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# Please don't repeat this: Gossip as Ritual Criticism

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## Abstract

What happens when an ethnographer gossips about ritual with interlocutors? What do the contents of these exchanges reveal about the ritual performances being discussed? The extracts of gossip exchanges between the ethnographer, Newar Buddhist priests, ritual sponsors, and other participants demonstrate that through gossiping, people create the space to express ritual criticism. Through these intersubjective gossiping sessions, focused on the actions of ritual performers during the offering ritual known as chāhāyekegu, people come to express their opinions about proper ritual procedure, thereby defining what is appropriate and inappropriate. Gossip-cum-ritual criticism allows people to share their views on ritual mistakes and proper procedure, albeit never their own shortcomings. While these conversations run the risk of making the ethnographer uncomfortable, ethnographers must follow these invitations to gossip since they provide a unique perspective on how interlocutors understand and engage with rituals.

## Keywords

Ritual; Nepal; Newars; Gossip; Buddhism; South Asia; Religion

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## Introduction[1]

As an English verb, to gossip is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "to talk idly, mostly about other people's affairs; to go about tattling" ("gossip," def. 3.a). When it is employed as a noun, it can be used to refer to a person, mostly a woman, as the dictionary notes, who enjoys engaging in the act of gossiping. The dictionary explains that it also means "the conversation of such a person; idle talk; trifling or groundless rumor; tittle-tattle. Also, in a more favorable sense: Easy, unrestrained talk or writing, esp. about persons or social incidents" ("gossip," def. 4). In the anthropological literature, gossip is often defined as "the negatively evaluative and morally laden verbal exchange concerning the conduct of absent third parties, involving a bounded group of persons in a private setting" (Besnier 2010, 13). While this social activity is "often dismissed as lacking in importance and is equally often regarded as a reprehensible activity to be avoided or feared," I argue that the exchange of gossip about ritual procedure in Newar Buddhist settings in the Kathmandu Valley serves as an avenue to express ritual criticism directed at the actions of ritual performers (Besnier 1996, 544). Ritual criticism is an idea developed by Ronald Grimes, defined as "the activity of exercising judgement about a rite or some aspect of it" (Grimes 1988, 220). Through ritual criticism, the grounds for evaluating a ritual are identified and actively negotiated. While ritual theories attempt to explain rituals, "ritual criticism may change, improve, establish or disestablish" the rituals under scrutiny (Grimes 1988, 220). Therefore, the aim of this type of speech is not merely aesthetic or practical but is also ethical and political.

In this way, I show that gossip about or around rituals is an active process through which participants articulate their critiques, indirectly challenge ritual authority, and collaboratively define proper procedure. Gossiping is an activity "that every single day, and for the large part of each day, most of us are engaged in" (Gluckman 1963, 308). While the study of Newar rituals has traditionally emphasized the performative dimensions of rituals through ethnographic observations and textual analysis of ritual manuals (Gellner 1991, 162), this article argues that such approaches do not fully capture the dynamic and contested meanings of ritual. Therefore, I examine how gossip serves as a lens for understanding ritual dynamics in Newar Buddhist communities. I show how gossip about performers and performances, as an informal discourse extending beyond the performance, communicates ritual criticism through which the meaning and efficacy of a rite are co-created. In two ethnographic moments—one with a priest and another with a family of sponsors—I focus on two recurring critiques expressed through gossip: the practice of diluting or substituting ritual elements, whether for economic, material, or practical reasons, and the practice of rushing through mantras or abbreviating ritual procedure. This data expands the focus of ritual studies, shifting attention from the formal aspects of ritual to the informal, intersubjective critiques, to illuminate how gossip serves as a tool for critiquing ritual performances, especially those that cannot be communicated to priests directly, given Newar social norms. Prompted by events that implicated me in the production of gossip, I conclude with a discussion of the ethical implications of using and researching gossip to demonstrate how researchers are fully involved in the gossiping event.

## Methodology

My approach to gossip is inspired by the work of Niko Besnier, who argues that interactions characterized as gossip are best understood through the analysis of what people actually say, "rather than what they say they say or what I think they say" (2009, 4). This "consists in recording naturally occurring gossip, transcribing the texts, and analyzing" (Besnier 2019, 104). In this article, instead of placing the burden of proof on my interpretation by merely translating or paraphrasing gossip encounters, I reproduce the conversations that rest at the heart of this analysis of gossip as a form of ritual criticism. These conversations

often happen in people's homes or in places where the central performer, in this case a Newar Buddhist vajrācārya[2] priest, cannot hear the sordid details, protecting the possibility that said priest and/or close colleagues could be called to perform one's rituals in the future. It is common to overhear sponsors suggest that priests are crooks because they take economic advantage of the fact that they are needed for rituals. Amongst sponsors, gossip functions as a parallel informal discourse. I did not enter into conversation with my interlocutors with the primary intention to gossip. Rather, following their interests, the data emerged in the flow of conversation about prior research interests in a ritual feeding of the goddess Hāratī and her five children. These moments emerged with the recorder in full view of participants. Interlocutors were aware that what they chose to confide in me was being recorded word for word and would possibly be published.

## Defining Newar Gossip

First, do the Newars even have a category that compares to the English term gossip? As one interlocutor explained to me, the most traditional form of expressing a Newar equivalent to the English gossip necessarily involves the word khaṁ.[3] In the dictionary, khaṁ is one of those words that has a substantial entry (DCN-K&S 1994, s.v. khaṁ; PNBD 2010, s.v. khaṁ; NED 1986, s.v. khaṁ), including such definitions as, "matter, fact, topic, or subject of conversation." It can even mean "discourse" or "language."

The wide range of applications of khaṁ and becomes evident in verbal phrases—such as with tvaḥte, lhāye, mvike, and nyāyke— that can be translated as gossiping. Paired with tvaḥte, meaning "to leave," "to abandon," or "to give up," khaṁ tvaḥte refers to the giving away of gossip or the exchange of pieces of gossip (DCN-K&S 1994, s.v. tvaḥte). Paired with lhāye, meaning "to speak" or "to talk," it is used to describe activities that are gossip-like, emphasizing gossiping as a verbal speech act. On the other hand, khaṁ lhāye is also used to mean "to accuse" or "to denounce," which is one of the foremost features of speech deemed to be gossip (DCN-K&S 1994, s.v. lhāye). The causative verb mvike means "to cause to burst" (DCN-K&S 1994, s.v. mvike). Paired with khaṁ, it is defined as "to gossip" (DCN-K&S 1994, s.v. khaṁ mvike). Literally it means "to cause gossip to burst," which could be read as spreading gossip or giving out pieces of gossip. Finally, khaṁ can also be paired nyāyke, meaning "to announce" or "to proclaim" (DCN-K&S 1994, s.v. nyāyke), hinting at the performative nature of this type of speech. These terms, and their possible combinations, express the variety of actions, processes, and sounds that are part of the lexical and emotional fields of the Newar world of gossiping.

However, today, it is more commonplace for Newars to borrow the Nepali term gaph and use it with the verb "to do" yāye, creating gaph yāye, which mirrors the Nepali verb gaph garnu. This can literally be translated as "to do gossip, chitchat, or conversation." The word gaph is a cognate with several words in other languages across the region. Manandhar and Vergati say the term can be traced to the Hindi 'gap,' also meaning "casual talk, gossip," (NED 1986, s.v. gaph; McGreggor 1993, s.v. gapa). They also note that the word is often paired with śap, creating gaph śap, meaning "gossip and other similar things."[4] Indra Mali writes that gaph refers to a "conversation[5] causing enjoyment during leisure time, conversation of leisure, useless talk, to talk at leisure, something allowed to be overheard such as to those who speak and listen to things that are not true" (2010, s.v. gaph).[6] This definition brings up the issue of the veracity of gossip in the Newar world by defining this type of speech as "not true." It also forces us to consider the audience of gossip by bringing up the fact that gossip can be overheard. The act of gossiping, as Besnier identifies, engenders "the danger of being overheard by inquisitive ears" (Besnier 2009, 98). Mali's last gloss explains how gossip comes to exist: it is something that is collected by overhearing. It is a description of the data that informs the act of gossiping. In contrast to the English, the Newars expand the definition by incorporating both

pleasure and leisure, allowing us to think through how gossiping is entangled with emotions. Gossiping, by producing these positive emotions, is not viewed as wholly negative, as in other linguistic settings. Considering these definitions thus raises questions about where and when gossip takes place, given that pleasure and leisure are not the first adjectives that come to mind when qualifying ritual actions and spaces.

While gaph is a communicative exchange that occurs among people in smaller, localized groups, where it serves as an intimate critique and negotiation, hallā (rumor) operates in wider networks where its circulation is unconstrained. Considering hallā thus allows us to see how gossip shades into rumor and scandal within Newar social worlds. How do rumor and scandal play into our discussion of Newar gossip? Rumor "is unsubstantiated information, true or untrue, that passes by word of mouth, often in wider networks than gossip" (Stewart & Strathern 2004, 38-39). It can also be understood as a form of "improvised news," that is constantly being re-created by the majority, to arrive at consensus (Shibutani 1966). In her dissertation, Sepideh Bajracharya discusses how hallā is an intrinsic element of the public political arena of Nepal. She defines hallā as "something heard about something that happened, or about to happen that cannot be verified" (Bajracharya 2008: 14). Rumor is therefore something that is both a possibility and an event. "[P]opular opinion, the extent to which *most* people hold it to be true," entangles rumor in the public and gives this type of speech its power (Bajracharya 2008, 14). In the cases I will present, however, gossip primarily critiques relationships and practices within intimate spaces. It offers an informal way to challenge authority and negotiate expectations within these smaller networks. Participants in rituals may use gaph to share observations about the actions of priests or sponsors, highlighting ritual substitutions or shortcuts as evidence of broader tensions.

However, as Stewart and Strathern note, "gossip may proceed into circuits of rumor, and rumor may get into gossip networks" (2004, 39). The overlapping of these processes highlights how private and public forms of speech influence each other. Scandal, for instance, emerges when gossip transcends its intimate boundaries and rippling outwards becomes public knowledge (Besnier 2009, 13). This interplay thus helps probe the question of how and why Newars come to critique rituals, demonstrating how critiques related to smaller, localized groups, such as the critiques surrounding ritual performances, remain in the realm of gossip, and simultaneously revealing the layered dynamics of ritual criticism.

Through gossip, people negotiate relational fields. They collaboratively define what is appropriate and inappropriate in a particular ritual performance (Stewart & Strathern 2004, 56). In Christoph Emmrich's research on the concept of mistakes and failure in Newar ritual settings, he shows that, "when speaking with ritual specialists about the breakdown of this ritual, […] there was practically no mention of a particular mistake or an overall failure" (2007, 158). However, as the events I will describe demonstrate, through gossip exchanges, people come to share their views on ritual mistakes and proper procedure, albeit never their own shortcomings. People create the space to poke, prod, and share details that they would otherwise never dare to vocalize, given their relationships with the participants in question, and the status and power of priests in Newar communities. At the same time, if one fails to abide by the shared rules, one enters the domain of slander, running the risk of being rebuked.

As a multi-party production, gossip lends itself quite well to the concept of intersubjectivity. I extend intersubjectivity, defined with the help of Lawrence Brown as "a process of unconscious communication, receptivity, and meaning making" that is co-created with and within relational webs, to these conversations that happen at the margins (2011, 42). I use intersubjectivity as an analytical framework

that "problematizes the separateness of individual consciousnesses" (Schieffelin 2006, 616), allowing one to conceive of the mutual constitution of the subject/object relationship and the gossip conversation as a phenomenon distributed through a field of relationships. Participation then becomes a matter of "our being penetrated by and incorporated in the world we have constituted" (Schieffelin 2006, 618). Conversation as per Thomas Ogden is an act of "engaging with another person" thereby "transforming raw experience into words and gestures to communicate with others and with [oneself]" (2001, 7-8). Through this process, a shared, but also unique, emotional field is created, and participants come to co-create meaning. In what follows, I focus on "the intersubjective space that gossipers create in the act of gossiping" because it highlights how gossip is both an exchange of information and a relational process that dynamically co-creates meanings and critiques within the context of ritual performances (Besnier 2009, 118).

## What's in a chāhāyekegu? Setting the Ethnographic Stage

At the top of Swayambhu Hill, one of the most important Newar Buddhist sites in Kathmandu Valley, there stands a two-tiered temple dedicated to the goddess Hāratī, worshipped as the protectress of children and the buddhadharma, and the goddess of smallpox.[7] In front of the temple, in a cordoned-off space, sits one male vajrācārya, with his male or female ritual assistants. To the right of the priest, there is a sponsor and their family.[8] They are engaged in a ritual known as chāhāyekegu, a feeding ritual for Hāratī and her five hundred children. The ritual is performed every day, sometimes quickly, other times more elaborately. This is standard in Newar Buddhist rituals with the same priest performing "a given ritual in a more elaborate or more compressed form, depending on the time available" (Gellner 1991, 162). According to one priest, there are certain "shortcuts" available to cut down the time it takes to perform the ritual. Saturdays, being the busiest day, often see quicker performances, prompting discussions amongst sponsors about how the ritual had been performed, once the priest is no longer within earshot. While some participants appreciate the speed and efficiency, others criticize the rushed pace as a deviation from the appropriate performance.

As for many Newar Buddhist rituals, a priest is necessary for the performance of the chāhāyekegu. There are four male vajrācārya priests, and their respective ritual assistants, usually women from the local buddhācārya[9] known as gurumāṃ, involved in the performance and preparation of this ritual. Each priest sets their own ritual fee, ranging from three hundred to one thousand Nepali rupees. The calendar is carefully arranged with certain priests being employed on specific days during the week, with Saturdays being the most profitable, given the number of people wanting to perform the ritual. Families who regularly perform this ritual tend to stick with a single priest, with whom they have long-standing links, either because of some familial association or recommendations from their social circles.

Why do the sponsors and their families engage in this ritual? Unlike other categories of rituals in the Newar Buddhist and Hindu world that must be performed regularly or once in a person's life, the chāhāyekegu does not have such a requirement. The ritual is organized by sponsors whenever they, or in some cases a dyaḥmāṃ, a woman possessed by Hāratī, think it necessary. Some sponsors had recently undertaken life-cycle rituals and chose to add the chāhāyekegu to the set of rituals they needed to undertake to assure protection from the goddess for the person who undertook the life-cycle ritual, especially after coming-of-age rituals for young boys and girls. Others perform it yearly to thank the goddess for having healed them from various malaises. Still others undertake the ritual for highly particular reasons; one woman, for example, performed it to thank the goddess after her daughter received a visa for Canada. In other cases, the ritual is prescribed by a dyaḥmāṃ, for her devotees to heal or remove specific

obstacles that have appeared in the lives of these devotees. According to a priest, another reason is that Hāratī had requested the Buddha to provide for her children after the demoness, now turned goddess, agreed to refrain from eating the children in the nearby villages. For this reason, the goddess and her children need to be fed through the performance of this ritual (Vajrācārya 2010, 55).[10]

Since this is a feeding ritual, what is it, then, that is fed to the goddess and her children? Nowadays, the Swayambhu Youth Club arranges most of the necessary ritual items for a fee of four thousand rupees (Vajrācāya 2010, 60). However, sponsors need to bring eight measures of rice-liquor (aylāḥ), or eight measures of rice-beer (thvaṁ), or eight packets of milk. In conversation with a buddhācārya on the necessary ritual items for the ritual performance, he explained that either eight packets of milk, or eight measures of rice-liquor or even eight measures of rice-beer were necessary to fill the alcohol pots. In general, ritual substitutions are a common occurrence in Newar rituals.[11] As one sponsor explained, "rice-liquor or rice-beer, above all rice-liquor is definitely the best" (aylāḥ ki thvaṁ dakvasibay bāṃlāḥ aylāḥ kā |). Put differently, "all [ritual] counterparts, all representatives, are not created equal and are not regarded as such" (Smith & Doniger 1989, 199). This hierarchy of ritual substitutes places rice-liquor at the top; in other words, it is the most appropriate liquid to offer. The other liquids follow this one in a succession that makes them decreasingly appropriate. These ritual substitutions are not uncontested, and gossiping will reveal tensions around what constitutes an appropriate offering in the context of the chāhāyekegu ritual. Sponsors must also bring one kilo of rice, an abundant number of flowers, twenty-six coins, two flower garlands, and a list with the names of their family members. This is the basic list, with certain families choosing to bring additional items. Once their turn comes, guided by the priest, participants engage in a variety of standard Newar Buddhist procedures, including the worship of the sun, the offering of mandalas, the worship of different ritual items, the worship of deities and spirits, and the worship of the ritual manual itself.[12]

The ritual manual used by the priests performing the chāhāyekegu ritual is called *Chāhāyeke bidhi va balimālā*, attributed to Badrīratna Bajrācārya. While this is the version currently in use by the priests, this is not the only manual. Several manuscript copies exist in both the National Archives of Nepal and the Āśā Saphū Kuthi. These manuals exhibit few differences, apart from divergences in the order of some of the preliminary rituals and some discrepancies in the Sanskrit vākyas—the Sanskrit passages, mainly mantras, contained in the ritual manuals between the Newar language imperative instructions.

The pouring of the alcoholic substances atop a copper bowl (baupāḥ) containing a bed of cooked rice, various cuts of buffalo meat and organs, turmeric, fenugreek, flowers, black soybeans, garlic and ginger, is the main event in the ritual performance. At this point, the priest carefully recites Sanskrit vākyas. Meanwhile, at the threshold of the goddess's temple, sponsors slowly pour out the alcohol onto the food in the bowl below. The manuals consistently prescribe the use of rice-liquor or different types of rice-beer. As a Tantric goddess, Hāratī is understood to be a goddess who likes alcohol (Vajrācārya 2010). Alcohol is thus an essential element of the chāhāyekegu ritual. This act is what gives the chāhāyekegu ritual its name (Vajrācārya 2010, 57). The term chāhāyekegu, alternatively spelt as chāyehayke, is defined as "to offer and worship with alcoholic spirits (esp. to the goddess Hāratī)" or "offering of a fountain of liquor." (DCN-K&S 1994, s.v. chāyehayke; Vajrācārya 2010, 55).[13] In this way, alcoholic substances are an essential component of this ritual performance.

## Never Water! Gossip and Ritual Substitutions

This discussion of the importance of alcohol is what brings us to the first gossip session. During an exchange lasting several hours, at the home of one of the priests, I tried to get

the priest to walk me through the steps of the chāhāyekegu ritual. I casually explained that based on my observations, it was possible to use rice-liquor, rice-beer, cow milk, and water. My offhand remark about ritual substitutions prompted the priest to discuss the "business policies," to borrow his term, of the other priests involved in the execution of the ritual. The speech act was saturated with judgment and a desire to draw boundaries between "proper" and "improper" ritual conduct. He described to me how the ritual ought to be performed and named specific priests[14] who, in his view, failed to uphold these standards:

> Rice-liquor, rice-beer, red rice-beer, [and] milk. It is not appropriate, on the other hand, to do [the ritual] with water. There, on the other hand, there is a business policy. [They] say to bring rice-liquor, however, [they] use water, and take the money for rice-liquor. For one measure of rice-liquor they take four hundred. Eight times four, [equals] thirty-two hundred rupees. [They] say it's rice-liquor, [however,] having replaced it with water they will offer it. It is definitely not appropriate to do that. To use water is, especially, not appropriate. Some of them definitely say it is appropriate to also offer water. However, it is not only water, [one] also needs to definitely mix a little bit of milk. It is not appropriate to do [the ritual] entirely with water. Also, it is definitely not appropriate to use as much water as possible. However, it is not appropriate to say.[15]

The final statement, directed at me, on the inappropriateness of saying this, highlights the morally charged and socially sensitive nature of the exchange. The priest's naming of others, his moral judgments about their ritual substitutions, and the way he leaned into the details places this exchange in the realm of gaph śap, gossip and things associated with gossip, evaluative morally laden talk about absent others. This was a form of speech that denounced and drew lines around what constitutes proper ritual action. According to him, there is only one way of doing the rite, and that version involves rice-liquor, rice-beer, red rice-beer, or cow's milk, but never water. On the other hand, the use of water by these other priests articulates a definition of the chāhāyekegu ritual, in which water is an appropriate substitute that does not fundamentally violate ritual procedure or the efficacy of the rite. Gossip thus presents itself as an attack on the ritual procedure of the other priests and an execution of judgment on their moral standing. In this moment, "judgements are exercised, and conflicting definitions of the situation are made overt" (Grimes 1988, 220). Gossiping was a way to judge and to broadcast that judgment (Paine 1967, 278-79). Gossiping with interlocutors uncovers these different articulations of the rite and associated judgements. What makes this gossip is not just the content of the critique but how and when it was said, to whom, and with what possible social effects. It was an intimate moment of ritual commentary that relied on understandings of what is acceptable, what's questionable, and how such matters are talked about sideways, rather than head-on. What is at stake, then, is not only substitution in practice, but the effects of naming substitution as such. In other words, how speech, such as gossip, transforms a pragmatic ritual variation into a morally and ritually consequential act.

Gossiping with the priest revealed how deviations become points of contention and criticism among priests. The priest's criticisms were not simply doctrinal clarifications; they were interpersonal evaluations—acts of boundary-setting that defined what counted as proper ritual action and who was seen as deviating from that norm. By examining these moments, we can better understand the dynamically contested nature of ritual practice in Newar Buddhist communities. The priest's response does not deny the fact that the ritual is sometimes performed with water. He confirms this fact and exercises a moral judgement on the act by sharing the inner workings of ritual procedure and criticizing the actions of other priests. Water, for him, sits at the bottom of the scale of appropriateness and is deemed to be a totally

unacceptable substitute. He let me know why I saw what I saw, but also that I should not have seen that. This exchange revealed "the 'truth' behind the 'truth'" surrounding this ritual by focusing on the errors and mistakes (Nep. galti; New. dvaṃ) of the other priests (Stewart & Strathern 2004, 38).

The priest came back to his prescription not to use water several times throughout our three-hour conversation. The repetition of words and phrases is common during gossip exchanges in general (Brenneis 1987, 244). When he drew me a diagram of the ritual arena, he again, while giggling, mentioned the "business policy" of the other priests. Even when the conversation had shifted to some other aspects of the ritual, he brought up this point, making sure I understood. Through this repetition, the priest emphasized his understanding that using water to perform the chāhāyekegu ritual is inappropriate. Repetition makes the statement more evident and highlights it as an important piece of information to retain. Repetition forces us to focus on how gossiping is language-oriented, "involving speaker participation and linguistic self-reflexivity" (Emmrich 2022, 140). Repetition, as a self-referential communicative exchange, comes from "a time within time, the time between one repetition and the other, where time could be made explicit or may remain implied" (Emmrich 2022, 140). The repetition of the injunction to not use water allows us to ask what it means for someone to reiterate something over the course of a few hours, sometimes using the same words, and other times using different phrasings. As Emmrich explains in reference to the Buddhist Pāli canon, "[c]ommenting, thus, involves a kind of repetition different from repeating the already known and, rather, one that returns to the same word and each time produces an ulterior meaning" (2022, 149). While the priest repeated, "on the other hand, it is not appropriate to perform [the ritual with] water" (laḥkhaṃ cāiṁ yāye majyū |) every time it was couched in a new piece of gossip about different elements of the ritual. Repetition drove this communicative exchange forward, growing the details and information surrounding the "behind the scenes."

Criticism, like gossip, however, is never disinterested. As Grimes explains, it is "neither disinterested nor purely personal, ritual criticism is essentially dialectical" (1988, 219). Ritual criticism, like gossip, is deployed at particular times to particular people. Critics and gossipers "may select the audiences before whom [and with whom] critiques are aired" (Grimes 1988, 232). This priest was always very careful to explain that he never performs the ritual with water and always fully reads out the vākyas. In his work with Newar ritual specialists on mistakes, Emmrich explains that their ritual critiques "are generally marked by the focus they put on the mistakes the other did" (2007, 158). The vajrācārya priest made the focus of our gossiping session the mistakes executed by other priests, not the possible mistakes he may have committed while performing the chāhāyekegu. The priest asserted to me that he was not a victim of the business policy, but was, in his eyes, possibly the only exemplary priest left in the pool. Through gossip, participants navigate relational dynamics, seeking belonging and positioning themselves within a particular web of relations. Gossiping allows participants to enter or repudiate group relationships, communicate satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and explore the boundaries of appropriate behavior in these settings. In this process, gossip becomes a way to collaboratively uncover and negotiate definitions of the ritual, evaluate the appropriateness of ritual substitutions, and make ethical judgements about the motivations of ritual performers.

## He Reads So Well: Ritual Change and Shortening

This leads us to a second moment of gossiping during a meeting with a family of śākyas who are yearly sponsors of the chāhāyekegu. The mother, after undergoing a period of illness for over twenty years, had been instructed by a dyaḥmāṃ, a woman possessed by the goddess Hāratī, to conduct this ritual yearly to remain

healthy. The family perform an elaborate version of the ritual, offering a complete ritual feast (bhvay). The family explained, even though they had trouble remembering their officiating priest's name, that they always performed the ritual with the same one. The conversation that ensued revealed some of their feelings about the ritual, his performance, and doubts they harbored about his competence. To jog their memories, I showed them pictures and videos I had collected during fieldwork. I qualify this exchange as gossip, not because the mother criticized the priest, but because she posed an evaluative question to me about his performance. When I showed them a picture of their priest, the mother replied:

> That's just like him. That's him! That's him! When seeing [him] from behind, it is just like [him]. In the front, the face is not visible. Yes, that is him. It is really him, this priest, he always performs [the ritual]. He is the priest who definitely always does [the ritual]. He's really great. He's really great. Is he a good reciter?[16]

Here, the final question, marked by intonation, signaled her evaluative intent, for which she sought confirmation from me. This question highlights possible doubts she may have held about the priest's performances. The mother wanted me to confirm her feeling that this priest read the Sanskrit sentences well because, later, when his mother could not remember the names of priests or the details of the ritual procedure, my friend told his mother, while pointing at me, "he knows" (vaṃ syū |). This statement placed me in the category of people who know the names of priests and the ways rituals unfold with those specific priest-performers. My perceived position as someone who has witnessed many rituals and talked to priests for research purposes, I believe, is what prompted the mother to direct the question to me. This continued interaction with the ritual and the performers, as evidenced by the videographic, photographic, and archival materials I gathered and showed this family, situated me as someone within the community of people engaged with this specific ritual tradition, and given that position, I was being invited to comment.

At the same time, qualifying this as gossip raises some important issues surrounding the definition of the activity. If we use the widespread definition that gossip is "negatively evaluative," then this exchange would not qualify as gossip (Besnier 1996, 545). This is because saying that a priest recites well was meant as a compliment. Is gossip always negative? Is it possible to gossip positively about someone? This example shows us that making judgments about a ritual performance need not always be a negatively evaluative act, as some of the earlier Newar definitions of gossip have similarly hinted at. In the eyes of this woman, the fact that this priest recites the Sanskrit sentences in a good way makes him a good person.

By attending to gossip, we see rituals not merely as technical affairs governed by priests, but as dynamic, intersubjective fields co-created by all participants, where lay agency plays a critical role in sustaining, contesting, and redefining ritual practice. During the unfolding of the ritual, while a priest's primary concern may be to recite the Sanskrit sentences and follow the ritual procedure as he understands it and sometimes according to ritual manuals,[17] a sponsor's primary concerns relate to what they need to do next. As numerous sessions of sitting behind the priest have revealed, often, sponsors have no clear idea regarding what steps come next, even when they perform the ritual yearly. The priest, or more commonly the ritual assistant, usually a woman known as a gurumāṃ, barks imperative instructions at the participants. In his discussion of the guru maṇḍala pūjā, another important Newar Buddhist ritual, David Gellner argues that "for most lay people the ritual is a technical affair, something they perform many times throughout their life but always under the instruction of a priest." (1991, 162). Building on this, Emmrich notes that for most participants in rituals, ritual is not about correctness but

about completion (2007, 160). Paying attention to gossip complicates these assertions. The mother's invitation for me to gossip, manifested through a question that invited me to share information I had gathered by sitting with and talking to priests, reflected her vested interest in ensuring the proper execution of her rituals, an interest shaped by her personal stakes in the outcomes of these rituals. She did not want to fall ill once again, as a result of an improperly recited ritual sequence. Her query positioned the priest's ritual competence as something open to collective judgment. In asking me to confirm his skill, she invited another participant into an evaluative dialogue. Such moments of evaluative questioning, whether phrased positively or negatively, form part of a broader lay discourse of ritual assessment. They reveal that participants do not simply accept priestly performance as given but actively produce, circulate, and negotiate evaluations of ritual efficacy by asking questions. Through gossip, lay participants assert their own interpretations of proper ritual procedure, voice their dissatisfaction with perceived flaws, and navigate their anxieties about ritual efficacy. In doing so, gossip shifts evaluation or criticism away from explicit rules and right–wrong binaries toward a more impressionistic mode of assessment, one that accommodates ambivalence, uncertainty, and partial judgments. In this way, gossip operates as a socially acceptable means for critiquing the priesthood, negotiating lay agency, and co-constructing the ritual's meaning and efficacy.

The mother's last sentence of the communicative exchange about the recitation skills of her priest becomes even more interesting when we contrast it with the statement about recitation that another priest made about that very priest we had been discussing:

> That priest really does not read well. He mumbles. He doesn't understand what is said. He mumbles [through] and finishes all at once. And I, on the other hand, don't do it in that way. Because it causes hardships. Mantras need to be recited, but if [one] doesn't read whatever is there, that is insufficient, [they] must be recited. All the [individual vākyas for the individual] placed flowers shall be read out, read out all twenty-four times. Then, he will read out a shortcut. [But] what[ever] he may recite, twenty-four [flowers] need to be offered. This way he will offer only four times, that's it (kā). It finishes really (ni) fast."[18]

Speed in procedure is something that the priest views as an indication of incorrect ritual procedure. On Saturdays, there is immense pressure to get the rituals done in a short time span because so many people have obtained tickets that entitle them to perform the ritual on that day (Vajrācārya 2010, 59). As the gossiping priest says, while the other priest "finished [the rituals] quickly" (yākanaṃ sidhala ni |), and "[performed] one pujā in twenty minutes" (chagu pujā bis minaṭ kā |), even "if [he, the gossiping priest,] does a shortcut, it takes forty-five minutes" (śorṭkuṭ yāisā paintālis minaṭ lagay jui |). The priest indicates that while the ritual procedure of the other vajrācārya is reproachable, his own ritual procedure is not subject to critique. Then, while laughing, he said that not reciting the Sanskrit sentences correctly explained why every month of Śrāvan (July-August), he must substitute the other priest who is systematically sick. According to the priest, "The deities also surely see. Before also, during the month of Śrāvan [he] is unwell."[19]

This citation of ritual rules allows the gossiping priest to take up the role of arbitrator of what counts as proper ritual performance. His invocation of deities demonstrates how gossip is entangled with "performing authority by referring to ritual rule" (Emmrich 2014, 87). This performance of authority elucidates Robert Paine's argument that gossip is "a device intended to forward and protect individual interests" (Paine 1967, 278). The priest is portraying himself as a reliable and exemplary priest who follows the rules. A position which, in his eyes, entitles him to

make judgements about ritual procedure. Both the woman and the priest use the same adjective (bāṃlāka) to refer to the priest's reading skills, albeit the priest negates the adjective. The gossiping priest indicates that being unable to read the Sanskrit sentences clearly is an indication that the other priest does not understand what he is reciting. When performing a ritual, a priest must not mumble through the Sanskrit sentences, but "needs to recite them all."

## Who Gets to Gossip?

Juxtaposing the critiques of the laywoman and the priest, along with their respective interpretations and anxieties, prompts us to ask: Who gets to gossip? As the ethnographic vignettes reveal, priests, and laypeople all engage in gossip differently. While everyone gossips, the content of their exchanges reflects their different subject positions within society at large and the chāhāyekegu ritual specifically. Different types of critiques, each with its own unique focus, are conveyed through gossip. It also does different things, as the example of the priest above revealed. The priest's gossip positions him as exemplary while simultaneously discrediting his colleagues. By revealing other priests' transgressions, he presents himself as attentive to proper procedure, as my arbitrator of appropriate performance, perhaps anticipating that his critique would reach a wider audience through my article. The mother's question, on the other hand, is not about asserting ritual expertise but about affirming the necessity of proper execution. Her harbored doubts about the priest's abilities, expressed through her question to me, demonstrate a concern about the reliability of those entrusted with the chāhāyekegu ritual's proper execution. By seeking my confirmation, she voiced her uncertainty and positioned me as an arbiter of ritual competence, illustrating how gossip negotiates authority and trust.

Gossip allows us to uncover what people deem important in a ritual, even if what they gossip about potentially has no observable impact on the next performance. Direct ritual criticism, not expressed through the medium of gossip, is also a possibility, though it presents us with different outcomes and dynamics, especially given the fact that it forces priests to respond. In 2023, during the Buṃgadyaḥ Jātrā,[20] one of the most important public festivals in Kathmandu Valley, a goat set to be sacrificed during the mahābali ritual refused to give its consent to be sacrificed by not shaking after it had been sprinkled with water several times. This led to delays, during which a dyaḥmāṃ regularly possessed by the goddess Manakāmana, intervened. Even though she is a non-priest, she openly criticized the ritual procedure and the priests themselves, rebuking the use of inappropriate materials such as a plastic bottle for ritual liquor, and demanded corrections to uphold ritual purity. Participants in Newar Buddhist rituals generally do not criticize priestly authority in such direct ways, since it is typically not socially acceptable to do so, reserving critique for once the ritual is over or for gossip exchanges with non-priest participants. The dyaḥmāṃ, however, as a woman routinely possessed by the goddess, a fact she reiterated several times, derives her ability to critique directly from this status. Towards the end of this interaction, the head priest replied to her, "We are also priests" (jipiṃ naṃ gurujū khaḥ |), prompting the dyaḥmāṃ to reply, "I also know how to do [the ritual]" (ji naṃ yāye saḥ |). This confrontation with priests and ritual assistants contrasts with the subtler critiques expressed through gossip I have described.

This exchange demonstrates that ritual criticism can emerge publicly and forcefully, challenging priestly authority in ways that gossip mediates more discreetly. The dyaḥmāṃ's vocal intervention underscores how power dynamics and authority are negotiated in real time. Her critique corrects procedural flaws but also asserts her authority as a ritual critic, revealing how critique, as an intersubjective act, reshapes the ritual's dynamics. The dyaḥmāṃ leveraged her position as critic to influence both the ritual's unfolding and the community's perception of proper ritual conduct. Unlike public interventions,

gossip permits participants to articulate their concerns, negotiate communal norms, and collectively process their observations of ritual performances without directly challenging priestly authority. In doing so, gossip contributes to the ritual's perceived efficacy by enabling participants to reaffirm, contest, or reinterpret its success or possible failure through shared evaluative talk. Gossip creates a safer, socially acceptable channel for expressing dissatisfaction or evaluating ritual integrity, which does not mitigate or ensure success or failure. Rather, it more often maintains the status quo of power dynamics within the ritual space, since it is often never heard by priests. In this way, gossip and directly vocalized critique serve complementary but distinct purposes, both contributing to the dynamic, negotiated nature of ritual as a process.

This dynamic of gossip as parallel talk is further illustrated in instances of gossiping between sponsors of the chāhāyekegu. During a consultation I witnessed a dyaḥmāṃ recommend that a devotee urgently sponsor a chāhāyekegu in Swayambhu to address a money-lending issue. After the recommendation, the devotee asked the Issue to use her connections with the priests in Swayambhu to get her a ticket quickly. Amid this exchange, the women ran through a list of priests and commented on whether they were good (bāṃlāḥmha) or bad (bāṃmalāḥmha), evaluating the priests' competence as it related to their performative abilities. She considered some priests good because they performed the ritual elaborately, carefully following the proper procedures, as the devotee and dyaḥmāṃ understood them. Others were seen as bad because they were thought to be crooked, echoing the "business policies" critique previously discussed. Out of this conversation, a clear candidate emerged, whom the dyaḥmāṃ immediately called. Thus, gossip directly shaped decisions about which priests to employ. While the formal hierarchy of Newar Buddhist rituals positions the priest as the expert, the informal realm of gossip allows lay participants to co-construct meaning, articulate their critiques, and engage with the ritual in a way that impacts their choice-making.

Depending on one's subject position, gossip-cum-ritual criticism has the potential to have observable impacts on people's lives. It is inherently possible for gossip to shape future actions and expectations of participants, including those critiques made by ethnographers. For example, while I was discussing rice with the śākya family, we came to discuss the hāsā, a winnowing tray that is found in most Newar homes. I had heard from a male vajrācārya priest that these should never be hung on the wall, since hanging them on the wall put the house owner at risk of being attacked by "black magic." When I asked this family if they also adhered to this practice, she replied, with "why?" (chāy). After explaining, she shrieked and replied, "really?" (khaḥ lā?). She proceeded to remove the hāsā from the wall. Statements about ritual practice, even when framed as passing along information, can be interpreted as ritual criticism when they evaluate, highlight, or correct aspects of performance. Such statements, whether made by an ethnographer or another interlocutor, can directly influence subsequent events in the lives of those involved. So does gossip. Emmrich cautions researchers and explains that by becoming ritual critics there exists the risk "that one takes over the position of the Parbatiyā Brahmin, Newar Rājopadhyāya or Vajrācārya or one which is very similar to these, because it is they who are associated with an authority and a competence which one pretends to have when asking questions of this kind" (2007, 159). In other words, when a researcher asks about the correct way to perform a ritual, the meaning of ritual substances, or the proper sequencing of ritual actions, they risk positioning themselves as if they possess the ritual authority of trained priests, even unintentionally. Even when invited to comment on ritual procedure, it is our job to maintain the diversity of perspectives and "measure the performers' work both according to the expectations of the various performers themselves and of their more or less specialized public" (Emmrich

2007, 159). This same caution should be applied to researchers who gossip. We must be careful not to act as referees in ritual matches between different participants, even when invited to do so.

## Conclusion

On a nine-kilometre pilgrimage from Balkumari, Lalitpur, to Swayambhu with one hundred and eight women, a group of women approached me on the return journey, curious about my familiarity with the male vajrācārya priests who had performed their rituals. I explained my research, and in an effort to establish my connection to the vajrācāryas, I allowed some biographical details about one priest to slip, causing quite the uproar. Due to the priest's previous employment history, as a non-priest these women asked me, "is he a person with lots of money?" (āpāḥ dhebā dumha khaḥ lā?).

Their question, half playful and half serious, opened the space for gossip. It was an invitation to speculate together about the vajrācārya's wealth, status, and priestly identity. They had associated the employment history with wealth and were asking me to confirm their suspicions. Gossips enter these conversations with certain expectations and agendas—which are culturally formulated but also can be of a more subjective nature—about what they want and expect to hear. In this case, the women's laughter, the teasing tone of their question, and my knowledge of his personal biographical details suggested that they wanted confirmation of their assumption about the priest's wealth. Since I claimed to know him, I was expected to know his financial situation. When I admitted I did not know, the women giggled and brought our exchange to an end. This moment underscores how gossip, as a collaborative activity, draws on relational fields to negotiate meaning and critique behavior. If I had not brought up the fact that I knew the priests as well as I did, I do not believe we would have engaged in this exchange of gossip. Gossiping is an activity whereby people give and take information and commentary.

As these gossip exchanges have revealed, the ethnographer is embedded in these gossip matrices that are generated through the encounter between researcher and interlocutor. These exchanges demonstrate how researchers are fully involved in the gossiping event. I was the one with whom priests and sponsors chose to gossip. I was both a participant and a co-author of these communicative exchanges. Ethnographic encounters, in general, are themselves intersubjective moments created between ethnographer and interlocutors. The conversations occurring during fieldwork are "mutually comprehensible dialogue, a fusion of horizons, the ground for further conversation, not a unified theory" (Lambek 2015, 27). While scholars of gossip have tended to focus their analyses on gossiping that happens between interlocutors, gossiping about researchers by interlocutors can reveal how the researcher may become incorporated into gossiping networks.[21] This, in turn, can sometimes position the researcher as a gossiping partner, but only when interlocutors engage the researcher in evaluative exchanges.

One time, as I left the living room of a dyaḥmāṃ, I overheard her talking to a patient about a previous interaction I had with her. Earlier that week, I was forced by the dyaḥmāṃ to ask a question about my future so that she could "look at the rice" (jāki kurkā svayegu) and predict my future. I asked whether the funding results of an upcoming conference would be positive. After consulting the grains of rice, she told me that I would receive the funding. Before leaving, I checked my emails on my phone and noticed that I had received the funding. I informed the dyaḥmāṃ immediately, and she very confidently looked at me and said, "I saw" (jiṃ svayādhuna |). According to her, it should have come as no surprise. As I was leaving the premises, I crossed paths with a devotee, who asked the dyaḥmāṃ, "who is that?" (su khaḥ)?. The dyaḥmāṃ then proceeded to recount how she successfully saw that I would receive the funding. While I only overheard one instance of me being the topic of gossip, the ethnographer's actions and person are fair topics to be

gossiped about (Gluckman 1963). My actions and future became the topic of speculation in this living room. In this way, gossip does not merely circulate among interlocutors. It is co-constituted through ethnographic engagement and shows how the researcher is embedded in the relational and evaluative dynamics of the gossiping network.

Recognizing the ethnographer's role in these exchanges leads to questions about the ethics of translating such interactions into written scholarship. How can a researcher participate responsibly in the gossiping networks they study, particularly when their observations are no longer confined to the spaces of fieldwork? As a creator and participant, is it possible for a researcher publishing on gossip to do so in an ethical fashion? As Besnier argues, in reference to Tanya Luhrmann's ethnography of Parsis in India, one of the inherent ethical issues of published research on gossip, and ethnography in general, is that ethnographers risk producing articles, dissertations, and books that gossip partners in the field will dislike (Besnier 2009, 19; Lurhmann 1996). While I engage in gossiping like my interlocutors, the mediums that we use are different. My encounters with gossip are no longer only expressed in the living rooms, at the temple, or on the road. They are printed and available to a wider public. Academic writing is entangled with authority and truthfulness; however, "[p]eople can respond to texts, can evaluate, accept, or reject them" (Besnier 2009, 26). Publishing on gossip has the inherent possibility to participate in the networks of gossip from which it emerged. While the level of distribution and the readership is different, like the gossip column of a tabloid, publishing research on gossip, like most ethnographic work, especially work concerning vulnerable communities and topics, has the potential to affect the community by looping back. Unlike the gossip magazines that sell because the subjects of the gossip are specifically named, research on gossip must anonymize the gossipers and the subjects of the gossip. This involves masking the identities of interlocutors and of field sites. Doing the latter was impossible with this material, since the gossip-cum-ritual criticism was deeply connected to the only place where this ritual is performed. Given these safeguards, "it is difficult to imagine how [people] could use the specific knowledge they may acquire through the work for damaging purposes" (Besnier 2009, 27). While the community of priests who perform the chāhāyekegu is small, given that I spoke with them all, and that I removed any identifying features about the gossipers and the subjects of the gossip, I would find it quite difficult for someone to pinpoint an individual and use the material contained here to attack them. However, published gossip can re-enter the spaces from which it emerged and affect those spaces in both positive and negative ways.

To what extent are interlocutors giving me their informed consent to publish their pieces of gossip, given the reality that "the motives of social scientific research are never entirely clear to informants" (Besnier 2009, 24)? Gossip naturally emerged as a topic that was relevant to the issues that brought me to those places. People enthusiastically shared gossip with laughter and concern. Given that interlocutors knew the possible outcomes of these conversations, why did they choose to possibly amplify their critiques contained within these exchanges of gossip? My data raises questions surrounding the intentions that all my interlocutors, but in particular the priest from the first vignette, had in sharing these details about the performances of other priests. I met the priest that day because I wanted to learn more about this specific ritual procedure. Knowing that I intended to publish on this ritual, the gossiping priest might have held concerns surrounding what version of the ritual I intended to publish on, and what substitutes I would present as appropriate. It is possible that he shared his critique, couched in this piece of gossip, to present to the researcher and the researcher's wider audience, what in his eyes is the most accurate performance of the ritual. He clearly did not want me to 'wrongly' state that the ritual could also be performed with water.

The context of gossiping creates the space where communicative exchanges about

how others are committing mistakes, or not, are made possible. Gossiping provides people with an opportunity to collaboratively construct what is appropriate and inappropriate for a particular ritual. By referring to ethnographic observations, the ethnographer is drawn into the intersubjective webs of these gossip spaces. This creates the conditions for people to express gossip-cum-ritual criticism. For an ethnographer to have opportunities to discuss such matters, they must be skilled gossips, meaning willing to engage in these exchanges and punctuate them with 'really?' or 'are you serious?' Letting the conversation flow where it may, yet never slandering or speculating without ethnographic data. Slandering is what lies beyond the boundary of acceptable gossiping. When we gossip with interlocutors, we are collaboratively establishing the boundaries and rules for the gossip game underway. Gossiping, as a social activity, is always located within co-created relational webs and presents as an "inherently exciting and precarious" activity (Winnicott 2011, 247). Engaging in these moments, however, is a double-edged sword. While these conversations run the risk of making us uncomfortable since it is a dangerous game that can digress into slander, we must sit with the discomfort, since these exchanges reveal much more than they obfuscate. Researchers wanting to engage with this type of information must, in addition to being skilled ethnographers, also be skilled gossipers.

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## Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Sailesh and Nigen Byankankar for their help in the early stages of this thread of research. Conversations with and comments from Chiara Letizia, Christoph Emmrich, Eileen McDougall, Ian Turner, Lena Michaels, Michael Lambek, Marsha Hewitt, and Vanessa Sasson greatly enriched this article. This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Robert H.N. Ho Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. Unless otherwise stated, words or sentences which are unmarked, meaning they contain no language identifier, are Newar. I use Newar as the term for the language, following current convention and following Austin Hale and Kedar Shrestha's *Newār (Nepāl Bhāsā)* (2006). The term Newar is also used homonymously as the ethnonym for the ethnic group. Other terms in use for the language, such as Nepalbhasa (also spelled Nepalbhasha, Nepālbhāṣā) and Newah Bhaye (Nevāḥ Bhāy) are equally valid, representing the high-register and vernacular variants, respectively, more commonly used when speaking Newar. In terms of spelling of Newar words, I have followed spellings from the most extensive Newar-Newar dictionaries: Satyamohan Jośī's *Baḥcādhaṃgu nevāḥ khaṁgvaḥdhukū (A Concise Dictionary of the Newar Language)* (1987) and Indra Mālī's *Nepālbhāṣā taḥkhaṁgvaḥdhukū (Practical Nepal Bhasa Dictionary*) (2010).

2. Following R. Umamaheshwari in *Reading History with the Tamil Jainas: A Study of Identity, Memory and Marginalisation*, when I use the caste name to refer to the general group, as a cultural and political category, and not to an individual person's name, I have chosen to decapitalize the word (e.g. vajrācārya not Vajrācārya).

3. Following scholars like Stephanie Jamison and others, I do not italicize any South Asian words.

4. This is a common feature in Nepali. Words get doubled, for example, raksi saksi, to express alcohol and things related to alcohol.

5. khaṁlhābalhā, which I translate as conversation is a nominalized form that

encompasses both informal chatting and more formalized modes of exchange, including what might elsewhere be glossed as an interview.

6. Mālī 2010, s.v. gaph "gaph, prā. (nā), phursatay nhyāipuketa lhāigu khaṁ, phursatayā khaṁlhābalhā, mvāḥmadugu khaṁ, duimadusuimadugu khaṁ, khaḥgu makhugu khaṁ lhānā nyanācvaṃpiṃta dhatheṃ theṃ tāyekāḥ bīgu khaṁ |"

7. For more details on the goddess see: Miranda Shaw, 2006 *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), chap. 5, 110-142.

8. For the name of the ritual under scrutiny, I have opted for the spelling found in the ritual manual HP-Vaidya, ASK, DP 3424. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Newar or Nepali are my own.

9. The buddhācārya are a Newar caste community in charge of ritual responsibilities for the important shrines in and around Swayambhu. They are considered a sub-caste of the śākyas. This buddhācārya organizes the ticket system for the ritual and gives the sponsor the list of items that need to be brought from home. For a detailed ethnographic description of the ritual see: Vajrācārya 2010, 59.

10. Vajrācārya 2010, 55. baccāharū ra hāratīlāī <12> khuvāuna chāhāyekeguparamparā surū gareko

11. For a more thorough discussion of ritual substitution, especially as it relates to wider theories of sacrifice in Vedic ritual and Hindu ritual consult Smith & Doniger 1989.

12. For details on Newar Buddhist ritual framing see: Gellner 1991.

13. If one breaks down the word, into the verbs *chāye* and *hāyke*, one possible definition of the term is offering by pouring out since *chāye* refers to the act of offering, while *hāyke* refers to pouring out or "to cause to flow" (DCN-K&S 1994, s.v. hāyke). In the ritual manual HP-Vaidya, employing a variant spelling of the ritual, it says, "here [do the] chāyahāyake" (thanachāyahāyake) (HP-Vaidya 1939, 44). Other manuals deploy the term '*chāhāyeke*' either before or after the performance of the sacrifice (Skt. bali) (HP-Ratnā 1861, 14; Vajrācārya 1995, 24; Vajrācārya 2001, 32; Vajrācārya 1907, 14; Vajrācārya n.d., 14). The sacrifice referring to the offering plate replete with different substances, including buffalo meat. Bajramuni Bajracharya's ethnographic description states that, "during the bali, the sponsors, pour rice-liquor, rice-beer, or milk from a full kalaśa (water-pot)" (Vajrācārya 2010, 58).

14. While the priest identified by name and description the priests he viewed as guilty of committing the offences, I have omitted those names and removed sections that could have clearly identified the subjects for ethical reasons that will be explored later.

15. New.: aylāḥ, thvaṁ, hyāuṁthvaṁ, sāduru laḥkhaṃ cāiṁ yāye majyū | ana cāiṁ business policy aylāḥkhaṃ hayeke dhāi laḥ taibī aylāḥyāgu dhebā kāi | aylāḥ mānāṃ cār saya kāi | āṭh caukaṃ batīs saya dhebā aylāḥkhaṃ dhāi laḥ tayāḥ chāyāḥ bī | va he yāye majyū kā | laḥkhaṃ cāiṁ yāye majyū | guliṃ guliṃ syāṃ jhalaṃ naṃ tarpaṇa yāye jyū dhāi kā | tara jhala mukkaṃ makhu sāduru sāṃ bhaticā lvākaḥ chyāye māḥ kā | laḥ mukkaṃ yāye majyū | tara sakbhar laḥkhaṃ yāye majyū kā | tara dhāye majyū |

16. New.: thva khaḥ theṃ cvaṃ | thva he khaḥ | thva he khaḥ | lyuneṃ svaybalay khaḥ theṃ cvaṃ | nhyaḥne khvāḥ mavaḥ | khaḥ va he khaḥ | ji va cāiṁ nhyābaleṃ vayata yākigu guruju nhyābaleṃ vaṃ yāi kā guruju | ekdam bāṃlāḥ ekdam bāṃlāḥ khaḥ | bāṃlāka bvanimha khaḥ ?

17. In the Newar Hindu and Buddhist context, rituals manuals are handled in a variety of ways. Some priests use them diligently, while others only glance at them briefly, yet others only bring them out when they need to be worshipped in certain sections of rituals, and finally others, as in this case, only use them to read out the Sanskrit passages.

18. New.: va gurujūṃ bāṃlāka bvanī he makhu kā | huṃ huṃ huṃ yāi kā | dhāgu thui makhu kā | svar svar yāi chakvalaṃ chakvalaṃ sīdheki | alay ji cāiṁ athe yānāḥ mayānā kā | chāy dhāsā pāpa lagay jui kā | mantra dhāyāgu bvane māḥ baru dakvaṃ ma bvaṃ sā majimagāgu cāiṁ bvane he māḥ | svāṃ chunāgu dakvaṃ bvanāni caubis vaṭā dakva bvanā alay megu shortcut bvanī chu va he bvanī caubis chāye māḥ thay pyakaḥ jaka chāyekī kā| [...] alay yākanaṃ sidhala ni |

19. New.: dyaḥnaṃ khane ni | nhāpa naṃ śravan mahinay ek mahina taka maphu |

20. For more information on this public festival see: Owens 1989.

21. For these approaches to gossip see Besnier, 2009; Gluckman 1963; Haviland 1977; Brenneis 1987; Van Vleet 2003; Paine 1967.

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