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Photo Essay

What Makes a Family? A Visual Approach to Ontological and Substantial Dimensions of the Domestic in Nepal

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Abstract

What makes a family? On the one hand, tangible aspects such as a shared household, eating practices, and marriage alliances come to mind. On the other hand, that ineffable dominium of feelings of attachment that is difficult to articulate also must have its role. I define the former a 'substantial' dimension, and the latter an 'ontological' dimension of kinship. Substantial and ontological dimensions are often profoundly intertwined in familial groups in most societies, yet in differing ways. Also, while substantial elements are not necessary for a group to identify as a family, as demonstrated by transnational family arrangements that do not share a household or eating practices, at the same time the expected exchange of substances might also follow obligations that do not correspond to one' s personal sense of belonging. The present essay visualizes the intersubjective processes through which middle-class people conceive of the family in the Newar city of Bhaktapur (Nepal), through the negotiation of domestic spaces and practices. Drawing upon fifteen months of ethnographic research in 2018-2019, I show how ontological and substantial dimensions come together to shape modern ideas of family.

Keywords

domestic relationships; family; Nepal; visual methods

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Introduction

What makes a family? On the one hand, tangible aspects such as a shared household, eating practices, and marriage alliances come to mind. On the other hand, that ineffable dominium of feelings of attachment that is difficult to articulate also plays its role. Gray (2008: 23) defined the former 'substantial' and the latter an 'ontological' dimensions of kinship. Substantial and ontological dimensions are often profoundly intertwined in familial groups in most societies, yet in differing ways.

While substantial elements are not necessary for a group to identify as a family (as demonstrated for example by transnational family arrangements that do not share a household or eating practices), the expected exchange of substances might also follow obligations that do not correspond to one's personal sense of belonging. This sense of belonging resonates with what Sahlins (2013) has referred to as 'mutuality of being', and to what Carsten (2004) has defined 'intrinsicity'. In a Nepali context, Zharkevich (2019) has addressed this notion in terms of 'affective kinship'.

The present essay visualizes the intersubjective processes through which middle-class people conceive of the family in the Newar city of Bhaktapur (Nepal)[1] through the negotiation of domestic spaces and practices. Drawing upon 15 months of ethnographic research in 2018-2019, I show how ontological and substantial dimensions come together to shape modern ideas of family. For example, living together is problematized in relation to an emic affirmation of modern ideas of family based on love and intimate attachment, and this is leading to the increase of nuclear households that are substituting the traditional joint household format. Most of the people represented in this essay are the same informants whose stories I explored in the paper 'Two Kitchens and Other 'Modern' Stories: Rethinking the Family Through Household Conflict and Fission in Contemporary Nepal' (Tiné 2022a). By rethinking those narratives through drawing, I bring here together people's voices and my own handwritten fieldnotes to communicate the working of layers of intersubjectivity in the process of sense-making around emic notions of family.

The methodology used in this project follows a technique that I have been developing in the last ten years under the name of 'art-tool' method (see Tiné 2017, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022b). According to this theory, the artist-anthropologist can contribute an added value to the ethnographic work in terms of both analysis and expression to better communicate existential contents. In the present case, art is used to capture and express those ontological aspects making a family that are somewhat invisible, in combination with the substantial aspects that are material in nature, where both of these aspects make up the essence of kinship as mutuality of being.

Through a combination of figurative and abstract elements (such as handwritten backgrounds), and playing with colours and shadows, the proposed images contribute not only to account for substantial dimensions of kinship, but also to bring the viewer to move to grasp further spheres of intersubjectivity and introspection involved in relational processes. These works thus provide a window of reflective inquiry and observation, rather than finite answers. Ultimately, by treating artistic (in this case visual) work as both a means of ethnographic reflection and representation, I aim to show that among Newar families in Bhaktapur it is both through individual perspectives and intersubjective processes of negotiation that families are conceived.

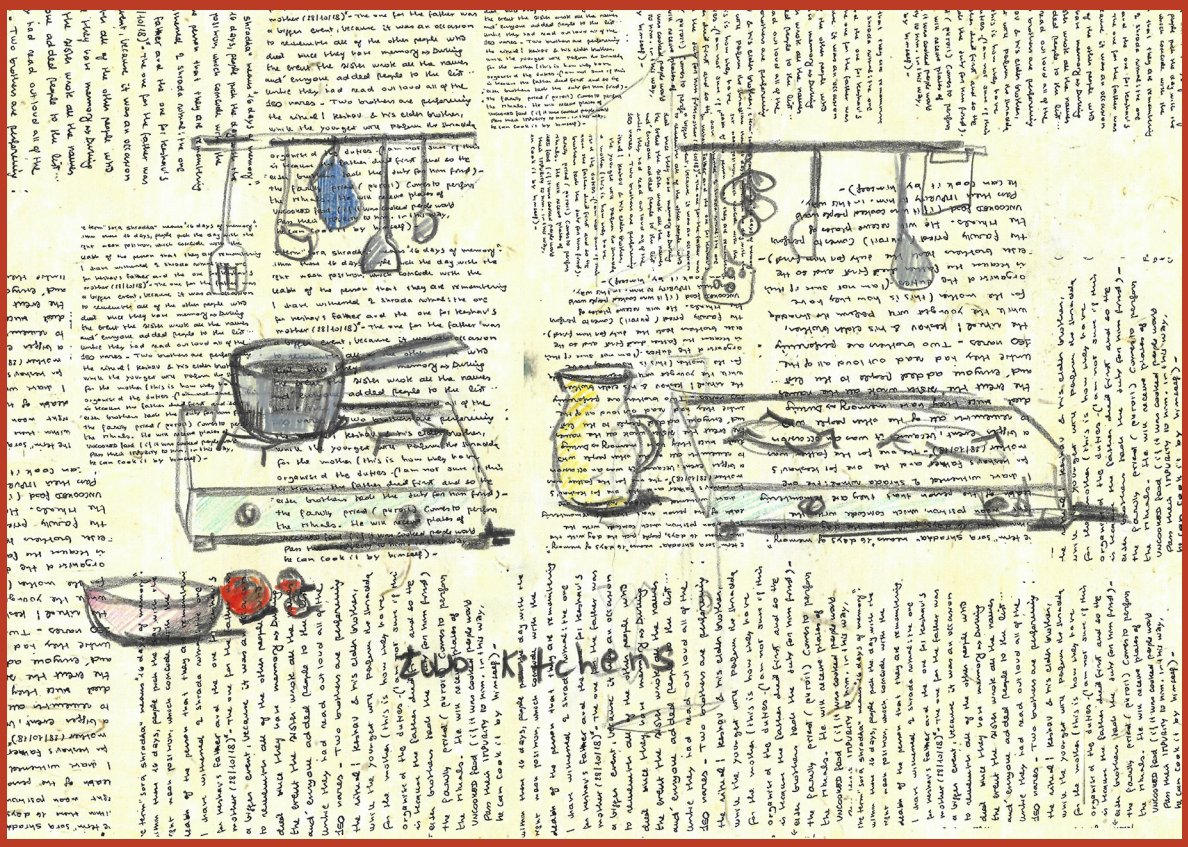

Image 1: 'Two Kitchens'

In the past, the Nepali law would consider a family undivided as long as its members formed a commensal community and shared a kitchen (Khatiwoda, Cubelic and Michaels 2021: 54). The kitchen's centuries-long legal connotation may not exist any longer in Nepal, but its symbolic power in defining a household is still strong (Löwdin 1998): the cooking area establishes the domestic unity of a household and marks its boundaries.

When, following a quarrel, economic constraints or moral obligations prevent people from dividing their households, they usually divide the kitchen, as in the case of Krishna Hara who separated from his mother, Biku. The creation of two distinct stovetops is particularly common nowadays; earlier, the two families would cook over separate fires.

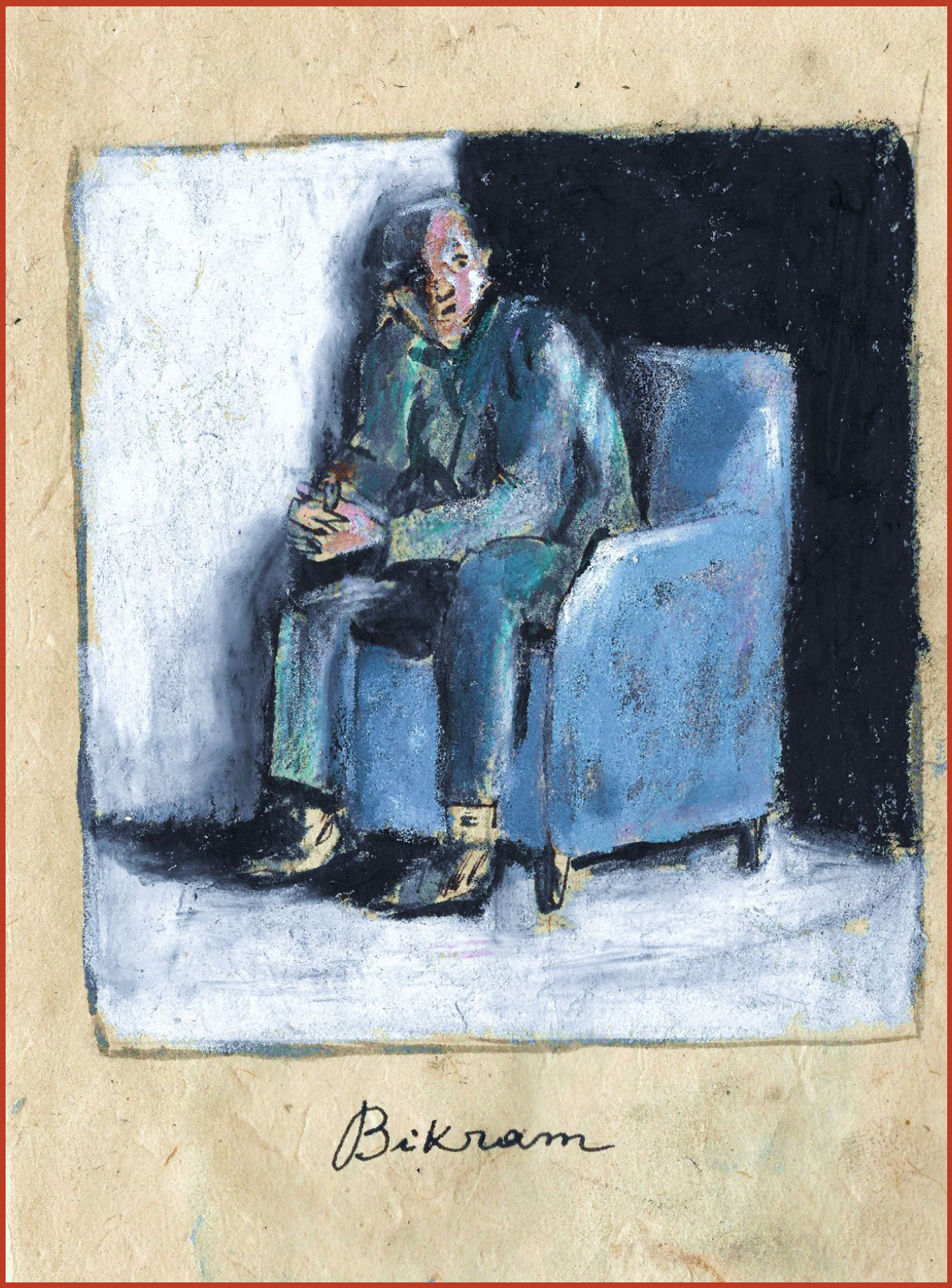

Image 2: 'Bikram Thinking'

Those who separate from the joint family experience guilt. This is true particularly of men. Bikram Hara, for example, often reflects on his choice, but always concludes that his decision was right, as there were no other options, since there was no longer mutual understanding (*aapasi samajdari*) in the joint household.

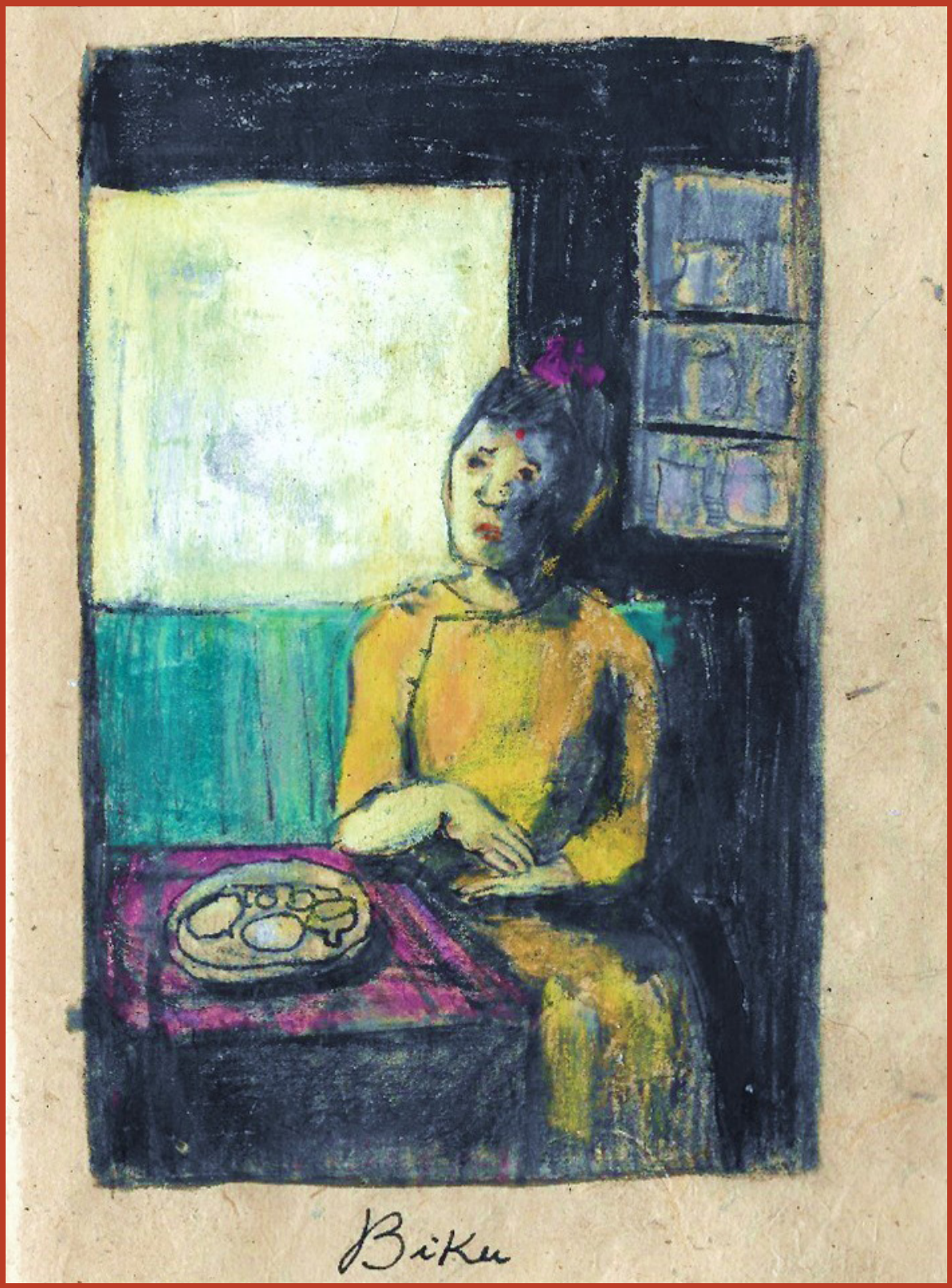

Image 3: 'Biku by the Window'

What is a family? One keeps wondering. And do older people have a different perspective than their grown-up children? Take, for example, the case of Biku. Her mind often goes to the condition of her widowed sister, Dhriti. Biku's sons refused to donate part of a land sale profit to Dhriti, saying that it should be her own children to take care of her instead.

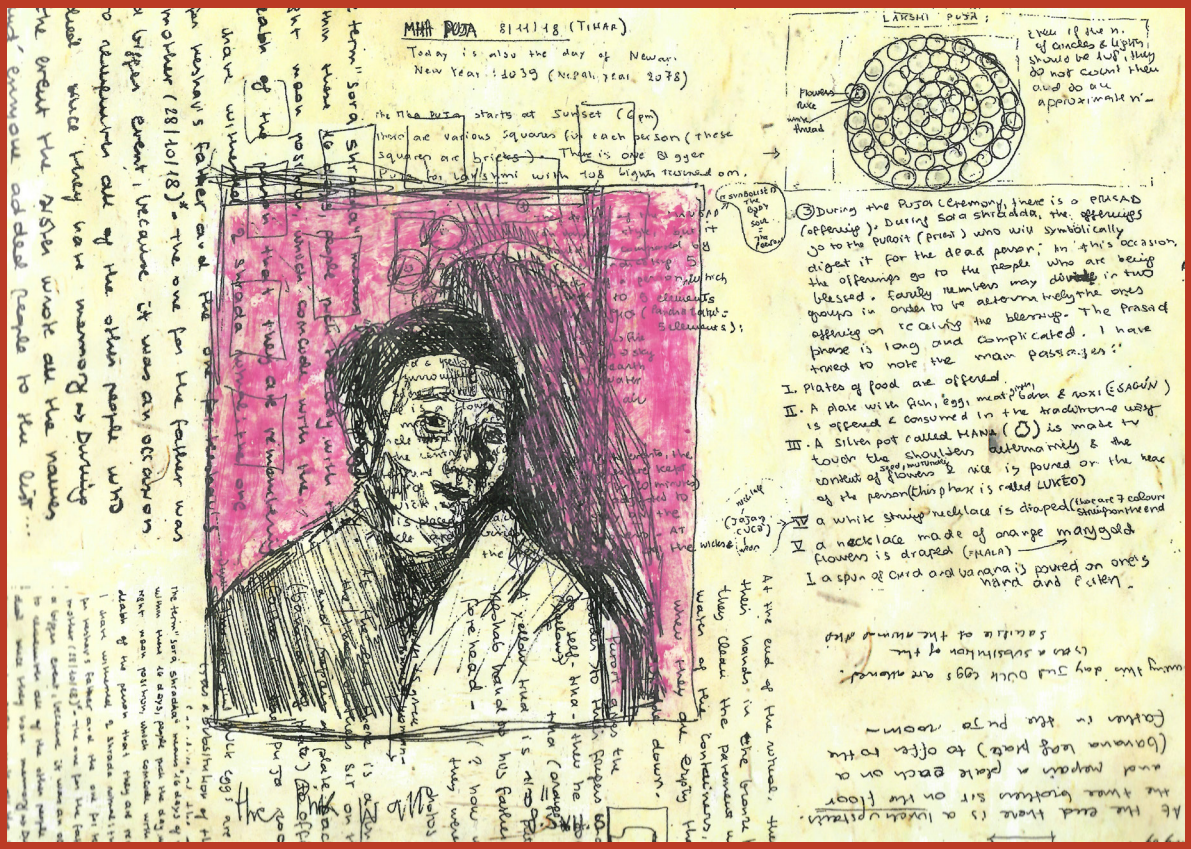

Image 4: 'The Pink Wall'

Dhriti lives in a small house just outside Durbar Square Gate. Facing severe economic hardship, and careful to save gas, her son and daughter in law do not allow her in the kitchen of her own house.

Dhriti has put up some black-and-white photographs of her children when they were younger on the pink walls of her house, joyous memories in stark contrast with her condition.

Image 5: 'Cutting Vegetables'

Bikram helps his wife in her daily chores by cutting vegetables and preparing them for her to cook. When they lived in a joint family, he did not help her as much as his relatives would laugh at him or criticize him harshly. To avoid embarrassment, she would often ask Bikram to leave the kitchen. While his desire to help her has not changed between household structures, the perception of not being judged has made it easier for both of them to act more freely and in accordance with their private desires without the fear of clashing with their expected public persona.

Bikram is mourning his father's death; the drawing shows him shaven-headed and dressed in mourning clothes. All the direct male descendants (*fukē*) must wear white in mourning period, and they may not enter the kitchen or cook. Married daughters are exempt because they are part of their husband's family.

Some exceptions are becoming common to suit changing needs and lifestyles: Preparing and eating raw, simple food is considered acceptable, as is dressing in shades of grey or beige for work, particularly outside the valley. However, the importance given to religious beliefs and to the care for the dead does not seem to me to have lessened.

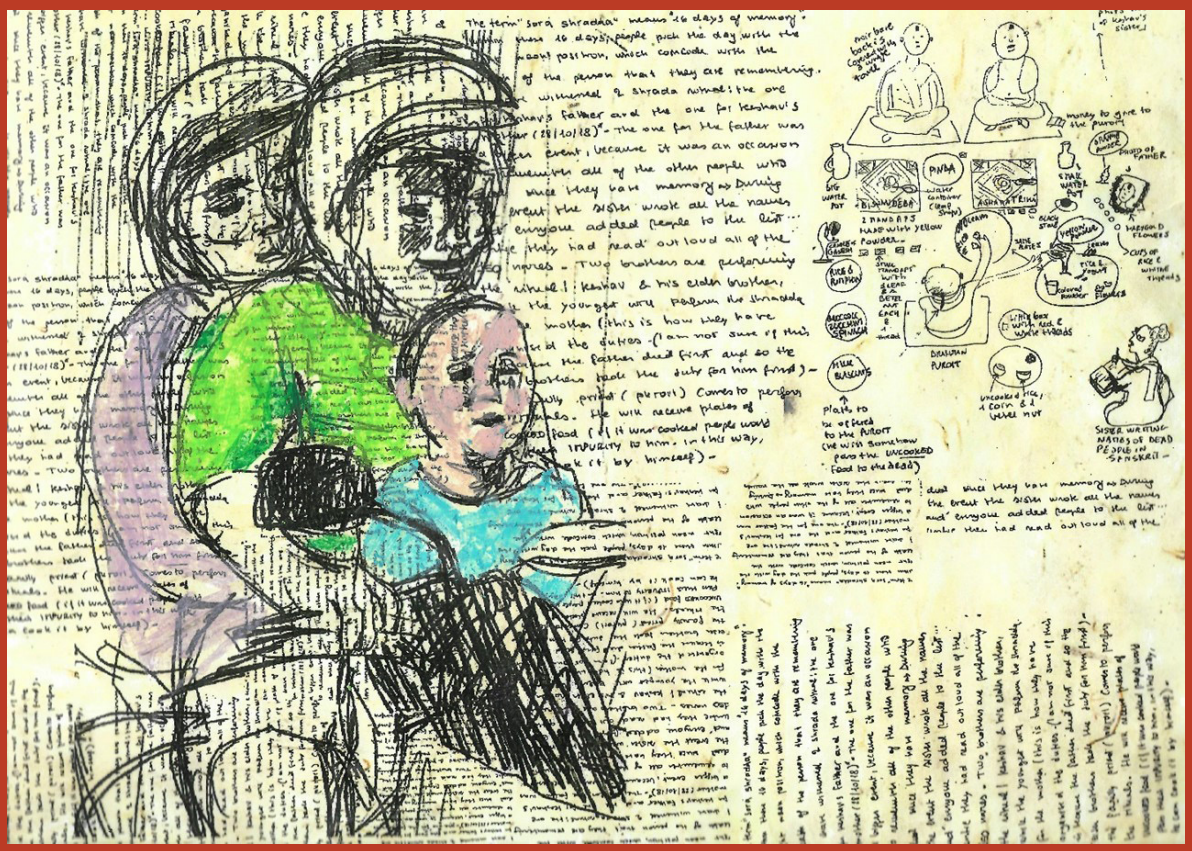

Image 6: 'Family on Motorbike'

This drawing shows a family on a motorbike and some of my fieldnotes on the ritual of commemoration for a dead father (*shraddha* ritual).

A motorbike is a sign of middle-class status in Nepal. It suits the need for people to quickly move between areas of the valley. It is as if they were moving all together towards the future. At the same time, old and new concerns, material needs, and spiritual beliefs are very much entangled, and form the essence of much kinship tapestries.

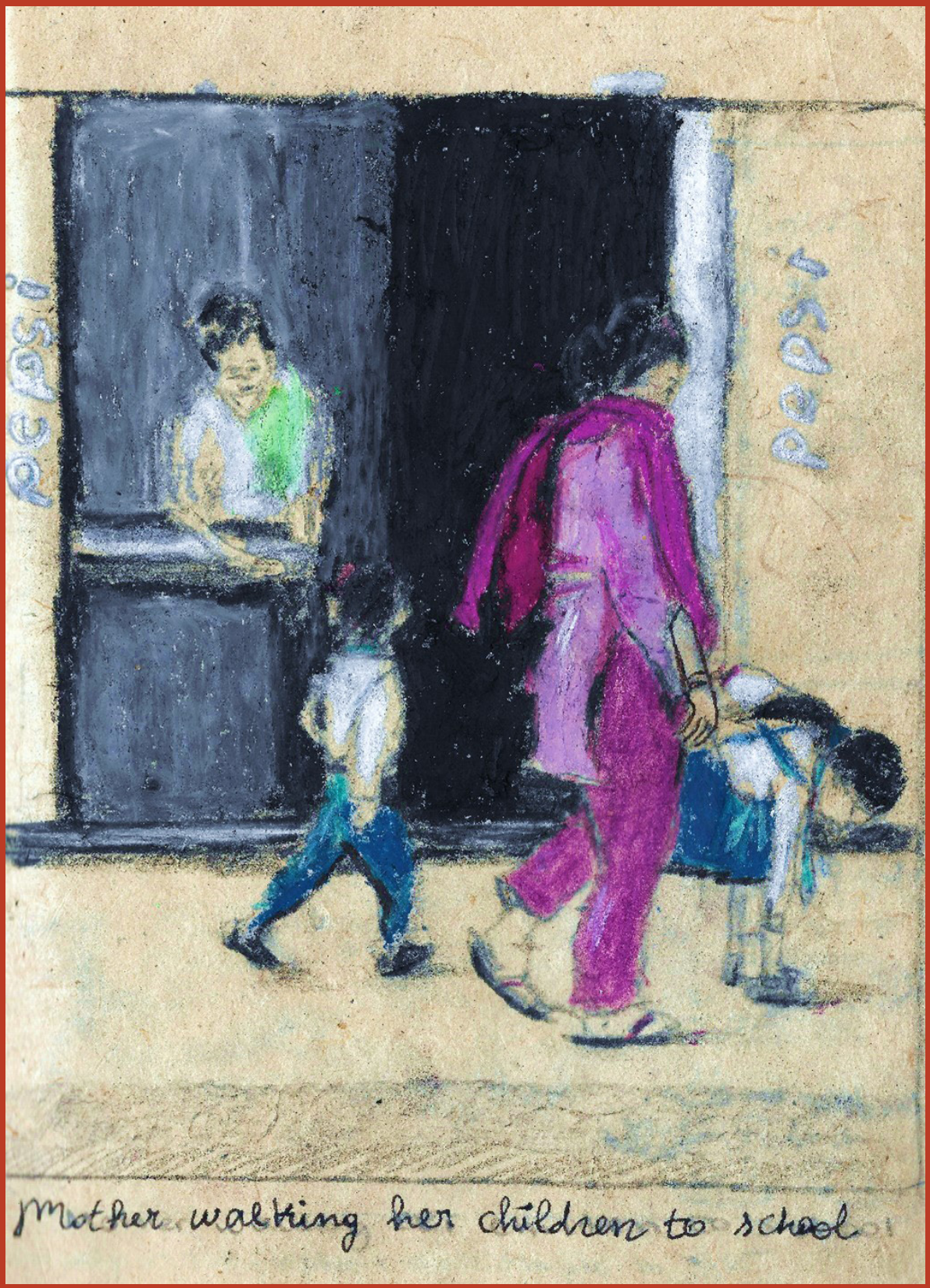

Image 7: 'Mother Walking Her Children to School'

Among middle-class families, education is considered essential for providing one's children with 'better lives' (*ramro jivana*) (see also Liechty 2003).[2] This constant sacrifice is one of the foundations of an ontological dimension of kinship (see also Zharkevic 2019).

Image 8: 'Romantic Date'

Love is not new in marital relationships in Nepal. However, whereas companionship and attachment were discouraged in the past, nowadays they are considered progressively more important in a marriage.

Image 9: 'The Pillow Insect'

A *phunga ki* (Newari for pillow insect) is a metaphor for the influence a wife can have on her husband, to the point of leading him to conflict with the members of the joint household.

Levy (1990: 116) defined it through his own informants' words: "the wife talking in bed at night, and [they say] that if a man listens to his bride's opinion, everything will be over".

The power of social change—embraced through, and enabled by, intimate relationships—is another dimension of ontological kinship.

Image 10: 'Baby Krishna Playing with a Lamp'

People say children need more love because they are innocent and they need more protection.

Yet, while love as an impalpable substance is demonstrated through the dispensing of care accordingly to one's need, preferences between members start to emerge as they grow up, and crucial disfunctions in the provision of care gradually develop, particularly to ageing kin.

Ontological kinship seems to have to do with new norms and types of love.

Image 11: 'A Good Father'

"A good father", many told me, "cares about the future of their children and grandchildren."

Image 12. 'Family at a Restaurant'

The display of intimacy in public spaces, and practices such as eating from the same plate, would previously have been taboo.

While eating separately was (and still often is) a marker of hierarchy in more traditional families. Eating out together, a new practice in Bhaktapur, is charged with meanings of intimacy and attachment.

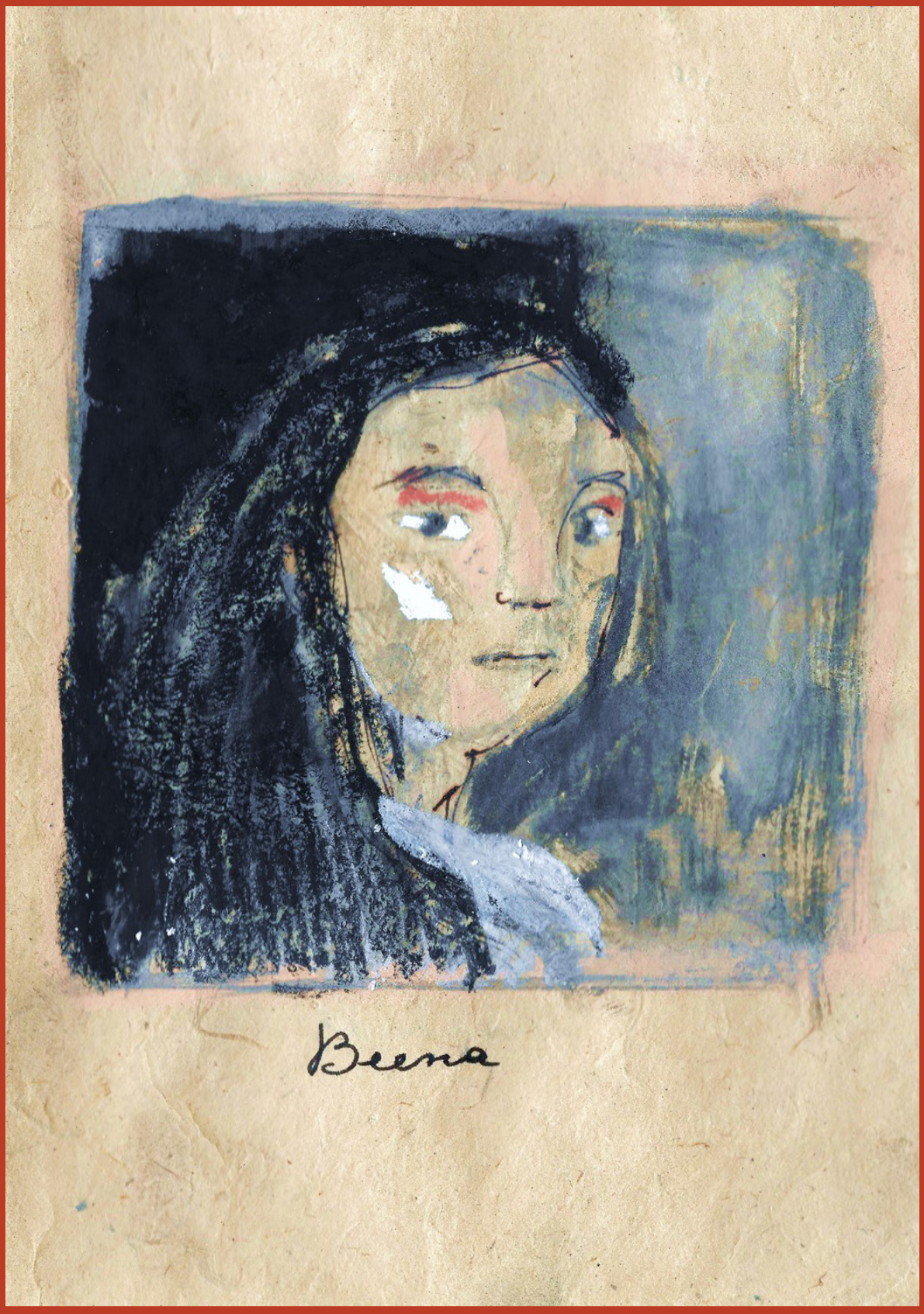

Image 13: 'Beena'

As an informant named Beena said to me once: "There are many different types of love in the family, and you love most those people who are closer to your heart".

Conclusion

Through my drawings, in this essay I have reflected on what makes a family among the participants of my research in Nepal. What emerged in front of my eyes was a combination of practices of intimacy, the influence of memories of the past, the working of aspirations for the future, of wrestling with types of love, and of social change that is initiated and enabled (when not resisted) through and within networks of relationships. Of course, 'what is a family' remains an open question, and each family will be different from one another.

Perhaps what makes families similar is their struggle through the currents of time, their power to navigate them, their vulnerability to lose and fall, while always reflecting on ways to act in a moral manner, often holding on to traditional norms and religious beliefs. These rather fleeting existential dimensions can sometimes be captured through a spontaneous drawing, or through the choice of certain words, in a process whose rules are difficult to pin down.

But these answers are never final and continue to mutate indefinitely, gaining and losing definition. These transitions happen in the eyes of those who looked at them first, then in the hands of those who drew them, and then again in the perception of those who saw the same drawings later, in a turn of interpretations and meanings.

My suggestion—which my drawings have helped to support and shape, and which remains open— is that Newar families in Bhaktapur conceive of the 'family' through intersubjective dynamics and negotiated processes that regulate how the substantial and ontological dimensions of kinship intertwine.

Paola Tiné is a doctoral candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. Her research investigates social change in contemporary Nepal, with a focus on domestic transformations as influenced by and contributing to a local ethos among middle-class families in the Newar town of Bhaktapur. With a background in both anthropology and the fine arts, she is interested in methodological approaches that enhance the insights of ethnographic research through visual representation, particularly drawing and painting.

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Endnotes

1. Studies on middle-class families in Nepal are still scant. Such studies are important as the middle-class strata increases in extent (WB 2016: 14). Additionally, while middle-class people form the backbone of economic development in Nepal, they also face a precarious condition of economic instability (see WB 2016; Liechty 2008: 211; also Nepali 2015: 423) and studies unpacking the existential and relational consequences of these factors are only starting to emerge. I discuss such dimensions of aspiration and vulnerability and their link to domestic relationships elsewhere (Tiné 2022c). More specifically, my current research (from which the present essay is developed) addresses the evolution of social relationships in Bhaktapur where available studies are fairly dated.

2. This is not only true among middle-class people or among people in Bhaktapur. In fact, while the present research only focused on that group, other studies have demonstrated this reality among other classes, ethnic groups, and locations (see e.g. Zharkevich 2019).

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