HIMALAYA
The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Research Article

Bhairab Nach and Navadurga: Masked Rituals of Nepal

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2025.9978

Abstract

Nepal and surrounding regions in India are known for resplendent masked performances. Often ritual in nature, they serve as tools for spiritual belonging, community cohesion, ties of kinship, and artistic expression. Research on Nepal's culture and performance traditions has been smaller compared to neighboring South Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Nepal's performance traditions are complex, with centuries of history, culture, and religious beliefs attached to them. In Nepal, many of these traditional performances are called Pyakhan or stories/parables. They are deserving of in-depth study, much like their other South Asian counterparts. This paper takes a deep dive into masked dance forms of Nepal, especially the making and use of masks in Bhairab Nach, and Navadurga performance.

Keywords

mask, costume, ritual images, Pyakhan, tantrism, religion

Recommended Citation

Chatterjee, Deepsikha, (2025). Bhairab Nach and Navadurga: Masked Rituals of Nepal. HIMALAYA 44(1): 5-28.

Nepal and surrounding regions in India are known for resplendent masked performances. Often ritual in nature, they serve as tools for spiritual belonging, community cohesion, ties of kinship, and artistic expression. Research on Nepal's culture and performance traditions has been smaller compared to neighboring South Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Nepal's performance traditions are complex, with centuries of history, culture, and religious beliefs attached to them. In Nepal, many of these traditional performances are called *Pyakhan* or stories/parables. They are deserving of in-depth study, much like their other South Asian counterparts. This paper takes a deep dive into masked dance forms of Nepal, especially the making and use of masks in *Bhairab Nach*, and *Navadurga* performance.

In 2022, I had the opportunity to immerse myself in the study of mask and costume making of Nepal's Kathmandu valley's *Bhairab Nach*. There are 29 forms of masked dances in the area.[1]

Bhairab Nach is a generic term for masked dances in this region. My research was centered on the mask making traditions of Bhaktapur area of Kathmandu valley.[2] The potter community performed their ritual dance *Bhairab Nach* for this research project. They perform this regularly during ritually potent times of the year, particularly after the monsoon months into the autumn. In my research I looked at mask and costume use by the Jetha Ganesh Bhairab troupe from the Pottery Square area of Bhaktapur. Simultaneously I focused on the mask-making tradition by the Chitrakar community. Here, the Chitrakar community is involved in ritual mask-making and ritual image-making at temples. Their work is visible as mask displays and ritual exhibitions at their home as well as activated by the *Navadurga* ritual dance genre. They are performed by the indigenous Newari people of the area (Koizumi 1983, 4; Davis 2019, 15). The Dasain festival takes place during such a potent time, before the harvest season. The performances are dedicated for the community's wellbeing (Davis 2019, 12).

Even as Nepal is a syncretic mix of the old and new, the modern and the ancient, beautiful nature and everyday bustle, the serene and the hectic, Nepal Mandal region in general and Bhaktapur specifically is built geographically and spiritually around the mother Goddess deities. Around the end of September (after the monsoons), a festival called Indra Jatra dedicated to the god of rains Indra takes place. It marks the end of the rainy season and the beginning of a potent time of Dasain. A symbolic staff called the *yasin* is processed around town and then immersed in water in the Hanumante river. Dedication to these Goddess deities is part of the festival. It includes offerings to a prepubescent-aged girl of Buddhist Shakya community (also called a kumari) as the center of the ceremony. The dance drama is based on the sacred text of the *Devi Mahatmya*, an important part of the *Markandeya Purana,* believed to have been penned around the 4th-5th century CE (Coburn 1984).[3] The performance tradition has primarily been passed down orally through the centuries.

This paper and my larger research project are focused on traditional performances that utilize masks. Masks in such traditional settings, as seen in Nepal, India, Indonesia, Japan, and among Yoruba communities in Africa, and other places, are often associated with religion and spiritual practices. Some scholarly books and anthologies have discussed masked performances such as by John Emigh, Margaret Coldiron, Donald Cordry, Deborah Bell, Richard Kohn, Wendy Meaden and Michael Brown, Bruce Kapferer and Georges Papigny, Laurie Margot Ross, and others. While these works are comprehensive in nature, they have not examined in detail the meanings, making, or activation of Nepal's rich performance traditions. There are three prior comprehensive studies on Nepal's performance, history, and religion that are accessible in English. The first is Carol Davis' book *Theatre of Nepal and the People Who Make It*, the second is an

older Japan Foundation Publication *Dance and Music in South Asian Drama - Chhau, Mahakali Pyakhan and Yakshagana,* and the third is Gregory Price Grieve's *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*. Davis's project takes on the commendable task of documenting Nepal's performances. Yet it tackles a lot of breadth, and all that is limited to modern and activist Nepali theatre. It does not delve into traditional performances other than mentioning them.[4] However the first chapter provides important information on the genesis of *astamatrika* dance dramas (invoking eight goddesses), originally conceived by Srinivasa Malla (1649-1685 CE) which is in practice now (Davis 2019, 11-12). These dramas are now under the umbrella of *Bhairab Nach*. Davis also details the cleansing abilities of such ritual performances. The Japan Foundation publication, although several decades old now, did go into depth with documentary details of *Bhairab Nach,* specifically the *Mahakali Pyakhan* genre within that, the conditions of performance, and the artistic style. Yet even that did not fully address the making of the masks. their meanings, how they are used, and most importantly, how they are activated alongside costumes in performance. Gregory Price Grieve discusses the complexity of understanding religion in Bhaktapur Nepal. However, his work does not go into performance traditions in detail other than some references to *Navadurga* performance (Grieve 2006, 17). The goal of this paper is to document the complex performance practice of *Bhairab Nach*, and *Navadurga*, how the masks are made and how they are used. In this pursuit, one publication, Alka Hingorani's *Making Faces*, discussing image-based religious practice in the Garhwal region of Himalayan north India is valuable (Hingorani 2012). Much like these case studies, Hingorani shows us how the images of gods—similar to the masks—possess spiritual potency around which the community comes together. This concept of spiritual potency will be valuable throughout this paper and my larger project.

Masked characters are often embodied in theatre practices that are anchored to the community and its religious beliefs, image-based beliefs, and routines of everyday life. Such everyday life is, by extension, connected to religious practice that is multi-sensorial in modality. This type of everyday life activity might include daily prayers and offerings at a home altar. It may also include annual festivities. I refer to this world an 'umbrella of tradition', a concept encompassing the conditions that enable the performance traditions to continue. In the next section, I will explore the contours of this umbrella of tradition. What is important to note is that this umbrella sustains the performance traditions.

When this umbrella of tradition is meticulously anatomized it can be observed that various segments or conditions allow the genres to be practiced and maintained. The different segments are the following: religious anchors; series of rituals; cyclical time; geographical space on the fringe; access to artistic materials; practice through lineage (caste, normative gender, and division of labor); proximity between mask, movement, and music; embodied acquisition; and a triad of efficacy, culture, and entertainment. These segments are interrelated and influence and inform each other. None of these segments are exclusive of each other. As will be discussed below, it is evident that one condition allows for another condition to exist. If imagined as a multicolored umbrella, each section has ombré coloration, such that red flows into blue, blue flows in yellow, with continuation in between. Sometimes considered traditional, sometimes backward, or primitive—together—these conditions allow room for practice.

Religious Anchors

The genres discussed in the larger project, as well as in *Bhairab Nach* and *Navadurga* here have strong religious backgrounds. They are connected to Hindu-Buddhist tantric practice. I will discuss the salient features of this later in the paper and explain how it helps shape the images and masked performances we study here.

Life, sustenance, culture, and community have been centered around this faith for centuries. In Nepal's *Bhairab Nach*, the performances are rooted in a celebration of Goddess Mahakali from Hindu, pre-Hindu, and non-Aryan beliefs and concepts (Koizumi 1983, 8-14).[5] In Nepal, they also merge with Buddhist tantrism to take on a new conceptual and material avatar. Nepal's Kali goddess and Bhairab look different from the Kali and Bhairab rendition of in parts of Indian performance traditions, in terms of materiality and iconography. The performances and visual renditions adhere to the religious roots of the genres. Diversion from the religious roots is not the norm and a negligible part of the genres. In all these cases, the religious belief systems inform the practices and in turn shape the material aspects of the religions.

In these performance genres, everyday life, defined as mundane or secular life, and sacred life, are intermingled. It is impossible to demarcate where secular practices end, and sacred practices begin. This is observable in visual art, theatre and performance, belief systems, and artistic practice. This phenomenon is especially prominent in Hindu practice, but to some extent this is observable in South Asian Buddhism and Jainism and is present to a lesser degree in South Asian Islamic and Christian contexts. As art historian Vidya Dehejia has written, sacred and profane art forms in South Asia are interspersed (Dehejia 2009, xi). This is particularly notable in premodern art. These forms lack a clear delineation. David Mason, who studied devotional Hindu performances, made similar observations. He wrote, "the image in the temple, or in the household shrine, is both an art object and a manifestation of divinity at the same time." And people make "little distinction between religion and art" (Mason 2009, 5).

In my experience, when consumers come to Bhaktapur's Pottery Square in Nepal and purchase masks of the goddesses, they are aware they are purchasing a goddess's representation for their home, whether they place this on their altar or their living room wall as an artistic piece. These buyers, even as tourists, are aware of a potency carried by the image. Along the same lines, when art historian Kajri Jain wrote about the circulation of religious images in the marketplace, she indicated "majority Hindu deities" [with images of other religions] coexist alongside the mundane "all in vivid, saturated colors" in locations as diverse as "elite living rooms, middle class kitchens, urban slums, village huts" and more (Jain 2007, 2-3).[6] Thus the religious imagery and its many inspirations from the religious roots continue to inspire performance and visual art and everyday life, way beyond the formal religious spaces and activities. We will observe this aspect in the different segments of the umbrella of tradition. This coexistence is chaotic, and within that chaos, there is room for community, cohesion, and creativity.

The Sakti[7] goddesses are the primary deities in the region. Through the ritual and festive masked performances and the everyday worship practices, these performance genres concretize a complex and secretive Tantric version of the religious faith that community adheres to. Religious studies scholar David Gordon White traces the origins of tantrism to "Tantra"—a textual pedigree from before the fifth century BCE—the *Asvalayana Srauta Sutra*, a "ritual framework" that "applies to both Hindu and Buddhist texts" (White 2003, 16-17). Put simply, it connects to what is known as "Kaula-Kula" practice, referring to kinship systems rooted in family and bloodline, often transmitted through initiation, and often involving offerings to Yogini goddesses in rituals of sexual symbolism for achieving well-being and occasionally to achieve magical powers (White 2003; Craig 2020).[8] Art historian Vidya Dehejia, who researched tantrism in India, defines yoginis as female counterparts of yogis who had immense potency and worshipped Siva in the fearsome aspect of Bhairava.[9] These goddesses belong to the Hindu faith on the surface, but the complex Tantric faith crosses beyond, into Buddhism and has a particular local flavor to it. The faith is framed through performances and oral practices in everyday life. Many

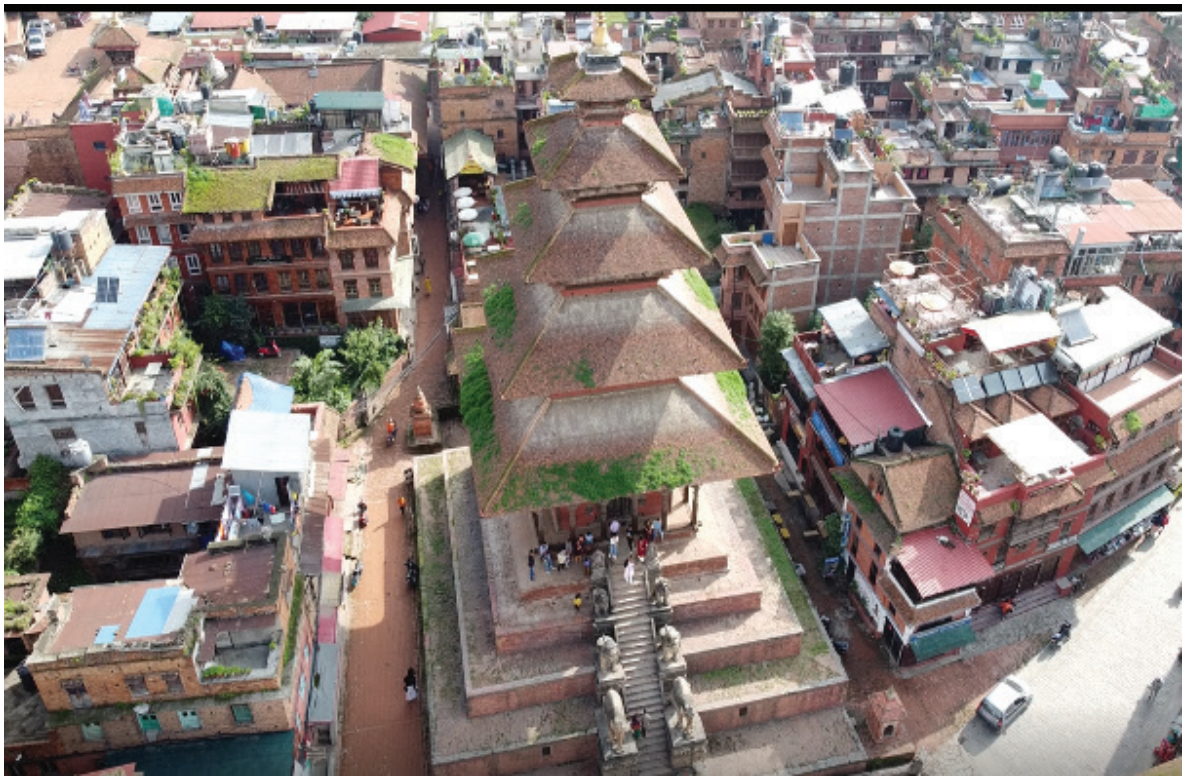


Figure 1: Aerial view of Nyatapola Temple in Bhaktapur. Built around 1701 CE, the temple enshrines a tantric goddess and is open to the public only once a year. It faces Taumadhi Square which includes a community space known as a *dabali* (ritual platform), regularly used for performances such as *Bhairab Nach* and *Navadurga*, as well as other gatherings. Directly opposite stands the Bhairab Temple, where Lord Bhairab (Shiva) is the presiding deity. Considered a fearsome entity, his image is revealed to the public only once annually. Together, the temples and square are imbued with spiritual potency and remain active sites of devotion. *(Photo by Sammit Acharjee)*

temples dot the region such as the Nytapola temple in Figure 1 above. Goddesses offer spiritual protection and benedictions for the eager devotees. But in the case of Bhaktapur, the temples were built around the city in a circular shape providing a boundary of protection. On one side of the city is the Hanumante river—with a goddess temple on its riverbank marking the area's funeral bank. A snake is carved around the city's boundaries, around the temples to further demarcate the space. Bhaktapur is a UNESCO World heritage site, as part of the Kathmandu valley heritage sites and remains protected.[10] The area was affected by the 2015 earthquake, but a majority of the buildings had been rebuilt by 2022.

While the tantric belief system is present in parts of India as well, the performance genres are unique to the Nepal valley. The tantric faith and performance genres lend themselves to an elaborate mask making practice in the region. As religious studies scholar David Gordon White wrote, tantric practice could never be understood through textual exegesis, and its vibrant practice is often seen as the dominant religion in Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet. Gordon White argued that tantric practice was both elite and vernacular in South Asia (White 2003, 2). The elite presence is perceptible in Nepal valley in the way tantric sculptures are highly visible in grand temple architecture in the region as seen in Figure 1 (Gutschow and Basukala 2011).[11] The royal kingdoms practiced tantrism and supported the practice. Tantric practice's vernacularity is perceptible through the faith practice of the people even now, whether through daily obeisance at such temples by the

local population, buffalo procession or *gai jatra* before Dasain and subsequent sacrifice to the goddesses or through the ritual performances that take place throughout the year. The masked dances are part of this vernacular practice. Yet in the context of greater South Asia now, tantrism is the "occulted face" of the religions of the region, in a subaltern position, one among many within a "multiplicity of practices"(White 2003, 4-7).[12] In most cases these goddesses are seen as village deities in India often including the pacification of female ancestors, ghosts, ghouls, and imps who may be angry and hungry, while they remain the prevalent deities in the Kathmandu region, and have been the "perennial" religion of the region (White 2003, 4-5)

Art historian Vidya Dehejia, who investigated art and architecture of tantric Yogini temples of Odisha in the east of India described how Tantric temples differ from mainstream ones in spatial arrangement and goddess iconography (Dehejia 1986, 6-29). Highly decorated Yogini sculptures are arranged around a central Siva deity in this temple in Odisha, India. Yet, resonating the idea of "occult", as mentioned by David Gordon White, Dehejia shows in Odisha, the sensuous and adorned female bodies could have a head of a horse, a large snake hood, the head of a rabbit with particular potencies of their own. Dehejia wrote how Yogini temples are meant to inspire "a deep sense of awe born of fear" (1986, 8). White reminds of the subaltern nature of tantric practice in India and Nepal. White argues that Vishnu centric practice (as seen in Bhaona and other spiritual practices in India I have written about), practiced by the intelligentsia, aristocracy, and merchant class are considered mainstream because it has overshadowed vernacular tantrism. Through this ethnography, I trace a material rendering of the tantric practice, but as will be evident, not all aspects are revealed to outsiders.

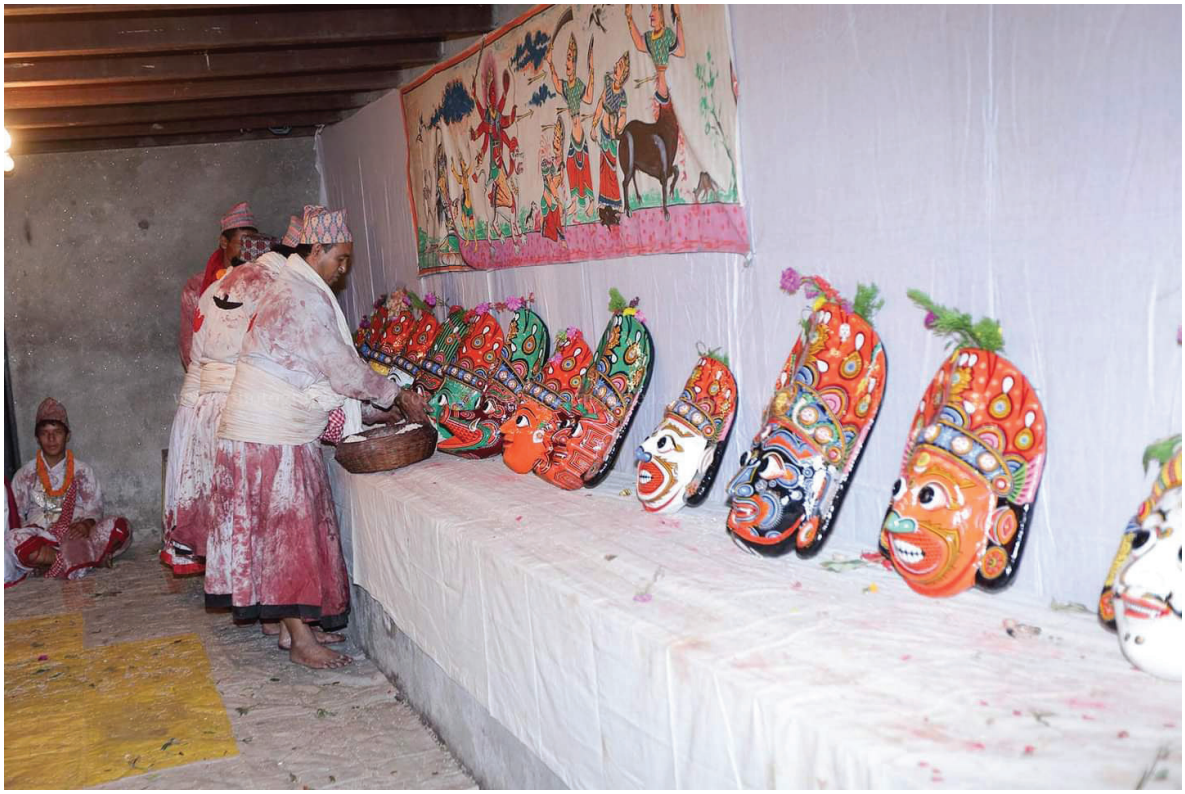


Figure 2: Offerings made to the Navadurga masks—potent religious figures—during the Dasain festival in September–October (autumn), at the home of Purna Chitrakar. *(Photo by Arbindra Prajapati.)*

Series of Rituals, Big and Small

Within these religious practices, there is a series of ritual performances. These ritual practices are both simple everyday practices at homes and temples, as well as significant festivals for large numbers of people. The performances studied here are part of these rituals, performed regularly either in small ways or for larger festivities. In the genres of masked performances, the performances are often rituals themselves. Such rituals are practiced and performed for their efficacious value for the communities that support them. Through artistic practice and performance, an aura of auspiciousness is created for the community through a public offering or gifting process.[13] These rituals are enacted daily, biweekly, seasonally, or annually. Rituals in South Asia are based on a variety of calendar cycles—lunar, solar, seasonal-agrarian, or annual. In some instances, they may be based on the secular Gregorian calendar as well. Most often, the masked performances in Nepal, with large programs and many masks with detailed designs, are part of large annual festivals such as Indra Jatra and Dasain. Yet these large festivals are supported by smaller festivities throughout the year. The smaller festivities may not have masked characters. Yet one festival is interrelated to another, even though they may not be celebrating the same occasion. They reinforce each other. Daily and seasonal prayers and offerings at goddess temples on the perimeter of Bhaktapur are one such everyday activity. The daily, smaller activities inculcate a way of thinking, doing, and performing. The devotee-performer understands that daily ritual performance is essential for sustaining and disseminating the auspicious aura that emanates from the sacred deity and temple space. This understanding is shared by local spectators, pilgrims, and visitors alike. These daily, ritualized performances are believed to be necessary and are conducted for their efficacy and auspiciousness for the community. On the complementary end, receiving and observing these performances becomes second nature for the community members—even when they are not visiting a temple or praying every day. It also defines a way of doing because a devotee-performer with this task of a regular performance has to commit themselves to this irrespective of audience or devotee presence.[14] Most often responsibilities are held by male-identifying members of the community. They have to perform whether there is an audience, another devotee, or a large group present, or no one at all. Each of these practitioners is committed to this "mini" performance irrespective of how he feels on a particular day, thereby making it *his* second nature. Likewise, it requires a method of repeated performances (what we might call warm-up activities or rehearsals in modern theatre) under low-stakes conditions that the devotee-performer must commit to. All together, these mini performances saturate the place and the people such that the annual masked performances, as seen during Dasain, are like condensed, deep, and materially significant versions of these smaller, dispersed performances everyone is used to. Thus, the ongoing rituals ensconce repeatable practices through the festival cycles that occur at predictable intervals. They outlast a bracketed time frame of a day, month, or year to continue into the foreseeable future.

Rituals have to be predictable. In a study of rituals, Claire Sponsler, an American scholar investigating Catholic rituals in Europe, the United States, and the Global South by building on seminal scholars such as Schechner, Turner, and others provided such a definition (Sponsler 2004; Schechner 2011; Turner 1982). This definition is applicable to these heterogeneous ritual performances. In *Ritual Imports: Performing Medieval Drama in America*, Sponsler stated how rituals are "seasonal; not occasional; they are repeated on a regular, usually annual, basis; they are tied, often in an unarticulated way, to the belief systems and deepest values of their communities; and they survive in unwritten forms, passed on from performer to performer through practices, not documents" (Sponsler 2004, 8). While ritual theorists such as Catherine Bell, Christiane Brosius and Ute Hüsken, and aforementioned Sponsler have studied

this pattern in rituals in the context of religious, as well as non-religious activities, it is the repetition that becomes a powerful tool in ritual and in these case studies (Bell 1992; Brosius and Hüsken 2010). The length of the activity is not as much of concern, but it is its predictability that is reiterative and restorative for the community it serves. In *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner described the term "restoration of behavior," which is applicable in this context. Under a very broad rubric, restored behavior includes dance, theatre, social dramas, rites, and many more, where such behavior is "expected" and is "'twice-behaved behavior'" (Schechner 2011, 35-36). Such predictability allows for the performance traditions to continue in South Asia.

As we see in Figure 2, offerings to *Navadurga* masks are made annually in this way. Alongside the process of making the masks, and the ritual annual sacrifice of the masks is part of the whole experience. The community members look forward to this rhythm.

Cyclical Time

The ritual practices establish a connection to a cyclical concept of time in these genres. Through daily, biweekly, biannual, or lunar/solar/agriculture/nature–based calendars, performances are repeated. And through such repetition, a relationship to past, present, and future is established. This concept also relates to Hindu-Buddhist concept of time through birth, death, and rebirth. A little child in a family may see regular performances in a nearby temple or in the community right from infancy. This young person may hear of such activities from the elders of the family—grandparents, parents, or uncles and aunts and see such performances in their childhood. The child then develops a sense of the past that is threaded through the memories of his immediate elders. These elders in turn remember and through their memory create a sense of a foregone past when such performances were practiced. In the present, the child observes the immediate family, parents, and grandparents maintaining the genres of performance. And through this, the child projects, or the elders project, a future where the child must carry on the practices. Thus, a sense of the past is threaded through memory and ancestors, an idea of the present is established through embodied experience, and a future is projected that has not yet arrived but promises and/or demands a familiar repetition.

Children from the Prajapati community learn to dance and play the instruments consisting of drums, gongs and windpipes from an early age (Koizumi 1983, 11, 47-48). If they have an inclination, they go deeper into the learning. Once the children learn the steps, they are assigned ancillary roles—such as kawaan (goblin), bhocha (ghost), or betaal (demon)—in the performances. As they grow up and learn the steps of the principal characters, they are able to take on the principal roles.

On the surface this may seem like a heavy burden to bear for a young child. However, through the growing years the child experiences different iterations of the performances and develops an embodied familiarity.[15] Whether or not the child carries on the activities or passes the responsibility to another, the community, through elders, youngsters, and neighbors, all play a part in this familiarization process that helps to sustain the tradition into the future. In turn, they also project a concept of time that is different from the modern city-based calendar. Similar to Sponsler's aforementioned repetition, this phenomenon can be understood as Schechner's restored behavior, where the child expects the ritual to continue, much like with the ancestors, and who in the future may play a part in the process. This contribution may be through the re-creation of the ritual with close-enough authenticity or with funds or other resources for the community. Irrespective of the way in which the ritual continues, there is an expectation of the aforementioned twice-behaved behavior that ensures continuity from day to day, month to month, or year to year. Most often predictability is something the community

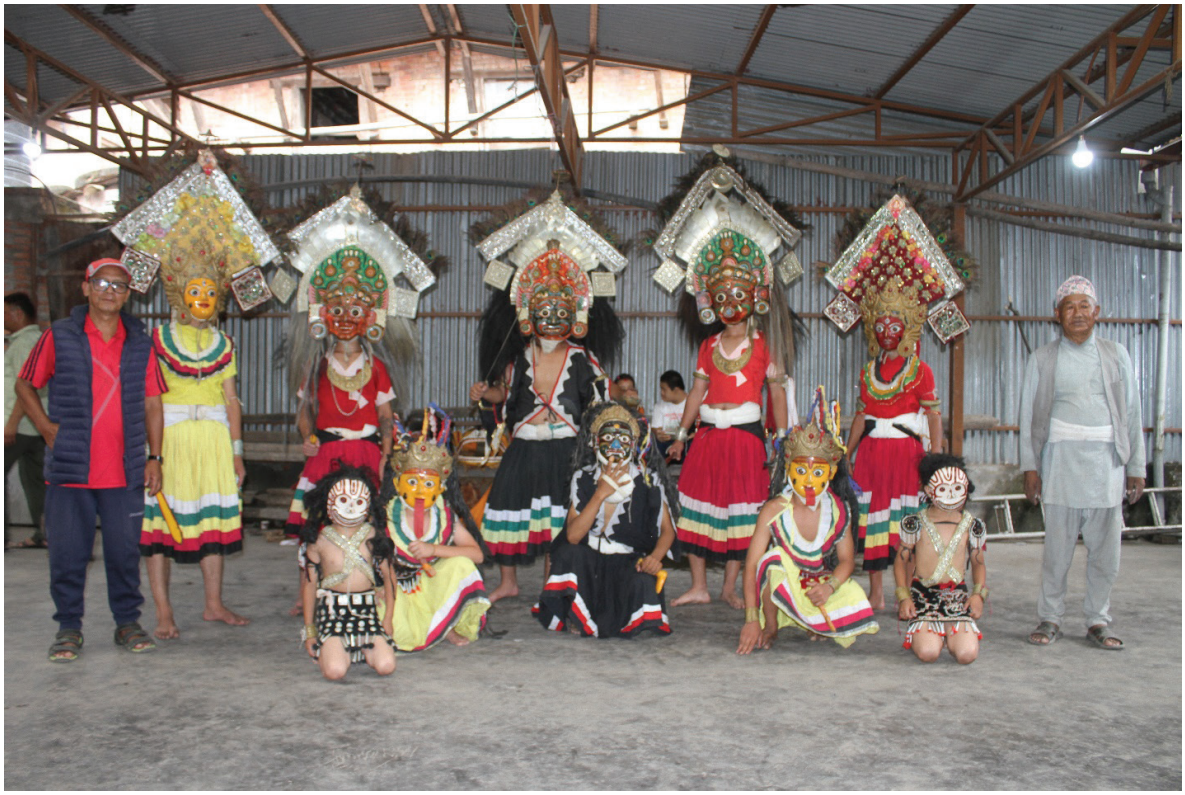


Figure 3: Jetha Ganesh Bhairab Nach Group performing *Bhairab Nach*. Characters identified from left to right. **Back row**: Brahmayani (yellow), Mahayani/Mahakali (red), Bhairab (primary character, black), Barahi (female counterpart of Baraha or boar god, red), Mahalakshmi (red). **Front row:** Kawaan/goblin (child performer), Bhocha, Betal, Bhocha, second Kawaan/goblin (child performer). (*Photo by the author*)

anticipates and enjoys, the local administrations (such as Bhaktapur Nagarpalika or Municipality) organize, governments capitalize on, and artists create for, ensuring flow of funds and festivity.

Bhairab Nach, and the specific roles as gods and goddesses the dancers render include jumps, leaps, synchronized pirouettes, and other vigorous movements while the dancers are in full costume. This means each performer wears the heavy masks, the clothing, some accessories such as necklaces and bracelets, waist bells, ankle bells, and hold hand props while moving. The heavy costume has to work with all these demands on the body. Given the ritual context of these performances, when performing for the religious festivals, the dancers fast to cleanse their body, abstain from sex, avoid certain foods, perform under all types of weather conditions, accompanied by loud drumming, sound of heavy cymbals and gongs, incense smoke—all together creating demanding circumstances. In a few cases, given the demands, some dancers enter a trance-like state. A trance-like state is required in *Lakhe* performances (not part of this research, but part of the 29 aforementioned masked dances of Nepal valley). A trance-like state is *not* required in *Bhairab Nach.* Some artists may enter a trance state in *Navadurga*. If compared, *Navadurga* is more ritually demanding than *Bhairab Nach*. The ritual requires demanding conditions such as all elements of the heavy costume and every musical instrument for accompaniment. Only when all accompaniments are present can the performance achieve its intended efficacy. Yet these conditions sometimes induce a trance-like state because of the physical demands on the body. As tantric scholar Saroj Shrestha explained to me, these conditions are required in order to purify the body, the community, and mother earth

with each deity associated with a specific purpose.[16] This is the primary purpose of the performances. He referred to the dance as "making of a temple in the body." Hence most of the performers I met are young, in their teenage years or in their twenties, capable of handling the demanding circumstances. Senior artists such as Lakshmi Sundar Prajapati (on the extreme right in grey in Figure 3), now in his eighties, serves as a guru to the company or Pasupati Prajapati (on the left in Figure 3), now in his fifties, serves as the company manager, but do not perform under such demands themselves. The youth years are when the artists train and learn all the parts. For example, my informant Padmodhar Prajapati, in his 40s living in US, outlined that from his childhood he picked up the assigned role for all the characters of *Bhairab Nach* other than the central ones of Bhairab, and Barahi.

Senior artists ensure the rituals are complete and are compliant to all the expectations of tantric methods. They ascertain that all the masks and costumes are worn as per regulations, and all associated regulations are followed. In some cases, it is necessary to hold back. The seasonal aspect of these performances is also crucial because only at the right timing is the performance valid and efficacious. I had visited Nepal in the summer. This is not considered an efficacious time. As several Prajapatis explained to me, it is considered a "rest period" of the year. There are a series of rituals that take place after monsoons, around late August, starting with Ganesh puja. Following that is a vital ritual called *gai jatra*. This is a procession of water buffalos. Based on tantric practice, these animals are sacrificed for the goddesses the following day. Subsequently the season of Dasain begins. Dasain is the same as Dussehra festival dedicated to the goddess in India. Dasain can also be repeated in spring (around April) when a smaller festivity takes place. Several masked dances take place during this season. The late fall into winter months are considered potent for goddess worship and associated masked performances. After this period a ritual called *jal samadhi*, or burial in water takes place. There are many ritual elements that are then figuratively buried. The ritual masks of *Navadurga* the Chitrakars make once a year are also placed in *samadhi* and thereby destroyed. Subsequently the period of rest begins, where potency is withdrawn and no masked performances can take place. I had requested a performance during this time. Some of the younger people in the group told me it was possible. However, when Lakshmi Sundar Prajapati was informed, he advised against a full performance. He believed it was important to preserve the ritual efficacy of the performance. Thus, the performance I had commissioned did not include some of the ritual gongs that are part of the festival. While I got to experience the material elements of the performance including masks and costumes, by omitting one musical component, the elders ensured that it did not constitute a full performance during an inauspicious time. While there are some, particularly the younger members, who were motivated by the compensation I offered, the seniors made sure no essential ritual rule was violated.

Similar to the Prajapatis, the Chitrakars shoulder the responsibility of all religious imagery in Bhaktapur. Their artistic work beyond mask making includes painting temple portals and divine imagery inside and outside temples, all types of seasonal ritual imagery for use in household altars, Hindu-Buddhist style landscape paintings called *thanka*, and other similar objects. For most of these purposes, printed imagery does not suffice, and the Chitrakar involvement with handmade objects is necessary.

Geographical Space on the Fringe

Masked performances are often practiced outside big cities, urban centers, areas beyond the onslaught of modernity. Bhaktapur, 12 km outside main Kathmandu is suburban to the city. The primary reason the different segments of the aforementioned umbrella of tradition are maintained is because of geographical locations. Bhaktapur is a heritage city that is on the outskirts of the capital. This location (much

like others I have observed in India), by being away from the direct onslaught of modernity, play a role in keeping alive some of the conditions under which the ritual performances are continued. It does not mean things are always pastorally romantic for these areas. Issues of poor infrastructure, such as water, power, roadways, and reduced access to education and healthcare, are a given (in all the case studies I have researched)—yet the locals have an interest in continuing the arts, especially the ritual arts. This is done by maintaining traditional communities of performers and audiences and by allocating access to performance space and having artistic materials easily accessible. Their geographical locations are a unique reason why these artistic and theatrical roots developed and continue to be practiced. Unlike other modernized-traditional societies, such as Japan, till now the people of the areas discussed here, have been able to maintain these practices. We see this in Bhaktapur in the goddess temples that surround the town (Birkenholtz 2018).[17] To some extent, the community holds on to the traditions *because* they see these ritual arts and associated performance traditions are ways of pivoting towards modernity, by harnessing travel and tourism. Performers can receive visibility, income through tourism, awards (in India and Indonesia) that they cannot achieve through traditional sustenance activities, such as agriculture and traditional occupations. Thus, the communities and the artists enjoy their locations and the associated visibility from these locations.

The artists create and display their work in public spaces such as temple squares and town squares. The potters, for example, have workshops and retail spaces beside the Jetha Ganesh temple. People walk and drive past them. Similarly, the dance performances take place here. The artists create their work in visible areas. Given that most of these spaces are religious or semi-religious in spirit, outsiders have long been welcomed.[18] Further, this kind of space also invites observers, neighbors, visitors, or audience without creating a sense of intrusion. Such a space is visible in Figure 2, where devotees can come and make offerings to the masks in an open patio in the mask maker's home. These spaces are usually somewhat separated from domestic spaces, such as bedrooms, kitchens, or bathrooms, but are within walking distance. While for an art community this type of a spatial arrangement may seem strategic or promotional, within the folk-arts genres, this is common. Folk artists are typically not ones who commute to work hours away but rather work in spaces close to home. It allows an openness. We will see this further down in the discussion of Bhaktapur's Pottery Square. Through this setup, students who do not belong to the immediate family but those who are in close proximity also get a chance at observation, and if interested, even a chance at experiencing, participating in, and creating the art forms. While interested outsiders were allowed no or limited access in earlier decades, the current conditions have opened possibilities for immersion.

Access to Artistic Materials

As a study of design, materiality, and fabrication processes, part of this research is aimed at understanding artists and their relationship to their artistic materials. Hence, my fieldwork began in workshops, ateliers, or makers' spaces. Upon entering these spaces, it is easy to spot materials strewn around, half-used materials, raw materials with which the artists create, open jars of trim and notions, or partly used paint jars and brushes. One can see how artists work with their materials—how they build, mold, weave, shape and construct their finished objects. Observing artists actively working in such spaces, one can glean a lot of information about their working process. The designer-makers work in family spaces in which they have grown up and so to which they have a long-established relationship. These spaces are also where the artists build up a familiarity with the materials. Whether these artists use clay, bamboo, wood, straw, jute, or softly worn cotton, they all have had access to these types of materials from their childhood. During fieldwork, I have

observed children as young as four and five playing with these materials, as their fathers, uncles, or cousins make more "formal" or "finished" objects. Eventually as they grow up, this familiarity allows them to approach the materials without fear or distance, helping them get drawn into or develop a closeness with the process of making. Having acquired basic skills associated with the art early in life, they grow to develop more advanced skills and an eye for both artistic process and final product. This proximity and familiarity allows them to develop into chief or lead artists if they have such an inclination.

Alongside the issue of familiarity is the issue of access to materials for the artists. This access establishes the sense of materiality in these genres. Children in Pottery Square for example, as seen in Figure 3, have access to clay, a potter's wheel, and shaping tools from an early age. They grow up surrounded by these materials. The raw materials that are used to shape masks, puppets, and other performing objects are all locally sourced. The performing objects in *Bhairab Nach* of Nepal are made of clay, cotton fiber, hand-made paper, buffalo fat, flour-based glue, and then painted. In India's different masked genres clay, bamboo, wood, cow dung, straw, jute, pliable wire, homemade flour-based glue and softly worn cotton are used. In Indonesia masks are made from pule wood, with ornamentation in fabric and leather are attached. Additionally, there are paints, brushes, cloth, trims, needles and thread, and other tools. The materials vary slightly from place to place and between the genres. However, what is notable is that the artists primarily use inexpensive, local, and naturally sourced materials. During fieldwork, I often entered workspaces that had such raw materials strewn around in haphazard and messy ways yet were at arm's length for the artists. If I asked artists about this proximity, they were caught off guard because access to materials was not something they ponder about. Such immediate access observed in these genres allows the artists to be physically very close to their materials and build easily. Occasionally they *do* bring in larger quantities through more complex procurement systems. For example, Purna Chitrakar shared how his bright blue paint pigment is acquired from a manufacturer in the UK. However, for artistic work that they engage in on an ongoing basis, their path to their resources is short. This accessibility helps build a proximity to the art form, the materials, and the ability for creativity. As performance scholar Arnab Banerji has illustrated in his research of urban theatre in India, and as I have also noted in my experience, access to materials have an impact on the ultimate creative outcome (Banerji 2020). I would like to assert that such easy access has a very positive outcome on creativity in the genres and in the integration of the materials into the performance.

Practice through Lineage and Embodied Acquisition

As discussed in the section on cyclical time, these genres are maintained through lineages, following what is known in South Asia as the *guru-shishya* model of training. In Nepal, the aforementioned *guthi* system is one such institution for intergenerational knowledge transfer. This has been examined in early cultural policy documents (Amatya 1983), described in official institutional sources (Guthisansthan), and framed as intangible heritage by scholars such as David Gellner (2019). Most often these lineages are family-based, where young children learn from their parents and grandparents. On occasion, these teachers are neighbors or distantly related family. In some instances, students may train as apprentices, even if they are not biological relatives. Resembling the guild models of medieval Europe, lineage-based practice fosters a very strong relationship to materials, belief systems, and maintenance of traditions. Senior teachers instruct young children and junior learners. The juniors then grow up and play a part in maintaining the tradition and teaching new generations.

Such lineage-based systems are not simply linear, passing from father to son. They

Figure 4: Pottery Square in Bhaktapur. This area is home to many pottery families belonging to the Prajapati community. Traditionally, potters by profession, they are organized into *guthi* (ritual guilds) and continue this work for their livelihood. While some members have moved away for education or employment, many remain engaged in pottery and ritual performance. Community members also participate in *Bhairab Nach*, offering ritual performances for the well-being of the community. *(Photo by the author)*

can be open ended. One can visualize them as rhizomatic systems where the community operates as a network. There is a wraparound effect within which a child from the locality or family learns. Such a child never forgets the system. Children are permitted low stakes learning through mimicry, playing with materials/movements, and developing a taste for the genre. And once they develop this interest, through a system of familiarity, they go on to participate in the genre with inclination and ease.[19] Many of my interviewees have suggested that even though they have moved away from these locations for many years because of work or school, they still have a fondness for and an embodied memory of the genres. One US-based interviewee, Padmodar Prajapati, who grew up in Bhaktapur, Nepal, and learned and performed *Bhairab* dance in his childhood narrated this. Even now, many years later, if he hears that particular set of percussion beats, his heart and body want to dance immediately. Thus, the cocooning effect within the community and muscle memory helps build an intimacy with the genres. I have noticed that the gurus or teachers of local forms of performance are all from a nearby region, district, or locality and/or have family/training-based lineages from the region. Living through and practicing such lineage-based genres comes with significant baggage, such as expectations, tradition-bound lifestyles, and other challenges. There may also be reasons for such exclusivity.

David Mason, in his observation of ritual performances in India, also notes this embodied form of experience. Mason has written about folk-ritual performances in northern India, around Vrindavan. There, devotional performances centered on Lord Krishna are an important part of everyday life. Mason discusses witnessing devotion-based theatre and how the audience is trained in viewing it from childhood—in other words, both the performer and audience have been trained in performing from childhood (2009). The performer learns to enact roles such as Krishna, Radha, or Krishna's kin and devotees. The audience simultaneously learns to take in such performances, react in an expected manner to the performances, make

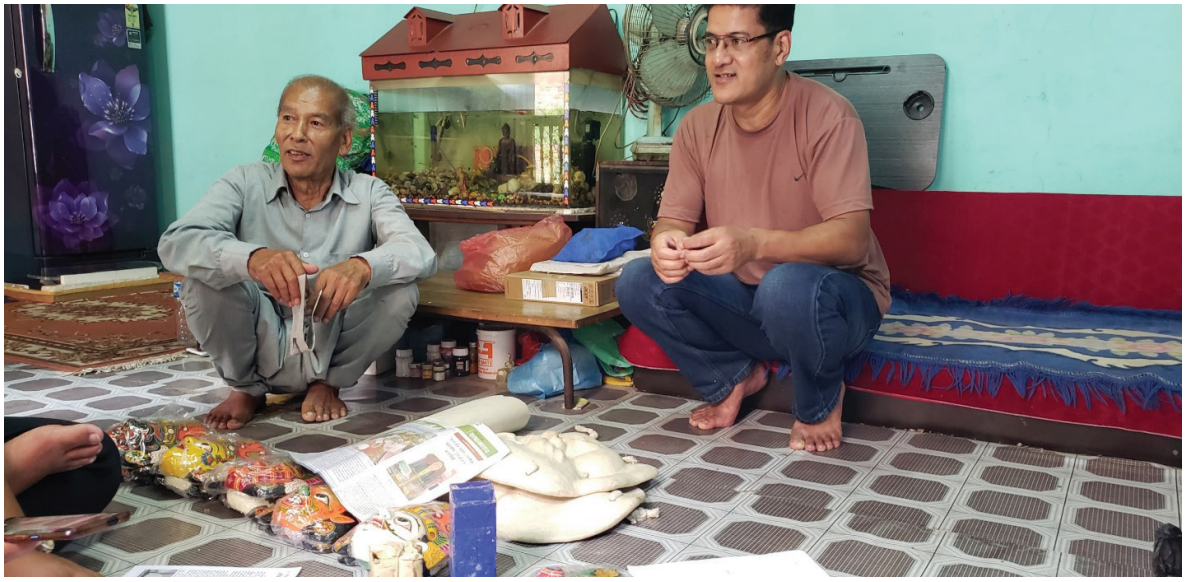


Figure 5: Expert mask makers from Bhaktapur, Purna Chitrakar and his son Rajesh Chitrakar. They belong to the Chitrakar *guthi*, a lineage assigned ritual artist duties. Members of this *guthi* are responsible for producing various forms of decorative art used in ritual contexts. *(Photo by the author)*

expected offerings to the performers, and participate in the devotional experience. Mason compares these performances with Stanislavskian actor-training systems. He notes how the actors are aware they are actors but at the same time are absorbed into and become part of the elevated story-telling. The audience, too, through their embodied-reception experience receives these performances differently than those in formal theatres. In my observation, this is true for the local artists and audiences who are steeped into this tradition from their childhood. While they are exposed to other performances, such as TV, film, and even social-media entertainment, they place the ritual performances on a pedestal. This elevated understanding of the performances is also true for members of the community who have moved away from the region but attach the same value to the ritual performances such as my informants Arbindra Prajapati and Padmodhar Prajapati. And to some extent this sweeps over tourists who come to the area, even if they have not grown up seeing such performances, because they experience it wrapped within a temple and cultural atmosphere that is difficult, if not impossible, to subtract from such events.

Caste, Normative Gender, and Division of Labor

In the various segments of the umbrella of tradition mentioned till now, I have written about how the roots, the rural, the folk, and the preindustrial environment is maintained through community. Yet one of the byproducts of such a wraparound community is that it is maintained through lines of stratification. Such lines of stratification are visible in caste-based and normative gender–based forms of tradition. Such stratification is created through communal classifications and hierarchies. They allow for a division of labor that in turn allows the traditions to continue. Such divisions can easily be perceived as systemic problems. As might be apparent by now, these genres and many others in South Asia perpetuate caste-based training systems. Various subgenres of Nepal's *Bhairab Nach* is the ritual responsibility of *guthis*, or houses/clans from the community in Nepal. Given the system of intergenerational training, *guthi*- or caste-defined training allows artists to specialize in their art form. Yet, much like the disapproval or non-absorption of outsider gurus or teachers, closed caste-based systems of practice can be unyielding.

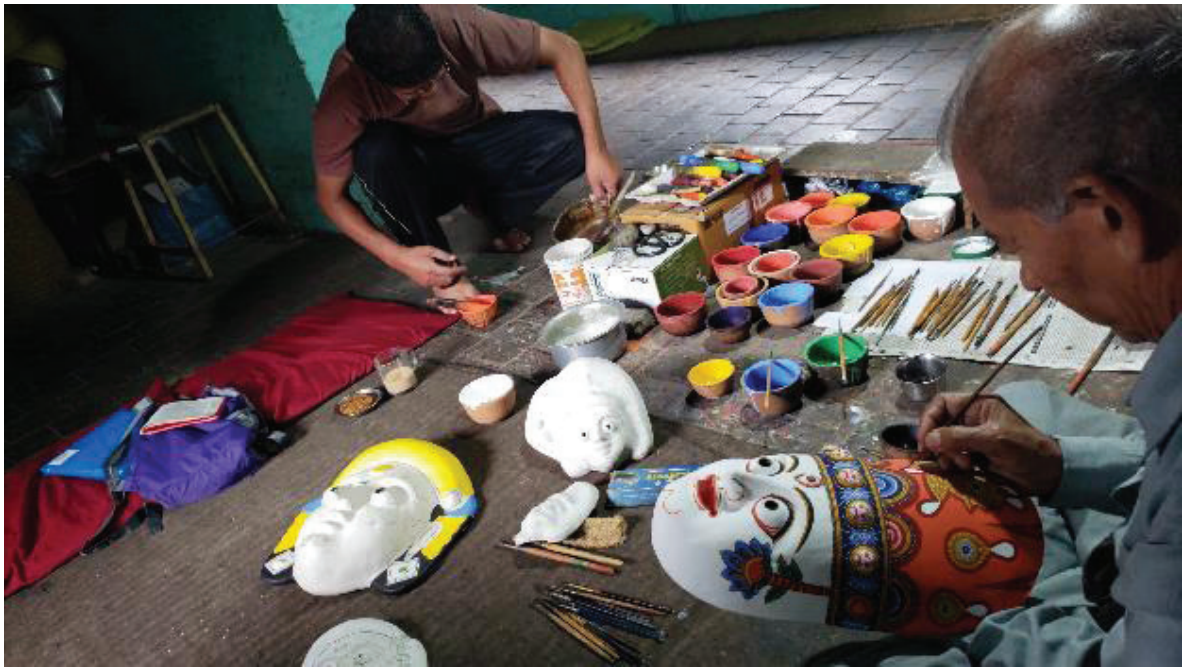


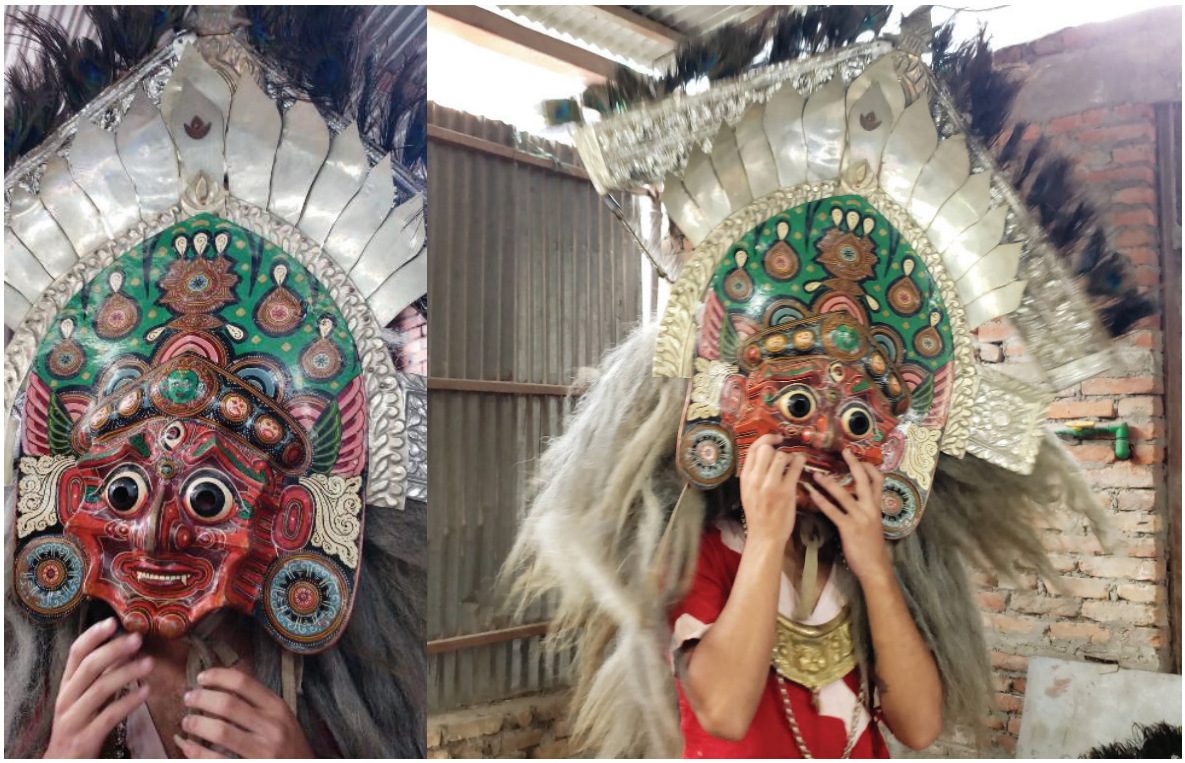
Figure 6: Goddess masks in progress, constructed by Purna Chitrakar and Rajesh Chitrakar. A smaller, unpainted decorative mask—non-ritual in use—is visible at the center. *(Photo by the author)*

Within these genres, there is a clear delineation between heteronormative male and female roles. Primarily it is the male members of the community who carry the traditions on, and female members remain less visible in public life. They take care of maintaining home and hearth. On occasion, I have seen women participate in the practices, but they are relegated to a secondary position. However, women are present as audience members in all the genres I have studied. While this could be seen as a negative aspect of these traditions, women by maintaining the boundaries of the tradition also help the male members practice, maintain, and specialize in the ritual performances. Mask makers in all the genres I have studied in India, Nepal, and Indonesia are primarily male members. Women do get involved in the costume-making (flexible textile-based parts of the costume) process. Through a gendered division of labor and resulting methods of gaining visibility, the genres maintain continuity. Yet through such maintenance systems, problematic aspects in the traditions can be perpetuated. Within such systems of maintenance, strong lines of knowledge acquisition, as well as boundaries for such acquisition, are clearly drawn out and are a given. In Nepal's Chitrakar community this may lead to extinction of the art form for their family. Purna Chitrakar has trained his son Rajesh Chitrakar. But when I asked Rajesh's son Sandesh (who in 2022 was in his late teens) he was not interested in continuing the family tradition. The other children are females and will not be allowed to continue. And in *Navadurga* tradition, even though sons-in-laws are male members they are not allowed access to the information. This is because of the purity of bloodlines and kinship ties that need to be maintained. Thus, the performance traditions can at times be insular in the flow of knowledge.

Proximity between Mask, Movement, and Music

Given the close-knit communities within which these performance genres are practiced and maintained, there is a very deep relationship between mask-making practices, movement that uses masks, and music that propels such movement. Often the artists are related to each other or are

distant relatives or neighbors. They are never outsiders in these genres in Nepal. This creates an atmosphere where it is easy for the masked dance and music to work in synchronization. A musical artist might practice his songs, drumming, or wind instruments on a regular basis. Similarly, a dancer might practice his steps daily. By being close to each other, they might decide to practice together. While practicing, a dancer may choose to use an easily accessible mask for an informal session. And given their familiarity with practicing their art form in open and inviting spaces, such mingling is possible and encouraged. The community-based system of sharing allows the different areas of the genres to work in tandem. Many times, the artists are trained in two or three different areas. Even though they may not excel in all areas, they have knowledge of the other areas. A mask maker may have been a dancer at one point in his life, while a singer could also be a drummer and a mask maker. Through such systems of borrowing, and sharing, ritual mask performances continue in their original locations. It is important to note that the learning process through such immersion is not that of a commercialized give-and-take system but rather is subtler. There is devotional, as well as artistic respect that ties these artists back to the origins. Another clear benefit of such a system is for the young learners. This system also allows youngsters the possibility to observe and experience embodied acquisition. A child can experience all three aspects—music, movement, and mask-making—and decide to specialize in one. Often young children are recruited to perform roles of child characters, and they pick up the character-specific details through observation and practice. Thus, children and new participants do not have the pressure to conform to only one area very early in their learning process. They have the flexibility to dabble in different areas, apprenticing in them, building interdisciplinary knowledge before committing themselves to one.



Figures 7 and 8: A finished *Bhairab Nach* Mahakali character mask in use. The performer is seen moving his neck to assess the fit and mobility of the mask before the performance. Dancers perform barefoot, occasionally wearing ankle bells for rhythmic accompaniment. *(Photo by the author)*

Triad of Efficacy, Entertainment, and Culture

These genres of performance operate on multiple valences. When performed during ritual cycles such as Dasain they provide opportunities for community engagement. They also serve as ready entertainment. Audience members who choose to attend the performances know of them through word of mouth, through predictable calendar cycles, and on occasion, through advertisements. They know such performances serve greater and/or imperceptible benefits to the locality and people. They also come simply because they are entertained by the exciting material aspects, bright costumes and props, lights, live music, and a community gathering. Even though the community is aware of other competing entertainment sources through TV, film, other media, and social media, actively consuming such entertainment at other times, they are aware that the ritual performances during specific times of the calendar allow a kind of local and social cohesion the other entertainments do not offer. This community cohesion aspect is a surplus to the efficacy of the rituals already discussed. People come together across generations, genders, and insider/outsider lines to simply take part in the activity. Sometimes tourists and urbanites are specifically invited to such performances, even though they are outsiders, and aware of the rich heritage aspect of these performances, join in.

Simultaneous to the issue of efficacy and entertainment runs the realization within the community that these genres are cultural treasures. UNESCO has recognized several masked dance genres of India and Indonesia as Intangible Cultural Heritage.[20] Nepal could pursue the same for Nepal Mandal's *Bhairab Nach* and *Navadurga* traditions. Nepal's performance genres have not been granted such status beyond space assigned as a UNESCO label 'heritage site'. Only the locations, the heritage cities of Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, and Patan in the Kathmandu valley are designated as a World Heritage Centre.[21] This does not mean a seamless, unified attempt at continuity has taken shape, but a general interest in the continuity of the genre has risen, even from resources outside the community provided by other funding agencies. While the way the practice is continued in the community does not change due to this status, it changes the way opportunities come to the artists, how many opportunities come, and the relevance of their life, art, and culture beyond their local confines. The educated and culturally inclined Nepali citizens are interested in investing more in tourism.[22] And tourism brings a lot of opportunities for *Bhairab Nach* artists. My interviewees Arbindra Prajapati and Padmodhar Prajapati both cited opportunities created by hotels and other tourist facing venues. Artists across South Asia and Indonesia are aware of the effect of tourism. Beyond the simplistic issues of livelihood, such status adds more responsibilities on them but they are simultaneously afforded more cultural and economic capital. Artists are constantly attempting to create new stories, new masks, and new costumes. In *Bhairab Nach*, the focus has been on stronger lines of continuity, smaller and portable masks for tourists and reaching larger audiences.

Here, it is worthwhile to ponder on how efficacy is established through masks and costumes in use here. While we discussed the potency of masks as seen in Navadurga displays and performances, as well in *Bhairab Nach* performance, their costumes also further the efficacy. There are several symbolic elements in the costumes that establish efficacy in *Bhairab Nach*. Typically, a dancer's costume includes a surplice style (tied and crossed over) blouse and a gored skirt with a wide circumference. The color of each costume is connected to the character they play. Black is for Bhairab, red for Mahakali, yellow for Brahmayani such that the mask color and the costume matches. The costumes are usually stock items for the troupe. New costumes are made as and when needed. Tantric scholar Saroj Shrestha explained that the four points where a shirt is tied are iconic of the four cardinal directions. The northeast direction is called Ishan,

Figures 9 and 10: Performers dressed in surplice-style tied shirts and voluminous circular skirts, elements characteristic of *Bhairab Nach* ritual costume. *(Photos by the author)*

southeast is Agni, northwest is Bayubya and the southwest is Nairitya. If there are two ties (there are some characters with two), it indicates the east and west. The back of the costume includes a swastika symbol, a sign of wellness in the spiritual Tantric system. Even though the ties on the tunic maybe not align with these directions, they are indicative of directions. There was not direct explanation for the skirt style. Skirt colors typically match the blouses. However, what was apparent was that the skirt facilitated movement in its wide, circular structure. Costumes are made by local tailors—many of them women—who have knowledge of clothing construction. These tailors also understand and include the *tantric* meanings in the costumes. I interviewed Ram Pyari Banamala who shared how she sets up a workshop in her home before festival season. Depending on the numbers required she can get help with her sewing. The stitchers are from the community and are practitioners of the faith. For the acquisition of materials either she or members of the troupe purchase the textiles. For costumes, the issue of maintenance of secrecy or codified knowledge is not as important as in the case of masks.

The act of putting on the mask and costume is significant for each performer and the performance. The process of putting on the mask also reinforces the efficacy of the objects---both for the user and for the audience-viewer-devotee. The mask proper, made by the Chitrakar, is quite large, fitting a male face with length about 10-12 inches. The metal plates of the halo are about 6-8" long. The decorative peacock feather trim is 3-4". The yak hair attached to the back is 24-40" long. When worn, the mask is 14-18" higher than the head, with the yak hair reaching down to the hip level or even to knee level in some characters. The masks are also quite heavy, weighing between 5-12 lbs. Once these items are put on, the mask is activated through vigorous movements and accompanied by loud and significant musical instruments such as gongs and drums (as seen in movement testing in Figure 8 and in the choral movement pattern in Figure 10)

In the most immediate sense, cultural capital from the ritual masked performances comes through tourism. Tourists may come from India, South Asia, and Global North countries or others with access to financial capital. This attention invariably provides income and exhibition opportunities. In addition to tourism, the artists are invited for mainstream performances in urban circuits. While this does not detach the performances from the roots, it affects the way the performances are perceived by tourists in the original locations. More visitors may know of such ritual performances and may assign more value to them. Thus, what was once a strictly efficacious or auspicious performance is now *also* understood as entertainment and a cultural product in the community. Yet there is a fine line. The community, when witnessing

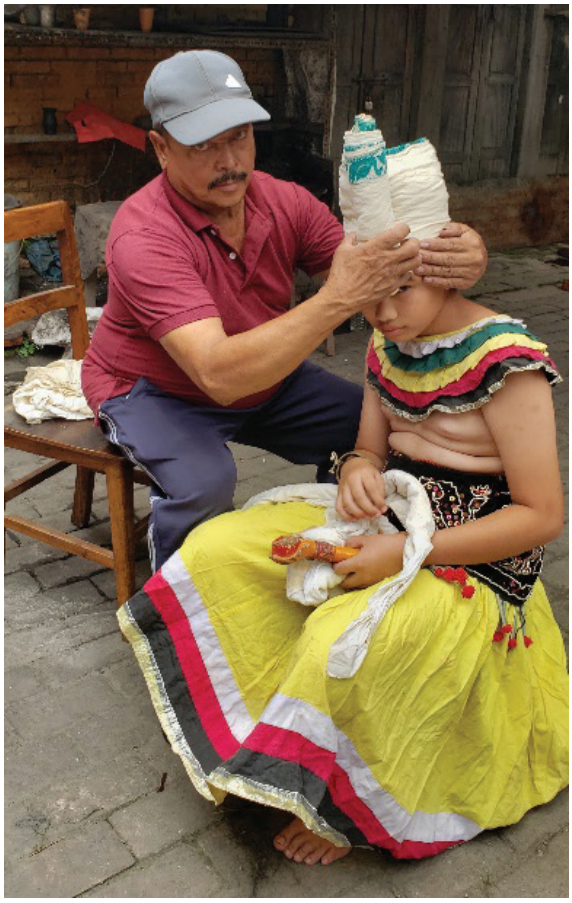


Figure 11: To ensure stability and comfort, performers wrap their heads in cotton padding before donning the mask. A padded chinstrap, tied from the chin to the crown of the head, provides additional support. This setup cushions the head, reducing bruising and allowing for vigorous movement, including jumps and twirls. *(Photo by the author)*

a *Bhairab Nach* performance in Bhaktapur, still regards it as an efficacious piece worthy of respect, yet the same is somewhat diluted if it is done in a hotel or a tourist-oriented space. Thus, the audience and the space/location play a major role in determining where within the efficacy, entertainment, and culture triad a particular performance is placed.

Through the aforementioned systems, the larger umbrella helps sustain these genres. The artists, audience, immediate community, outsiders, and institutions all play a part in the process of continuity. They also play a role in shaping the performance in the present and in the future. The community or the audience that supports the genres today may slowly withdraw tomorrow, or because of external added attention, the community might double down in its support. In the five genres I have studied across India, Nepal and Indonesia, touched upon here, the community maintains a portion of the support because of the ritual connections. The materials associated with the genres are also one way to assess how well (or not) the genres are supported. Once again, because of the ritual value, the materials have an elevated position. Most of these genres have thriving masked performances because the artists and the community are invested in continuing the ritual forms.

Conclusion

The characteristics of the masks and costume-apparel in *Bhairab Nach* and *Navadurga* both indicate a deep allegiance to tradition. This helps maintain the efficacious nature of the performance. *Navadurga*'s annual image/mask display at the Chitrakar home furthers this belief. The genre might be on the fringe of a greater ecosystem of performances in South Asia, but by anchoring on the idea of tradition, the artists command a significant role in the community through their artistry. The materiality of the performance—whether in the features of the masks and costumes, or the way the material is activated through ritual offerings including ritual dance-contributes to the efficacy. The artists in the community are not deterred by the lack of relative visibility compared to their similar counterpart genres in India or Indonesia. They do not tour extensively or are invited to festivals outside Nepal frequently. Rather, the community backs up the performances and the artistry with support and zeal. This enthusiasm is palpable in how the community comes together on festival events such as Dasain, provide support and offerings to the performance groups and take in their rituals. In a way, the community is the glue holds together the performances and are co-creators with the artists.

Through this detailed process of ritual image-making and image use we see in the work of the Chitrakars and Prajapatis, a world rich in visual religiosity is reaffirmed. This is not a surprise for South Asian traditions. Art historian Kajri Jain, focusing on art practice and consumption in India in her book *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (2007) describes such a world - steeped in images is self-evident. It is also a world where religion, art, and everyday life co-mingle (Jain 2007, 1-3). Jain's observation is that a plethora of popular art images is visible in the visual world of India that compete for attention (Ibid.). While Jain mostly talks about print images and is focused on India, unlike the focus here on handmade masks, both print and handmade ritual objects compete in the same visual landscape. Jain's observation can be extended to Nepal and the greater South Asian region, also noted for visually rich everyday life. Within such a space, the mask-makers discussed here, compete for as well as command artistic space. They do this by claiming their allegiance to the tradition and the genre in which they are trained. At times, they participate in the world of popular image-making. The Chitrakars make smaller *Navadurga* masks for sale. Some of these are purchased as full sets of masks, but occasionally they are purchased as singles. The Chitrakar's ritual imagery for households and portable masks for sale are such examples of popular items. By carefully pivoting from the rituals, the performances are repackaged for homes or as entertainment at hotels, stores, and tourist-facing spaces. In these settings, the dance or the mask gets detached from its original meaning, but for the artists, the intent remains the same. They repackage the genre knowing these products are appreciated, attracting a set of new devotees/appreciators. They cautiously veer from tradition only to such a degree that they can create popular demand, without disconnecting from the roots. In these instances, it is because of the rich materiality of the masks and costumes that the performances and masks continue to hold their value beyond their ritual and community-supported context. Thus, the artists have made the best use of the conditions, which on the surface may seem limiting, but have been pivoted to make them liberating.

Through this article's emphasis on artists who make one-off art pieces, within this image-laden world of South Asia, it becomes evident that such image-rich ritual worlds rendered through masked performances and decorative masks provide multisensory experiences for the devotee, connoisseur/consumer, and tourist. In *Bhairab Nach* and *Navadurga* the impetus has been on continuity, with mask makers working to sell their art products only occasionally. The community also invests in this continuity of performances. For example, in 2022 when I interviewed artists they had not performed for two years because of the pandemic. They looked forward to performing again and the community members were eager to support or sustain the ritual performances. The artists understand that the locals value these performances and artifacts for their ritual meanings. They also know outsiders and visitors value the objects and experiences as unique and culturally tethered, thereby recasting them as new audiences, consumers, and appreciators. They come to see these images, pray to these images, and consume these images. Some of this happens because of the traditional context of the genres. Yet because of continued artistic relevance, the artists can assert their place within the broader visual, performative, and artistic landscape. Within these genres, religion, art, performance, artistic tradition, and innovation converge. They help create polysensory experiences through movement, music, masks, and costumes for the devotee/audience/consumer. And despite growing popularity, knowing they shoulder the responsibility of continuing the tradition, the artists and community come together to build a rich and fulfilling experience through the performance and its rich visual imagery.

The following individuals generously shared their knowledge and experiences through interviews conducted as part of this research on *Bhairab Nach* between 2016 and 2024:

Padmodhar Prajapati (2016–2024);
Arbindra Prajapati (2020–2024);
Sthaneswar Timalsina (initial consultation, June 2022);
Saroj Shrestha (June 1–30, 2022); Amit Banamala (June 20–30, 2022);
Purna Chitrakar (June 20–30, 2022);
Rajesh Chitrakar (June 20–30, 2022);
Sandesh Chitrakar (June 20–30, 2022);
Lakshmi Sundar Prajapati (June 20–30, 2022);
Pasupati Prajapati (June 20–30, 2022);
Ram Pyari Banamala (June 20–30, 2022);
Nagendra Awal (June 20–30, 2023); Reetu Jyakhwa (June 20–30, 2023);
Prem Sundar Prajapati (June 20–30, 2022);
Kalpana Sintakalan (Kalindi Priya) (2020–2024);
Bimal Timalsina (June 20–30, 2022 and electronic);
Lakshmi Prasad Banamala (June 20–30, 2022).

Endnotes

1. Shubhash Ram Prajapati, The Masked Dances of Nepal Mandal, Madhyapur Art Council and UNESCO, Thimi, 2006; ethnography was conducted in 2022 that included over 50 interviews and 10 days of dance and artistic process observation funded through an University Grant. I have continued the research in a virtual format since then.

2. Bhaktapur is also called Thimi. Thimi is one part of Bhaktapur district.

3. For further study, I took the online course *Victory of the Goddess: Myth, Philosophy, and Ritual*, taught by religious studies scholar Sthaneswar Timalsina and offered by the Vimarsha Foundation. See Vimarsha Foundation, "Courses," accessed October 2, 2022, https://www.vimarshafoundation.org/courses.

4. Davis, Theatre of Nepal, 2-4; Davis suggests how the earliest oral storytellers were the Pyakha performers from the Gopali settlers. They may have come to the region roughly 5000 years back. They continue to perform Jhinhihri/Jhinjhari Pyakhan. The current Indra Jatra festival was established around 10th century CE by Licchavi rulers and continues to be seen in the Lakhe Pykahan now.

5. In consideration of Tantrism, Wedemyer finds its analysis deeply perplexing (Wedemeyer 2013).

6. Jyotindra Jain studying religious Indian art in circulation states the same (Jain 2007).

7. "Sakti" can also be spelled "Shakti" but I am using the spelling seen in other English texts. Similarly, Bhairab is referred to as Bhairava in some texts. Sakti worship is also seen termed as "Kula" or "Kaula" indicating ancestral worship.

8. Kinship in Nepali culture is believed to be through families but also culturally cemented around religion and wrapped around systems of care, community, and connection to land as discussed by Sienna Craig.

9. For more on tantric temples and Yogini iconography, see Vidya Dehejia's *Yogini Cult and Temples: A Tantric Tradition*.

10. UNESCO "World Heritage Convention" https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/121/, accessed 8/7/2023.

11. Gutschow and Basukala remind us of the deep religious connotation of every element of the Newar architecture that is visible in Bhaktapur.

12. Similarly, in Coburn's Devi Mahatmya's foreword, Daniel H.H. Ingalls asserts how the cult of the devi (goddess) occupies a subordinate position in South Asian religious practice. He believes the religiosity around devi enjoyed greater presence in pre-literate cultures and non-Aryan cultures.

13. On auspiciousness see Dehejia, The Body Adorned, 14.

14. Typically, the responsibility is on a male performer. Gender is discussed in detail in another section later.

15. In the unique pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, many children (and adults) also learned that the simpler and individual rituals had to be maintained rather than organizing larger congregational events. Through my interviews I learned that most of the artists looked forward to the post-pandemic life, not just because it promised grander artistic opportunities but also because it would offer a familiar repetition. In some instances, folk-ritual patachitra artists of eastern India created pandemic-centric new works.

16. Saroj Shrestha (tantric scholar), conversation with the author, June 24, 2022. According to local belief, there are ten forms of Bhairav with protective powers: Swet Bhairav (seen in performances), Aakash Bhairav (sky), Kaal Bhairav (time and death), Bagh Bhairav (menacing tiger), Pachali Bhairav (king or farmer), Unmatta Bhairav (guardian of Pashupatinath), Shaant Bhairav (protector of children), Batuk Bhairav (joyous), Kritimukh Bhairav (terrifying visage), and Hayagriva Bhairav (leader, ferocious). See also Online Khabar, "The Guardians of the Valley: 10 Bhairavs of Kathmandu Valley That Keep People Safe," Onlinekhabar (Nepal), September 23, 2024, https://english.onlinekhabar.com/different-forms-of-bhairav-kathmandu.html.

17. Birkenholtz reminds us how these spaces are a product of the locals elevating these spaces such that become significant for the community.

18. Navadurga mask making is an exception to this, in that it some parts of its making process needs to occur in secrecy, following the tenets of tantric practice. However, the masks are placed in full view during ceremonies as seen in Figure 2

19. Every youth interviewee of Bhairab Nach such as students of Lakshmi Sundar Prajapati and Pasupati Prajapati reported that they learned by observing the seniors, and then tried it themselves.

20. "Chhau Dance (India)," UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists, https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/chhau-dance-00337, accessed August 2, 2024; "Three Genres of Traditional Dance in Bali," UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists, https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/three-genres-of-traditional-dance-in-bali-00617, accessed August 2, 2024.

21. "Kathmandu Valley," https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/121/. Accessed August 21, 2023.

22. My interpreter Arbindra Prajapati and his wife both work for Nepal Airlines. He has often shared with me how Nepal Airlines creates targeted ad campaigns that feature traditional genres, such as Bhairab Nach, to gain more tourism-related visibility. My other informant, Padmodhar Prajapati, narrated the opportunities for performing ritual dance they got from hotels in Kathmandu and other tourist-facing organizations.

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