachalā* is an *icon* of – has a relation of similarity to – each of the traditional melodies, and also of a sort of generic Newar folk melody.⁴ And moreover, in the recording and in the video this iconically Newar melody is in musical dialogue with the six Newar seasonal melodies.

The Video

The visualization of all this works from four types of visual content: 1) The two singers, women in their 20s or 30s; 2) A group of six dancers, girls in their late teens or so; 3) The various actual outdoor locations where the singers and dancers appear; 4) Diverse scenes presenting some element or event of Newar culture.

To give a short description, the film starts with zooming in on the town of Kirtipur, as seen from the south-west, with its characteristic skyline. The town is built on a ridge with two peaks, each crowned with an important religious building: the Cilamco stupa on the southern peak, the temple to Umā

⁴ For other examples of ways of relating to the Newar melodic tradition, see the three songs by Ram Krishna Duwal in Grandin (1995).

Maheśwar on the northern one. And in the video, the Umā Maheśwar temple, built in the multi-roofed pagoda style with multiple platforms that Newar architecture is famous for, gives a clear visual accent to the introductory, rather long, shot of Kirtipur. Then follows a succession of shots of the dancers – all dressed in the same way with brownish blouses, red-bordered black saris and white shawls (also with red borders) and with hennaed bare feet – proceeding through Kirtipur’s Bāgh Bhairav temple compound. On their way they meet a small procession of young people carrying a red banner with the words *jātiyā sām̐skṛtik vividhatā he rāṣṭriyatā khaḥ* (ethnic cultural pluralism is nationalism).

All this has been shown to the introductory, instrumental music (the melody called *rāga Mālaśrī* or *Mohanī* and belonging especially to the ten-day *Mohanī* festival falling in the season of *śarada*). When the song’s first couplet starts, it is the two singers that are given the visual floor. The two women are dressed in the same way, but differently from the singers: they wear a long, brownish tunic over a pair of baggy blue pants but they also wear the same red-bordered white shawl as the dancers do. A series of shots show that the singers sit on the topmost platform, directly underneath the roof, of the Umā Maheśwar temple whereas the dancers perform their dance on a lower platform. Throughout this couplet, shots of the singers and of the dancers are mixed with some shots of an audience of sorts that has gathered below the temple – shots that show also the urban setting of the event.

The scene shifts entirely with the introductory music for the next verse, the one presenting the season of *hemanta*. The tune played in this introduction is also known as *Hemanta* (see Table 2). Now the setting is in the farmlands, presumably those on Kirtipur’s south-west, and we are given a picture of agricultural work. A man and a woman is seen preparing the field for sowing or planting, the man overturning the dry earth with a *kū* (a digging hoe), the woman then breaking up the clods with a mallet. The woman is dressed rather similarly to the dancers: in a red-bordered black sari with a brownish blouse; the man wears a tunic and a pair of trousers in a brownish fabric similar to that of the women and a black *topī*. A second woman arrives on this scene, carrying a basket with food and plates, and proceeds to serve a snack of beaten rice and (presumably) meat to the farmers. Meanwhile the banner-carrying procession, including the six dancers, are seen proceeding over the fields and are watched by the farm-workers. For the first line of the couplet, shots of the two singers are juxtaposed with shots of the six dancers,

dancing in the field. This goes on also for the second line of the couplet where, however, also two other scenes are included in the montage. The first of these scenes is cut in exactly at the word ‘yaḥmarhi punhi’ and shows the making and eating of the type of bread or cake called *yaḥmarhi*. The second scene is from a *jātrā*, and depicts a palanquin carried in a procession inside a town. This scene is cut in exactly at the word “nhayagām jātrā” (the *jātrā* of seven villages).

The ensuing four couplets are visualized in a similar way. The singers and, especially, the dancers take up most of the scene in the verses, with shots of particular items cut in, in the fashion described above, as prompted by key words in the lyrics. The musical preludes, on their hand, feature scenes with the dancers or montages of brief scenes of urban life. For example, during the 16 bars (some 22 seconds) of the *Sinhājyā* prelude before the fifth verse, there are altogether 14 shots cutting to and fro between people walking on rainy streets, girls playing the *dhimay* drum and *bhusyā* cymbals, a close-up of a part of the *Loṃ degaḥ* (stone temple) in Kirtipur, girls dancing on the platforms of this temple, and the banner-procession walking up a street towards the camera.

The quick pace of the editing in this montage – 14 shots in 22 seconds – is something that we find throughout the film (save at the end), and the montage shows up also other typical features of the video. To start with shots and editing, the whole movie is made up by 118 shots. Many shots – 66 of them, to give the actual number – are about 1.4 seconds in length, which is the same as that of a bar in the music. And indeed, the rhythm of the cuts in the movie mostly follows – flexibly, not rigidly – the small cymbals marking out the first beat in a bar. Another 27 shots are about two bars long (roundabout 2.8 seconds). The film includes 17 shots that are relatively long (3.5 seconds or more) and just a few shots (9, to be exact) whose length is not adapted to the grid of the music.

Another general feature of the film, found also in the *Sinhājyā* montage, is the predominance of shots from temples (54 shots) and the townscape (39 shots). There are altogether four temples or temple compounds in the film, all located in Kirtipur (Bāgh Bhairav, *Loṃ degaḥ*, *Umā Maheśwar* and *Cilaṃco*), and except for two brief shots from Bhaktapur’s *Biskā* festival, all the pictures of the townscape appear to be from Kirtipur, too. A third important location is not part of this montage but has been described above: that of farmlands (16 shots). An overview of the video is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Overview of the *Kaulā Kachalā* Video

Time (min'sec.)	Music/Text	Principal Location	Duration (seconds)	Number of Bars in the Music	Number of Shots in the Video
0.00	Mohanī (prelude)	Kirtipur Bāgh Bhairav	17.60	12	8
17.60	Verse 1 (śarada)	Umā Maheśwar	22.35	16	11
39.95	Hemanta (prelude)	Farmlands	19.50	14	11
59.45	Verse 2 (hemanta)	Farmlands Townscape	22.35	16	12
1'21.80	Phāgu (Holī) (prelude)	Townscape	22.35	16	14
1'44.15	Verse 3 (śīśira)	Loṃ degaḥ	22.35	16	11
2'06.50	Basanta (prelude)	Townscape	11.10	8	8
2'17.60	Verse 4 (basanta)	Cilaṃco	22.35	16	10
2'40.00	Sinhājyā (prelude)	Townscape Loṃ degaḥ	22.35	16	14
3'02.30	Verse 5 (gr̥ṣma)	Bāgh Bhairav	22.30	16	9
3'24.60	Silu (prelude)	Loṃ degaḥ	16.80	12	6
3'41.40	Verse 6 (varṣā)	Bāgh Bhairav	22.30	16	3
4'03.70	Lā-lā-lā (outro)	Bāgh Bhairav	27.50	20	3

A third feature of the *Kaulā Kachalā* video, shown in the *Sinhājyā* montage, is the metonymical way the townscape and especially the temples are portrayed. In the opening shot of Kirtipur, the three roofs and much of the main building of Umā Maheśwar can be seen, and a few seconds later we have a full view of the main Bāgh Bhairav temple. But in the rest of the video, only different fragments of the temples appear.

As may be clear already, the video includes both scenes staged specifically for the shooting, and what look more like documentary shots. As Table 4 shows, staged scenes make up the most of the video and among these, scenes

with the dancers and to some extent the singers predominate. But also the banner-procession and the agricultural scenes have a notable presence in the video.

**Table 4: Types of Content in the Video
(Final Shot with Dancers, Singers and Banner not Counted)**

Type of Content	Number of Shots	Total Time
<i>a) scenes staged for the video</i>		
Dancers	43	1'42
Singers	14	0'35
Singers and dancers together	11	0'33
Agricultural scenes	18	0'29
Procession with banner	13	0'24
Music being performed	7	0'10
<i>b) (possibly) documentary scenes</i>		
Festival scenes	5	0'10
Diverse tasks (women preparing <i>yahmarhi</i> , man weaving straw-mat, etc.)	8	0'09
Various (woman with umbrella, man smoking water-pipe, etc.)	5	0'05

After the sixth couplet, the song – and the film – ends with five reprises of the music of the couplet's second line, now sung 'Lā-lā-lā.' The camera follows the six dancers as they dance their way along a house. However, when the dancers pass the main door of the house, outside which the two singers are seated with the red banner above and behind them, the camera rest upon the singers and then goes on to zoom in to the banner itself which is the film's final picture, leaving us with the message that nationalism is made up by the multitude of ethnic cultures.

***Kaulā Kachalā* as Ethnographic Storytelling (and a Note on Method)**

Kaulā Kachalā is not just an object for aesthetic contemplation. Its basic task is communication. Beyond the video's display of singers and dancers there is also some kind of didactic storytelling going on, a storytelling to which moving pictures, text and music all contribute.

I have adapted my way of approaching this didactic story from a distant relative of *Kaulā Kachalā*, namely Chittadhar Hridaya's *Sugata Saurabha* and from Todd T. Lewis's (in Hridaya 2010: 355–358) comments upon this classic work. *Sugata Saurabha* (first published in 1948) is an epic poem on the life of the Buddha where, however, the poet has borrowed freely from Newar culture to flesh out the scenes. Seeing Chittadhar's work as "a kind of cultural encyclopedia of the Kathmandu Valley civilization" (p. 356), Lewis goes on to provide a table of contents – including, for instance, home life, festivals, marriage rites – of this encyclopedia. Following this lead, we can see the *Kaulā Kachalā* song and video as a sort of ethnography, as a young person's guide to the culture and cultural heritage of the Newars.

In both cases – *Sugata Saurabha* and *Kaulā Kachalā* – this approach covers about half of the classical questions on a communication process (who says what through what medium) while other questions remain. To whom is the work addressed (is it really only to young persons)? What are the contexts, the circumstances under which it has been formulated and put into circulation? And what are the purposes? These questions bring up such things as the activist position of all three artists, and the nature of the Nepali society in which they make their communicative interventions. We will consider this in due time.

While *Sugata Saurabha* in Lewis's and Tuladhar's translation takes up more than 300 pages, *Kaulā Kachalā*'s text – with a sum total of 58 words – would make a meager encyclopedia. Instead, *Kaulā Kachalā* can be seen as a 'multimedial' (Cook 1998) or 'multimodal' (Kress 2010) ethnography that makes use of several communicative and artistic modalities at once: language, music, and moving pictures; but also dance and choreography, dress, and the craft of mise-en-scène. In this multimodal way of working, *Kaulā Kachalā* is akin to an ethnographic exhibition at a museum – and this affinity includes the way scenes, as we have seen above, are staged rather than purely documentary (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991).

To address *Kaulā Kachalā* as a multimedial ethnography and to spell out what it communicates, the concept of the indexical sign, combined with James J. Gibson's notion of affordances (see, for instance, Chemero 2003), provides us with a good point to start from. An index is according to semiotics the type of sign where signifier and signified are linked by a correlation of some sort (Port 2000). The figure of the part for the whole, known as metonymy or synecdoche (for our purposes here there is no need to review

the various definitions), is one case of an indexical relation. Now, an actual correlation between two entities is an *affordance*, an offer or opportunity, to read one entity as (indexical) sign of the other.

While words, according to the semiotic conceptualization, are arbitrary symbols, indexicality is important also in language. Indexes are such linguistic features – choice of words, accent, way of speaking and so on – that are rooted in and point to specific social contexts such as class position and educational background (Park and Wee 2012) or perhaps certain typical personae (such as cowboys, farmers, and ranchers in the case of U.S. ‘country talk,’ Hall-Lew and Stevens 2011). It is easy to show that indexicality operates in much the same way in music.⁵ As Cook (1998: 17–18) puts it:

Musical styles and genres offer unsurpassed opportunities for communicating complex social or attitudinal messages practically instantaneously; one or two notes in a distinctive musical style are sufficient to target a specific social and demographic group and to associate a whole nexus of social and cultural values [with an entity of some kind].

To give a musical example of how all this works:

The sounds of the *dhimay* drum is (or rather, affords) an index of the drum itself, of someone beating it, and of the technology used in producing the drum (i.e., the paste on the inside of the skin serving to give a rich, resonant tone). But moreover, the sound of *dhimay* indexically points to when this drum is used – procession music at festivals, religion, etc., and of by whom it is used (traditionally, men from the Farmer caste). But moreover, the *dhimay* is an index of recent change: of that also women now set up *dhimaybājās*. Metonymically – the part for the whole – the sounds of *dhimay* invites us to consider the festivals of which these drums are such an important part. All this, then, is the field of indexical affordances of the sound of the *dhimay* drum: what this sound invites us to see.

And similarly, we can establish semiotic affordances for the music of *Kaulā Kachalā*. The composition of the melody, the instruments in the

⁵ An indexical approach to musical meaning helps bypassing such common but strange ideas as those put forth by cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997: 5): “Music has been called ‘the most noise conveying the least information’” and “music...can’t easily be used to reference actual things or objects in the world.” In his groundbreaking study of television music, Tagg (1979) showed that small fragments of music – a melodic phrase, a sonority, a metric pattern – in fact *are* used to reference actual things or objects in the world.

recording, the metric patterns, and the inclusion of traditional melodies between the verses: all of these afford indexical meanings.

We have already seen that *Kaulā Kachalā*'s video makes use of the indexical relation of metonymy (the part for the whole) and also the song's text affords indexical links. It is to the exploration of such relations and links that we now will turn.

Cyclical Time: Festivals and Religion

The seasons work well as a thematic device to organize an ethnography of the traditional Newar civilization in many of its aspects: religion, performance of dance and music, and of course the organization of its monsoon-based agricultural economy. The two events that the text of *Kaulā Kachalā* gives for each season all belong to the cycle of festivals. Together with the sequence of seasonal melodies this at once represents religion, performance, and the cycle of the year.

The song starts out (with the season of *śarada*) with the festivals of *Mohanī* (at harvest time) and *Svanti* (when the harvest is completed), the particular Newar articulations of the festivals known as *Daśāī* and *Tihār* in Nepali and as Durga puja and Diwali in South Asia more generally (on these and the following festivals, see Levy [1990] and van den Hoek [2004]). These two festivals are mentioned in the text, and *Mohanī* is also alluded to by means of the musical introduction to the first couplet, which as we have seen is that of *Mohanī*, but they are not visualized beyond that in the film. The second couplet (*hemanta*) gives us *yaḥmarhi punhi* (the full moon when *yaḥmarhi* cakes are eaten) and *Nhayagām jātrā* (the festival of the seven villages; an important festival in Gujje Malakar's hometown of Kirtipur), each with appropriate footage.

In the third couplet (*śiśira*), the song goes on to *Ghyaḥ cāku saṃlhu* (when ghee and molasses are eaten) and *Silā caḥrhe* (the festival of Shivaratri on the 14th day of the waning moon of *Sillā*, i.e., just before the new moon) out of which the first also features in the video. In addition, the film includes a scene of powder-throwing at *Holī* – a festival that falls in this period – to the instrumental introduction to this couplet, which consists of the refrain of the *Holī* melody. (*Holī*, then, is mentioned musically and visually, but not in the text of *Kaulā Kachalā*.) The fourth couplet (on the season of *basanta*), in its turn, gives us *Pāhā caḥrhe* (the festival of the guest, just before the new moon of *Caulā*) and *Biskā*. The first of these is an occasion to invite friends

and out-married women to household feasts, though this is not visualized. In contrast, the film includes two sequences from the major festival of *Biskā* as celebrated in Bhaktapur: the chariot being pulled through the streets of this town, and the notable event when people from the lower and upper parts of Bhaktapur each attempt, in a tug-of-war, to pull the chariot into their town-half.

The concluding two couplets of the song (the fifth and the sixth) make do with presenting the festivals by name only, without any accompanying footage. The festivals mentioned in these couplets are both important and scenic enough, however. The fifth couplet (*gr̥ṣma*) gives us *Sithi nakhaḥ* and *Gathāṃ mugah*, two significant events that frame the period of rice transplantation, *sinhājyā*. The seasonal melody performed in the introduction to this couplet is also known by this name (*Sinhājyā*). With *Sithi nakhaḥ*, the dry season is expected to end and ponds and dams should be cleansed before the monsoon comes. At *Gathāṃ mugah*, the ghosts that normally inhabit the fields but who have been invited inside the towns not to disturb the work in the riceland, are expelled again from the towns together with the demon bearing this name (*Gathāṃ mugah*).

And the sixth couplet (*varṣā*), finally, mentions *Gumpunhi* and *Yeṃ nyā punhi*. *Gumpunhi*, the full moon of *Gūlā*, includes a number of events, among them worship of frogs, and walking to the important Buddhist stupa of Swayambhu. *Yeṃ nyā punhi*, a month later, falls on one of the days when *Indra jātrā*, the major festival of Kathmandu, is in full swing.

When festivals are given the role of being the defining events of each season, *Kaulā Kachalā* emphasizes the religious dimension of Newar civilization. And as music, *Kaulā Kachalā* offers a wide net of indexical links to Newar religious life. Rāga *Basanta*, iconically present in *Kaulā Kachalā*'s melody and performed in one of the interludes, indexes a number of hymn texts sung to this rāga. It also indexes the hymn-singing *dāphā* and *bhajan* groups who make use of this melody (at the appropriate time of the year) and, metonymically, the religious foundation of much of Newar music and the many ways in which music is performed – in processional flute ensembles – and sung as part of religious services. The sonorities of the *dhimay* drum in one of the song's interludes offer further indexes of the religious festivals when processions featuring this drum proceed through the streets of a Newar town.

The video further accentuates religion by devoting so much of its time to scenes in set in temples and temple areas – the Bāgh Bhairav temple compound, the Umā Maheśwar temple, the Cilamco stupa cluster, the Lom degaḥ stone temple. With this, the religious duality of Newar civilization – including Hinduism but also a specific form of Vajrayana Buddhism – is conveyed. The *Kaulā Kachalā* multimedial ethnography provides also details of religious life: the dancers proceeding with utensils to do *pūjā*, close-ups of religious statues – some of them red from persistent worship – and wood-carvings, the household rituals carried out at specific occasions (making and eating *yaḥmarhi*, feeding ghee and molasses to a child at *Ghyaḥ cāku saṃlhu*).

By means of its text, its music and its visuals, *Kaulā Kachalā* operates with metonymical (the part for the whole) affordances here. And it does so in several ways. First, a short visual scene or a melody belonging to a certain festival serves to point to the whole of the festival, with its multitude of constituent events, in question. Second, the yearly round of twelve festivals singled out by *Kaulā Kachalā* evokes the whole festival year, with its multitude of festivals. And third, the festivals metonymically point to religious life as a whole, to the collective and public aspects of this life, and perhaps also to Newar culture as a totality.

Circumscribing Space: An Urban Civilization

While movement in time organizes *Kaulā Kachalā*'s text and music, the video shows us movement in space. Spatial movement is implied when the singers and the dancers appear in a new location with every verse. And almost a third of the video's individual shots – 36 to be exact – depict actual movement through space: staged shots where the banner-procession, the singers, the dancers and others are shown on the move, documentary shots of festivals or just townspeople proceeding through the town.

Pang (2004: 43) points out that a museum often leads the visitor in an organized “pathway through an exhibition.” In a similar way *Kaulā Kachalā* guides the spectator along a prescribed and specific pathway in what can be seen as an outdoor ethnographic exhibition. At the same time, this pathway iconically replicates the Newar religious processions that proceed through and tie together relevant space. The maps of the prescribed processional routes that one finds in scholarly ethnographies (e.g., Wegner 1986; Herdick 1988) are replaced in *Kaulā Kachalā* with glimpses of routes as laid out

by the singers, the dancers, and the banner-procession as they move from place to place.

The public, religious life metonymically and indexically evoked by *Kaulā Kachalā* is very much urban life. Already the introductory shot of Kirtipur's skyline shows us the dense compactness of a Newar town, as well as the preferred location for such a town: on a hill. The video's inserted shots from festivals gives an overview of what this looks like on the inside, with three- to five-story houses lining the streets and alleys, and the number of people living in these houses but now out on the street to take part in or watch the procession. A large number of shots pick out the details of the townscape: houses, parts of houses, windows, doors, stone-paved streets and open places, brick walls and of course the temples that are such a defining part of Newar urbanism. The architecture – from the style of the houses to such things as a wooden window or a stone doorway – makes clear to us, moreover, that this is not just urban space, it is Newar urban space that we are seeing here.

It is urban space that is mapped out when *Kaulā Kachalā* – by way of musical indexes – points to the hymn-singing groups in different neighborhoods and to the processioning ensembles at festivals. And similarly, the melodies of *Rājamati* and *Va chu galli*, both iconically evoked by *Kaulā Kachalā*, indexically point to texts where the urban setting – including specific Kathmandu localities – features as a prominent backdrop for their respective love-stories.

In the video, five out of the six verses are set inside the town. But as we have seen above, one verse is set in the farmland where the banner-procession, the dancers and (as we may infer, since they appear in front of the banner which we have seen brought there by the procession) the singers arrive. In this they again replicate Newar religious pathways – certain musical pilgrimages (Greene 2003; Wegner 2009) as well as festivals (such as the *Nhayagām jātrā* featured in both text and video in verse 2) leave the town streets to visit important places outside.

The *Sinhājyā* rāga in the musical prelude to verse five, and the mention of *Gathām mugah* in the text of this verse, further point to the interdependence between a town and its farmland. *Sinhājyā* denotes the transplanting of rice which is a time when the cultivators go out from the town to work in the fields – traditionally “a time of festivity as well as of hard work” as Hamilton (1819: 224) described it. At the festival of *Gathām mugah*, the ghosts who have entered the towns during the time of rice-planting are chased out into

the fields again (Levy 1990: 271–272). All in all, *Kaulā Kachalā* extends the urban to include also the agricultural surroundings.

Agriculture and the Economy

Kaulā Kachalā, then, goes outside the town to use farmland as the setting for the visualization of the second couplet. Moreover, the montage to the introductory music to this couplet shows us actual agricultural work. The significance of this part of the film is double. First, it displays agricultural work as part of traditional Newar culture (the traditional dresses of the farm-workers help convey this). And second, it demonstrates the particularly Newar way of doing such work: using a digging hoe (*kū*) for overturning the earth in preparation for sowing. In his notes on Kathmandu Valley agriculture, Campbell (1837: 116, 135) – who evaluated the hoe as “the grand implement in the tillage of this country” – was very impressed with what the Newar cultivators achieved with it. In most places, a plow drawn by animals would be used for this work but there is a well-publicized Newar taboo on plowing – though this does not apply in all Newar settlements (see further Webster 1981). In any case, the carefully terraced land would not lend itself easily to plowing and the Valley’s farmland was never used for grazing cattle that could draw the plow (see Hamilton 1819: 217; Campbell 1837: 70; Wright 1990[1877]: 46–47). It is also in accordance with Newar practice that it is the man who uses the hoe. Even if women on the whole devote twice as many hours to agricultural work than men do (Joshi 2000), the use of the *kū* is an exclusively male task. Writing two centuries ago, Hamilton (1819: 221) could be referring to what we see in the video: “After each hoeing, the women and children break the clods with a wooden mallet fixed to a long shaft, which doesn’t require them to stoop.” In the video, the framers enjoy a meal of beaten rice and meat and this, too, is the typical practice – together with ‘considerable quantities’ (Webster 1981) of white rice-beer, though *Kaulā Kachalā* is silent on this.

The importance of agriculture is brought out indexically in *Kaulā Kachalā* also when the melody or *rāga* called *Sinhājyā* is played in the interlude between verse 4 and verse 5. The word ‘*Sinhājyā*’ denotes not only this melody but also the activity and the time of transplanting rice – the maybe most significant event in the whole agricultural cycle – and the *Sinhājyā* *rāga* indexes a considerable number of different texts related to this event and sung during this time period (see Lienhard 1984 for a number of such songs).

Agriculture is foregrounded also by other semiotic affordances offered by *Kaulā Kachalā*'s music. The *dhimay* drum and *bāsuri* wooden flute evoke the processional music upheld by the Newar farmers, and the *Basanta* melody iconically present in *Kaulā Kachalā* and performed in one of the interludes points to the farmers as prominent maintainers of the hymn-singing *bhajan* and *dāphā* groups performing in different neighborhoods. With this, the urban nature of Newar agriculture is indicated. Farming is integral to the urban organization of the Newar towns and villages and farmers are prominent participators in urban life, with key tasks in festivals and as musicians.⁶

The text of *Kaulā Kachalā* makes no explicit reference to agriculture or, indeed, to any economic activity. Yet the yearly cycle of festivals metonymically evoked by the twelve festivals mentioned in the text provides close indexical links to the yearly cycle of agriculture. For example, *Sithi nakhaḥ* (mentioned in the fifth verse) marks when the rains are expected to arrive and when the period of rice-planting is about to start (see Levy 1990: 512).

The montage from the farmland is the most extensive portrayal of economic activity that the *Kaulā Kachalā* video gives us, and agriculture is prominent in the semiotic affordances provided by the text and the music. Beside agriculture, the song and its video index Newar artisans and their craftsmanship: stonework, metalwork, woodwork in the form of statues, architectural details, household and *pūjā* utensils, and jewellery are all shown in the video. The film, moreover, touches upon the weaving of a rice-mat (shown in a brief shot in the introduction to the sixth verse), has a series of shots depicting a man carrying a load on a *khaḥmū* (a bamboo pole with baskets suspended from each end), and gives a scene of household work (the making of *yaḥmarhi* cakes in the second verse).

What is absent in *Kaulā Kachalā* is the importance of merchants and trade to Newar culture. This absence, to stretch things a bit, can make us ask whether *Kaulā Kachalā* portrays Newar culture as self-sufficient and secluded – like if it had grown organically from the earth of the Kathmandu Valley. But a closer inspection of the words and of the music does show

⁶ That this is so can be understood already from the titles of scholarly articles such as ‘The Farmers in the City’ (Toffin 1994) or ‘Urban Peasants’ (Gellner and Pradhan 1995), both on the subject of the Farmer caste. In fact, this caste (known as *Jyāpu* or *Maharjan*) is the largest single Newar group in most settlements and in all of the larger towns and cities (including even Kathmandu).

up indexes of the cultural flows that also have been formative to the Newar civilization. Seasonal melodies such as *Basanta* show all signs of belonging to the pan-South Asian rāga tradition and indeed they are often called rāgas (see further Grandin 1997; Widdess 2011). The language itself, Nepalbhasha, has accommodated many words from Sanskrit and modern South Asian languages – as is visible in the names of the seasons that *Kaulā Kachalā* enumerates (and in the word for season, *ṛtu*, itself). As an icon of the Malla-time bilingual dramas where Nepalbhasha was used together with Bengali or Maithali (Malla 1982: 65–67), *Kaulā Kachalā*'s text shifts bilingually between Nepalbhasha and Nepali in each verse. And while the moving images in the video seem to evoke a picture of a self-contained culture, there is one exception also here. In the text on the banner, only the verbs are uniquely Nepalbhasha. The rest is easily understood by a speaker of Nepali (and, I suppose, of any other Sanskrit-based South Asian language). Altogether, *Kaulā Kachalā* metonymically shows us the thoroughly 'Indianized' nature of Newar civilization.

Foods and (other) Cultural Artifacts

Kaulā Kachalā's text and music have quite a few things to say on Newar religion, festivals, urbanism and economy. But when it comes to specific artifacts most of the storytelling is left to the video. The text does mention two items from the realm of foods – *yaḥmarhi* bread, and the plate of ghee, beaten rice and molasses given to children on *Ghyaḥ cāku saṃlhu* – and these are also picked up in the visualization. *Yaḥmarhi* cakes are made from a sweet dough of rice flour, molasses and sesame seeds and then steamed. It is eaten on *yaḥmarhi punhi* (on Newar foods and food symbolism, see Löwdin 1998).

The video adds a third item: the snack meal in the farmland. This consists of beaten rice and – as it looks like – the type of meat dish called *chvaylā*. This is a standard combination for a midday meal, but both foods have important ritual and social indexicalities – maybe most importantly, unlike boiled rice, beaten rice can be served and taken without strict considerations of caste status.

Again, the song metonymically invites us to see these three food items as parts of the whole, that is, of Newar cuisine as a whole, where everyday dishes (like the snack meal above) coexist with many items consumed at special occasions (like *yaḥmarhi*). The many more extraordinary dishes,

meals and feasts included in this whole are furthermore indexed by the festivals mentioned in the text and by the seasonal melodies performed in the interludes.

Cultural artifacts of many different kinds are – as we have already noted – part of many scenes in the film. To repeat, they include stonework, metalwork, woodwork in the form of statues, architectural details, tools and implements such as the *kū* and the *khaḥmū*, household and *pūjā* utensils, and jewelry and clothing.

Many of the actors in the staged scenes of the video – the singers, the dancers, the people in the farm-work scene, the girls seen playing musical instruments, the man carrying a *khaḥmū* – are dressed in a way indexing Newar tradition. The long tunic over a pair of baggy pants that the two singers wear is the traditional dress of the unmarried young woman. The fabric of the tunic, moreover, is of the kind locally produced by the women of the household on the handlooms occupying the ground floor of numerous Newar houses. The same kind of fabric is used for the blouses of the dancers' dresses. Such a blouse, together with a sari, is the dress of a married woman, and the red-bordered black saris the dancers wear traditionally signify women of the farmer caste. (The cover of the CD-album *Jhī Newāḥ*, where *Kaulā Kachalā* is included, also features a young woman dressed in this way.) Again, the same type of fabric is used for the traditional men's dress that the farm-working man in the second couplet wears. The man carrying the *khaḥmū* appearing briefly in the *Sinhājyā* interlude has the same type of dress.

So *Kaulā Kachalā*'s multimedial ethnography includes three full-scale illustrations of traditional costume, all contextualized in staged scenes. Also jewellery – the headgear, the anklets, the necklaces and the bracelets worn by the dancers – is shown in the same way.

The young folks in the banner-carrying procession, however, contaminate what can look like traditionalist purity of the ethnography and insert it in a present-day setting. They wear the types of clothes that are usual in contemporary Kathmandu Valley settings: garments looking like ready-made clothes from any shop and of modern types of fabrics. The shots of outdoor scenery – spectators watching *Kaulā Kachalā* being performed, festival participants – include people in similarly non-traditional dress. This is quite unlike other traditionalist Newar music videos that seem to carefully keep out of the picture plain-clothes people and indeed any signs of the present day (modern houses, consumer items, cars, advertisements – only faded political

graffiti in one of these videos tells us that we are in fact in contemporary Nepal).⁷ *Kaulā Kachalā*, in contrast, equally carefully stages scenes where plain-clothes people – the procession – appear in a collective lead role.

Women and Men

The text of *Kaulā Kachalā* is silent on gender issues. The music and the video, however, have some things to say. As noted above, in the farm-work scene the man turns over the soil with the hoe, the woman levels the overturned soil with a rake. In other scenes, men are shown carrying burdens in the *khaḥmū* baskets and weaving rice-mats, women are shown preparing, distributing and serving foods. Metonymically this evokes the whole of the rather strict traditional division of labor into some tasks for men and other tasks for women – much like the division that appears in Joshi's (2000) data from the Newar village of Lubhu in about 1990. The video, moreover, metonymically evokes the traditional gender pattern in the (documentary) shots from festivals, where men are shown as public actors carrying palanquins and pulling chariots, women as spectators lined up along the houses. As Wegner (1987: 471) has written there used to be a "strict exception of the womenfolk" when it comes to participation in the rich and complex matrix of genres, ensembles, instruments, repertoires, and performance venues that makes up traditional Newar music. There are certainly indexical affordances in *Kaulā Kachalā*'s music that point in that direction, to the traditional complex of hymn-singing groups and processional ensembles, all maintained by men. And finally, the melodies of *Rājamati* and *Va chu galli*, iconically evoked by *Kaulā Kachalā*, indexically via their respective texts (and metonymically via the whole repertoire of similar texts) point to women as objects of male love and desire, attractive in their jewellery as they appear in the town's streets to fetch water from the *hiti*.

But *Kaulā Kachalā* also tells another story. It is one where women appear in public both to perform and to speak as subjects. The visualization of music in *Kaulā Kachalā* goes beyond traditional gender roles. In all of its visual depictions of musical performance, it is women who perform – they play the *dhimay*, the *bāsuri*, and cymbals. As Toffin (2007) as well as many Newars

⁷ See, for instance, the videos for *Māyā re ratna* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Uw2KYt3I4c>), *Lyāymanha dāju* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=_o2SnK9cjDY) or *Sirsayā heku* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpw3_tH8gpo). The latter is the one with the graffiti. All accessed 25 July 2015.

have pointed out, the restriction on women in music has been overturned in recent years and women now take part in the traditional musical life that was previously closed to them.

Kaulā Kachalā presents us with a paradox here. The singers and the dancers are dressed in ways that index Newar tradition, yet what they do in this costume – public performance of music and dance – is a complete break with this same tradition.

A Multimedial Tradition

Kaulā Kachalā reflects back on itself as both a part of and an addition to the Newar artistic traditions that it includes in its ethnography. As we have seen above, the melody of the song itself resembles and paraphrases a number of melodies from the traditional Newar repertoire. As recorded on the CD, the arrangement adds two Newar sonorities: those of the big barrel-shaped drum *pachimā* (or perhaps *khim*), and those of the even larger cylindrical drum *dhimay* together with *bhusyā* cymbals. All this both situates *Kaulā Kachalā* in the Newar musical universe, and tells us about this universe. The six traditional seasonal melodies add further to the multimedial ethnography, and the ethnographic story goes on to include the hymns and the processional music indexed by the song melody and which metonymically evoke Newar music as a whole.

But *Kaulā Kachalā* as a guide to Newar music doesn't end there either. The *dhimay* is presented also visually, in a staged scene appearing in the introduction to the fifth verse (following the recording, as this is also where it is heard). It appears here in the standard combination with the cymbal-pair *bhusyā*, which is just barely audible in the audio recording. The visualization includes another trick when it comes to presenting musical instruments. A bamboo transverse flute – a *bāsuri* – is a prominent melody instrument in the audio recording. But in the video, this instrument is visualized with the *wooden* transverse flute, peculiar to the Newars (and, a little confusingly, also called *bāsuri*). The Newar *bāsuri*, however, is not a solo instrument like on the audio recording and as shown in the video, but is always played in groups of several instruments.

Already as a song, and even more with its video, *Kaulā Kachalā* is a multimedial piece of art. But though multimediality (along with multimodality, intermediality and similar words) seems to be a rather new and hot thing in the academic world, Newar art has been multimedial

almost since time immemorial – dramas with song, music and dance were performed at the courts of the Kathmandu Valley in medieval and Malla times (see further Malla 1982). So as a multimedial artifact, *Kaulā Kachalā* with its video and all is deeply traditional and completely in line with the dance-dramas performed at certain festivals. Moreover, both these traditional dramas and *Kaulā Kachalā*'s video make use of the town itself as a venue for performance, incorporating architecture and other sculptural arts in the scenery.

Newar (performing) art is multimedial – or perhaps, more accurately, intermedial (Wolf 1999) – also in another sense. Poetry is there to be sung, dance has music, and melodies have texts. To begin with the latter, the melodies performed instrumentally by for instance processioning flute ensembles are those of songs. (There is a body of purely instrumental Newar music, but this is percussion only, no melodies here.) In this way, in *Kaulā Kachalā* as well as in a traditional flute ensemble, the instrumental melodies index texts. (Often there are numerous texts for one melody or *rāga*.) Just like a text is indirectly present in a melody, music is indirectly present in a lyrical text. Durgalal Shrestha, *Kaulā Kachalā*'s poet, is perfectly within this intermedial tradition with his practice (as we saw above) of writing his lyrics on the base of a folk melody. Such new lyrics are sometimes sung to a traditional melody, sometimes given new melodies.

The inclusion of dance in *Kaulā Kachalā*'s video is perfectly within the Newar multimedial tradition, but the specific dances presented are a somewhat different case. The group of girls in red and black saris dance their way through the video. They provide visual continuity and tie the different settings and milieus together, and dancing in obvious sync with the music they anchor the visual 'text' of the video in the auditory 'text' of the music recording. The dancing thus performs important narrative tasks in the *Kaulā Kachalā* music video. But rather than to the traditional, masked dance performances (van den Hoek 2004; Toffin 2010), the specific dances presented in the video link *Kaulā Kachalā* to contemporary stage performances and to music videos of Newar music where young girls dancing in red and black saris is a standard item.

Activism and Claims of (Ethnic) Space

The singers and dancers who move from location to location lead us on the pathway through the outdoor, multimedial ethnographic exhibition that

Kaulā Kachalā presents us with. But there is also the banner-procession that seems to do the same guiding job. As underlined by the text on the banner, the procession provides a sort of frame or meta-message on how to perceive and understand the song. Let us dwell upon this for a moment. Why is this banner there? Why are the children who carry it around dressed in ordinary present-day clothes? What is signified when the banner-procession links up with the dressed-up dancers? And what is the significance of the movement in space? To address these questions, we must leave the safe empirical ground of ascertaining affordances, and move on to a more argumentative and reflecting mode.

The banner, as we have seen, advocates pluralism of ethnic cultures. The text, music and video make this argument bear upon Newar ethnic culture. So why not start out by seeing *Kaulā Kachalā* in the context of the Newar activism where both the composer, Gujje Malakar, and the songwriter, Durgalal Shrestha, have taken part for such a long time. Returning again to Chittadhar Hridaya's (2010) *Sugata Saurabha*, first published in 1948, Hridaya in fact wrote this Nepalbhasha epic in prison where he was put precisely because he had published in this language. A very brief history of Newar activism from *Sugata Saurabha* to *Kaulā Kachalā* could include Hridaya in prison in the 1940s, the Newar reactions to the closing down of Radio Nepal's service in Nepalbhasha in the 1960s, Padma Ratna Tuladhar's election to the National Panchayat in the 1980s,⁸ and the declaration of the Newāḥ Autonomous State in 2009. The history should also mention the various organizations set up for the furthering of Newar language, literature, script and so on, the establishment of an archives for Nepalbhasha manuscripts and other scholarly efforts, and cultural work including the yearly manifestations demanding the adoption of Nepāl Saṃvat (the unique era of the Kathmandu Valley) as a national era. Cultural programs celebrating this era are regularly staged at New year according to Nepāl Saṃvat (see Grandin 2011: 62–66; Grandin Forthcoming), which falls in the festival of *Svanti* (Tihar). *Kaulā Kachalā* starts out with the season of *śarada* (autumn),

⁸ I have a vivid memory of Durgalal together with Padma Ratna, both completely red from *abir* powder, on an open vehicle at the latter's celebration *jāvrā* after winning the seat. On Padma Ratna as a local hero, see Grandin 2011: 33, 58–61, 80–81.

and indeed follows the Nepāl Saṃvat calendar and not that of Vikram Saṃvat (which starts in spring).⁹

Inevitably (as I am tempted to say), Durgalal Shrestha has written a song on Nepāl Saṃvat – which I heard at a Nepāl Saṃvat program in 1985, and then again 25 years later as played from a recent CD-album – and his oeuvre includes also the *Newāḥ State Anthem* (Shrestha 1131 n.s.) which was inaugurated with mass singing at the declaration of the Newāḥ Autonomous State at the Dashrath Rangashala (National stadium) in 2009 (Shakya 1131 n.s.). A veritable who’s who among Newar artists – including Raamesh, Rayan, Ram Krishna Duwal, Amar Raj Sharma, Susan Maske and, prominently at the harmonium, Gujje Malakar – were there to sing, and suitably, not only the newly adopted Newar flag but also large *dhimay* drums (one of them played by Gujje’s son) were prominently displayed. (The music for the Anthem is composed by another Kirtipur artist, Tirtha Mali, an in-law of Gujje Malakar’s. This composition, interestingly, has rather less links to the world of Newar melody than has *Kaulā Kachalā*. It does employ a 7-beat tāla articulated on *dhimay* drums, but the melody seems more based on chords than on any recognizable – to me – Newar models.) As Shakya (1131 n.s.: 3) reports, among the speakers at the occasion was Newar intellectual and activist Malla K. Sunder, who shed light on the “structural goals of Newah state and its features.” According to Shakya, Malla K. Sunder went on to say that the “Newah state has a place for all supporters and that there will be no further discrimination to any caste and creed under new state law.” But, as Shakya goes on to report, Malla K. Sunder “also mentioned that priority will be given to Nepal Bhasa in every sector of state government and in educational institutions to save the identity for the future generation of Newah people.”

Five years earlier, the same Malla K. Sunder was in Kirtipur to introduce a cultural program celebrating Durgalal Shrestha – a program where a garland of Durgalal’s songs were knit together into a song-play (*gīti-mālā*) or opera. The program was organized by Gujje Malakar’s circle (see Grandin Forthcoming) and beside Durgalal himself the choreographer Hari Darshandhari and the musical artists Rayan and Raamesh (all long-standing friends of this circle) were given honorary seats on the stage. I was not there at this event, but from how participants described it to me it and from a video

⁹ Though it can be noted that *Kaulā Kachalā* adopts the poetic license to start its year with *Mohani* rather than with *Svanti*.

recording of parts of the show that they showed to me, it is clear that this song-play – entirely in Nepalbhasha – elaborated upon the same message of ethnic (and linguistic) pluralism as the banner in *Kaulā Kachalā*. Actors in different ethnic costumes (Newar, Tamang, Bhojpuri and others) were there to give physical shape to the message, which was underlined also by means of tearing up of a copy of the newspaper *Gorkhapatra* (a newspaper signifying the linguistic hegemony of Nepali) in one central scene.

Seen in the light of all this, the banner-procession in the *Kaulā Kachalā* video can be understood to mark out and give cultural content to spaces claimed as specifically Newar.¹⁰ The procession in fact replicates two different forms of spatial manifestation at once: the political procession (*julus*) and the Newar festival procession (*jātrā*). This is well in line with how ethnic and more general political stuff is cross-mobilized in the progressive and the ethnic political movements (see Grandin Forthcoming). For instance, a political procession can incorporate Newar festival music and follow the festival route in a town (see the section ‘Election Winners’ Procession’ in Grandin 2011: 81–86). As we have seen both the composer and the songwriter, like many others, have long histories as activists in both the ethnic and the progressive fields. Some observations suggest that the balance of cross-mobilization is shifting to increasingly favor ethnic purposes. In the 1980s I was struck by how progressive rhetoric was part and parcel of Nepāl Samvat programs, but in recent years it has been progressive, even Maoist events that has struck me as manifestations of Newar culture. A similar case is when I recently heard the seasoned ethnic and progressive activists in Kirtipur sing their song *Deśbhakta* – a flamingly patriotic, progressive song in Nepali written by their friend and mentor Rayan – with a new text in Nepalbhasha celebrating *Newāḥ rājya*.

What *Kaulā Kachalā*’s procession does – marking out and claiming Kirtipur and its surroundings as Newar space – is taken further in other song videos. For example, the title song on the VCD album *Jhīgu Swanigaḥ* (Our

¹⁰ I come to think of a large signboard, in two languages (Nepalbhasha and English) and three scripts (Devanagari, the ‘Newar’ Ranjana script, and the Latin alphabet), put up down at the entry of the main road to Kirtipur, which I saw in 2010: “Hearty welcome to Newa: Autonomous State, Kirtipur of Federal Republican Nepal.” The pictures on the signboard were familiar from *Kaulā Kachalā*: the Kirtipur townscape as seen from the south-west, girls in red and black saris, the Bāgh Bhairav temple. The year after, however, this signboard was replaced with one with less explicit messages.

Valley) – brought out by the songwriter Ram Bhakta Maharjan – covers much more of the ground of the Newāḥ Autonomous State. The text in this song mentions places like the Krishna temple in Lalitpur, Nyatapola in Bhaktapur, Pashupati, and Swayambhu and events like *Indra jātrā* in Kathmandu, Biskā in Bhaktapur (visualized with, incidentally, exactly the same shots as in *Kaulā Kachalā*'s video), and *Karuṇāmaya* in Lalitpur and surrounding areas. The video goes even further and gives panoramas of the Valley together with a staged scene of an outdoor feast, and the camera picks out numerous well-known Kathmandu Valley views and objects. All this is tied together with traditionally dressed dancers appearing in the different localities, and by the music which is, again, by Gujje Malakar (for this song a much more extended composition yet not unlike *Kaulā Kachalā* in the way the melody is crafted). In the place of the banner-procession, a male dancer here acts as the protagonist guiding us in the urban landscapes, and the singer (Juju Kaji Ranjit) – pictured singing in the studio – assumes the role of a narrator appearing in cuts throughout the video.¹¹

To sum up the argument so far, we can rather safely assert that *Kaulā Kachalā* is not only a general ethnographic guide to the Kathmandu Valley and its heritage, but a sort of political ethnography made for activist purposes.

Now, if the video marks out and claims a certain space – and certain cultural content associated with this space – as Newar, to whom is this message directed? Is it towards the Nepali state and the Nepali-speaking Brahmans and Chhetris who are seen as prominent upholders (and benefactors) of the state? Some things suggest that this is not the full answer. A song for children, in Nepalbhasha, and a banner similarly in Nepalbhasha do not seem to be the most obvious way of getting the message across to those addressees.

Moreover, it is striking that the banner, with a text about the importance of ethnic culture, is carried around by a group of young people in plain, ordinary clothes. This is quite unlike the girls dancing in *Kaulā Kachalā*, in other videos, and in numerous stage programs (and unlike the girls featured on the Kirtipur signboard referred to in footnote 10 above). The procession leaves out ethnic costume and instead positively stages what other traditionalist videos erase, namely people in ordinary, present-day clothes.

¹¹ I am working on a study of some thirty Nepalbhasha song videos, and it is clear that *Kaulā Kachalā* is well within a general trend in its use of images evoking traditional Newariness as well as the material heritage of the Kathmandu Valley.

Activism and Claims of (Agricultural) Space

A different reading would be to see the banner's message of ethnic culture and heritage as directed not primarily outwards but inwards, towards fellow Newars. When *Kaulā Kachalā* marks out Newar space and Newar cultural content, this is maybe not primarily a question of recognition (and of seeking a degree of autonomy) in a federal Nepal, but to claim the specific cultural content that goes with the space for the future Newar community.

This future community is right there in the video, in the form of the plain-clothes children carrying the banner. Already at the beginning of the video, the ethnically costumed dancers are seen joining the procession – that is to say, the future community links up with Newar tradition. With this co-presence of plain-clothes present-day young people and explicit (traditionalized) Newar ethnicity, *Kaulā Kachalā* as a song video seems to claim both space and ethnic culture for the future.

For the Newars – seen by Gaige (1975: 160), even in the height of the Pancayat era, as a part of the “ruling coalition” together with Brahmans and Chhetris – this means to face other, and in the end more formidable, challenges than to achieve cultural and political recognition. The challenges in question belong to the realms of economy and ecology more than that of politics. Already two decades ago, Gellner (2003: 289; the text was first published in 1993) observed:

It is when a distinctive Newar cultural and linguistic identity is under threat that a movement arises to perpetuate it....Great emphasis is put on the glories of Newar civilization – its architecture, arts, scripts, rituals, complex division of labour – precisely at the time when the knowledge of these things is rapidly disappearing....

To grasp the nature of these challenges, let us go back again to the British observers of the late 18th and 19th centuries whom we met in the section on agriculture and the economy above. This is how Colonel Kirkpatrick (1811: 69), arriving at the rim of the Valley in February 1793 as the first of these visitors, describes his first view of the Valley below him:

From the summit of Chandragiri there is a most commanding prospect...the waving valley of Nepal, beautifully and thickly dotted with villages, and abundantly chequered with rich fields...the scenery...exhibiting to the delighted view the cities and numberless temples of the valley....

Kirkpatrick's successors – Hamilton (1819), Campbell (1837), Wright (1990[1877]), and Oldfield (1880) – made similar observations. They were impressed by the abundant supply of water, used for irrigating fields that had been terraced for cultivation. Wright (1990[1877]: 7, 46) commented that Valley was “almost entirely under cultivation” with two or even three crops per year, Oldfield (1880: 91) noted that the inhabitants almost exclusively “live on the high level lands,” the lower grounds being “appropriated to the cultivation of rice,” and even Hamilton (1819: 223) was impressed by the “considerable skill” and care that had gone into the terracing and irrigation of the fields. Campbell (1837: 136) concluded his lengthy account of Newar agriculture by saying that he had “more than sufficient” reasons to “a claim for the Newars to a very high, if not the highest, place among the cultivators of Asia.”

As is happening throughout Asia, a massive new wave of urbanization and de-agricification (see Dirlik and Prazniak 2012) has now overlaid and partly engulfed the traditional Newar cities and towns. In the engraved picture facing the title page in Hamilton (1819, no page number) the stupa of Boudhanath is located in a completely rural setting, with only a couple of small houses nearby. Still in 1967, as we see from the aerial photo given in Haack and Rafter (2006: 1059), there is a ring of houses around the stupa but the rest is open fields. But in 2001 (Haack and Rafter 2006: 1059) a satellite picture shows that the location has metamorphosed entirely to a built up area with just a few fields remaining. Bhattarai and Conway (2010: 70) present a similar pair of pictures for another Kathmandu area and comment: “Once a fertile rice field [aerial photo from 1967]...has been turned into a concrete jungle [satellite image from 2004].” Thapa and Murayama (2009: 542–543) provide statistics that show how the Valley's urban area has grown from three percent in 1967 to 14 percent in 2000, and provide land use maps from 1967, 1978, 1991 and 2000 that show how Kathmandu and Lalitpur sprawl in all directions from being individual towns to a continuous and much larger urban area. In his analysis of pressures on land in the Kathmandu Valley, Shrestha (2011) finds a number of factors driving this rapid urbanization: inflow of migrants, inflow of money (remittances from emigrant workers, assets transferred from rural areas), real estate in the Valley being seen as safe investment, credit from financial institutions, and a powerful real estate sector lobby.

These processes, whereby land commands very high prices and agriculture is shifted from the immediate surroundings of Newar cities and towns and towards the Valley's fringes, mean that 'the farmers in the city' (Toffin 1994) ultimately farm no more. And as we have seen, farmers are in many respects important participants in the cultural performances.

Money and markets also present other challenges to Newar civilization – the gods (which are now often kept caged) tend to emigrate to museums and private collections in the West, together with other cultural heritage.

The recent earthquake – with the tragic loss of many lives and the large-scale destruction of houses and heritage – further underlines the vulnerability of the Newar heritage celebrated in *Kaulā Kachalā*. (Three of the four temples where scenes were shot for the video have recently been listed as “partially damaged.”¹²)

But cultural survival of the recurrent earthquakes is built into Newar civilization. The onslaught of the market, on the other hand, undermines the agricultural foundation of this civilization. The text of the banner and the peregrination out from the urban scenes and into the farmland extends the urban to include the agricultural surroundings, indicating that agriculture and farmland is essential to Newar culture. Perhaps this could be read as a comment that alienation from agricultural land will mean alienation from culture?

In any case, *Kaulā Kachalā* appears to tell the children to whom the song is overtly addressed that they have to know their Newar heritage and claim it as their own and as foundational to their identity. And it appears to tell the adult Newar world that if there is to be any multitude of ethnic heritages also in the future, and if Newars are to maintain their claim to a distinct cultural identity, they have to safeguard their cultural heritage.

Final Comments

Kaulā Kachalā is, as demonstrated in some detail on the previous pages, dense and rich in terms of semiotic affordances. The paradox, however, is that you need to already understand these affordances if you are going to learn from them. If the music of *Rājamati* is unknown to you, you will not note that it is iconically present in *Kaulā Kachalā*. If you are unfamiliar with the festivals, the sound of the *dhimay* will not make you see the indexical

¹² See www.nset.org.np/eq2015/download/others/Preliminary_List_of_Collapsed_monuments.pdf; accessed 1 July 2015.

connection between this drum and the processions, and a fragment from the festival in the video will not make you metonymically connect this to the festival as a whole. The name of a festival in *Kaulā Kachalā*'s text risks being an empty tag rather than a suggestion to recall the full complexity of an important event in Newar civilization. To solve this paradox, *Kaulā Kachalā* would need another guide, one outside itself.

But the song seems to suggest a way to circumvent this dilemma. *Kaulā Kachalā* – and its many relatives presented on the stage, on music albums, in video films – is a form of contemporary Newar culture that actively relates to its tradition. Its text talks about that tradition, its music is in a creative dialogue with that tradition, and as a multimedial piece of art it is in itself part of that tradition. In the video this multi-layered relation to Newar heritage – displaying it, arguing about it, being part of it – is mirrored in the similarly multi-layered presentation of staged scenes of cultural life, of the singers and the dancers, and of the banner-procession: sometimes in a sort of interaction, sometimes just present in the same place. In, for example, the paradoxical way the video lets the singers and dancers appear in traditional clothes doing things (public singing and dancing) that the tradition would never allow, and in the way the plain-clothes procession silently frames and comments upon all the items of Newar culture that are on display, the song probingly engages questions of cultural heritage, telling us that Newar culture is not only for contemplation but also to be drawn upon, to be used, and to be modified according to the needs of the present.

So *Kaulā Kachalā* provides a guide to the Newar cultural heritage in two different ways at once. One way is what we have studied at some length in this article: the multimedial ethnography that guides us on a path through Newar cultural life. The other is *Kaulā Kachalā* itself as a specimen of this heritage in the shape it has today. And it may well be that it is the latter guide that is the most significant.

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Biographical Note

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