

Publics Of Heritage And Domestic Archives Among The Nepali Middle Class

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In an article in *Himal* entitled 'Gods in Exile', Kanak Mani Dixit (1999) demands the return of hundreds of religious icons and statues of gods and goddesses from foreigners who have bought or stolen this cultural property from Nepal. Dixit questions the motives and agendas of a Western collector seeking authenticity through exotic objects that are far away and still in use. But he also lambasts what he calls 'the cultural elite' in Kathmandu for their participation, or passive collaboration, in the sale or theft of these objects. 'While the citizenry watched helplessly as the gods and goddesses went into foreign exile', he writes, 'the cultural elite looked the other way' (Dixit 1999: 9). Dixit, himself a member of the cultural elite and an upper-class media tycoon, highlights the recent significance of heritage and the preservation of cultural history throughout the Valley. This discourse has affected the way in which people talk about monuments, buildings, and other spaces marked as past in the city, as well as the way people think and talk about their own personal inheritance in their homes.

The theft and sale of statues, cultural icons, as well as texts and household items, increased especially after the 1980s when tourism became a dominant industry and the vast majority of Nepalis in the Valley became dependent on a cash economy.¹ The history of the movement of Nepali cultural property across Nepal's borders can be traced back to long before the dissolution of Rana rule in 1950. Such traffic in cultural heritage was no doubt a vital part of the small colonial presence in Nepal during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as it was in India, and certainly the interest in tracing cultural heritage in Nepal is clear in several accounts of colonial scholars (e.g. Hodgson 1874, Oldfield 1880). Dixit suggests that the disappearance of this cultural property is an effect of the crumbling importance of the Valley's communal institutions, and Kathmandu's

1 One might also argue that the significance of *retrieving* cultural statuary became all the more important precisely because of the growing tourism in the Kathmandu Valley.

encounter with a headlong modernity.

While many have bemoaned the loss of history in Nepal's confrontation with modernity, as in other places this sense of loss is what characterises modernity, particularly in the past two decades of democratic reform. In this moment, history has become a more centrally debated subject in the public sphere, and public urban spaces have become increasingly marked as relics or traces of the past. Ethnographers, political scientists, and cultural historians writing since the 1990 *jan andolan* have stressed the significance of this political transition for enabling new narratives of history. With new narratives of the cultural past, new political and cultural identities rise to the surface of social consciousness; and vice versa: new political and cultural identities require new narratives of the cultural past (Lawoti 2007, Tamang 2008, Des Chene 1996, Hangen 2009). It is no surprise that during the 1990s many in Kathmandu began to write, rewrite, and preserve traces of their cultural or national heritage and their personal history in a variety of ways.

Scholarly attention has been paid primarily to the political stakes raised by emerging social groups and reform movements, and the narrative contexts of their attempts to change the state. Here I take a different approach. What does it mean to become part of a public? And how do public discourses that circulate around people influence their understanding of their possessions, their inheritance, and personal selves within a social world? How can we begin to think about the effect of the growing public sphere² on people's personal projects, particularly the growing importance of and desire to be recognised within publics in which they may not be active, contributing participants or listeners? Each of the stories I explore here engages with the question of how public discourses of history and heritage may, unwittingly and indirectly, affect individuals who are not directly a part of that public.

The people I discuss here are not scholars, members of the elite literati, or political activists. Their efforts at preservation are more closely connected to their homes, while the narratives about these objects, books, and houses stretch out beyond the limits of their family to an imagined

2 I am relying on Habermas' definition of a public sphere as a space of engagement (in his terms, a space of rational debate) between actors who debate political and social issues outside the domain of the state, ideally to keep a check on political power (Habermas 1989).

public. Their reflections on the possible history that may be carried in their inherited objects relate to much longer histories: Newar Buddhism, the history of public education, and the significance of printed books for gaining knowledge, in contrast to religious palmleaf manuscripts used for ritual purposes. During the time of this research, the value of the past was actively promoted through several intersecting institutions or industries: the boom in the heritage industry associated with UNESCO (which set up offices in Kathmandu in 1998), the discourse of heritage and its tangibility (in regions and specific homes) associated with the new politics of the *janajatis*, and the market for antiques or old things. The fact that the practices and discourses of such institutions were a vital part of the public sphere—in newspaper debates, TV serials, magazine articles, and popular culture—meant that people who were not active in these projects could draw upon and transform their messages to suit their own purposes.

This essay is based on research that was conducted primarily during the mid-1990s, and so it represents a specific moment during which personal and national history was being reevaluated after *jan andolan I*. In more recent years, the re-evaluation of the past has only accelerated with the growth of the *adivasi janajati* movements to create a federalist state based around ethnicity. While the Nepalis I describe do not discuss their projects in clearly political terms, their desire to preserve a specific ethnic or familial past that can be projected as a part of national history may be used to tell a political story. The demise of a strong state-sanctioned version of national history may be, for instance, the other side of why a new constitution has been so difficult to write.³ The ethnographic examples I present below provide a small window into these broader questions about reimagining pasts. The broader aim of the paper is to show precisely *how* the discourse of history is appropriated by people: what linguistic strategies they use, what objects they choose to call history, and what sentiments are simultaneously invoked—to imagine that possibilities in their personal or familial pasts might one day be recognised by others as history.

Consider the following more recent examples that can be found easily in the Nepali press:

3 I thank Sanjib Baruah for clarifying this point.

1. Upendra Shakya, along with many other Kathmandu residents (including an Austrian and US expat), restores vintage motorbikes from the 1950s-60s.⁴ An article, written for 'The Week' section of *Republica*, quotes Shakya saying 'I feel like I own a bit of history'. Another vintage bike owner, who inherited several bikes from his grandfather, notes his sadness at 'the sight of a lot of old bikes gathering dust and mold in garages'. The discourse of history expresses people's sentimental attachment to these objects with personal and familial value (cf. Miller 2008). It also suggests an implicit association with foreigners, some of who came to Nepal aboard vintage motorcycles in the 1960s-70s. The government has apparently capitalised on the sentimental and aesthetic value of the old by imposing an additional tax on such vintage vehicles.
2. An article entitled, 'A walk into heritage'⁵ (ESC Nepal, November 2011), describes the wish for contemporary *bahals* (residential areas organised around a courtyard) to be recognised as valid tourist sites, 'places where the past lingers'. The article describes the wish of a former ambassador to the EU, Durgesh Man Singh, to revitalise *bahals* because they are 'glimpses into history' and they could provide tourists with 'daily performances of culture and tradition' (ibid).
3. Publications produced by *adivasi janajati* organisations frequently publish revisions of history as a part of their political message (Hangen 2005, Tamang 2008, Onta 2011a). The prominent boycott of Dasain, beginning in the early 1990s and reaching a peak in 2002, became an important debate in several *adivasi janajati* magazines (Hangen 2005, Onta 2011a). As Hangen argues, of central importance in these debates is the question of the 'true history of Nepal'. In their revisions of history, they seek to overturn ritual practices like Dasain and ritual markers, like *tika*, that they claim celebrate the Hindu oppression of *adivasi janajati* groups (Hangen 2005). Such revisions of history have become an

4 Katry, Cilla and Asmita Manandhar. 'Vintage and Retro Rides'. *Republica*, http://archives.myrepublica.com/2012/portal/?action=news_details&news_id=38777, November 25, 2011.

5 Bisht, Kapil. 'A Walk Into the Heritage'. *ECS Nepal*. http://www.ecs.com.np/feature_detail.php?f_id=509, October 31, 2011.

increasingly prominent public means by which various ethnic groups make claims of indigeneity to specific regions of the country and challenge dominant state narratives. Even those who are not part of the *janajati* movements have heard the claims of indigeneity that have become a vital part of the public sphere.

These examples illustrate some of the major and not at all surprising aspects of intersecting discourses about history in contemporary Nepal. As an aspect of the heritage industry, the value of the old is clearly a globalised phenomenon, integrally tied to the way outsiders and tourists view the nation (Herzfeld 2009, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Bruner 2004). As Herzfeld points out, ‘the worldwide celebration of “heritage” [produces the] curious irony that local distinctiveness has now become a generic good’ (Herzfeld 2009: 305). Yet the value of the past is not, of course, limited to the global significance of heritage within the tourist industry or UNESCO, nor is the global product of heritage the same across the globe, as Herzfeld points out. Example three suggests that public discussion of history is also obviously a national project; it has become a hotly contested subject central to the changes various Nepali political groups envision in the identity of the nation and the state.

E. Valentine Daniel has distinguished between the relatively ontological being of heritage, in which the past is an active component of the present, and the epistemological seeing of history (Daniel 1996). With history, questions about knowledge—what there is to know and how we know what we know—are central.⁶ Yet, as Anar Parikh (2012) shows, history and heritage are often intertwined among heritage activists in Mumbai and Anamagar, and the same is true in Kathmandu. Heritage activists tout their knowledge about the past as much as the material evidence supporting that knowledge. The idea of history, I argue below, often relates to aspects of heritage that are given value by the market or by international forces like UNESCO.

Such discourses of heritage are of a very public nature and they circulate widely, sometimes among unintended and unaddressed audiences. Public discourses are defined by circulation that cannot be controlled or

6 As Chakrabarty points out, this distanced stance of the seeing historian is only made possible by the existence of what appears to be its opposite: ‘anachonism is regarded as the hallmark of such a [historical] consciousness’ (Charkrabarty 2000: 238).

fully known by the producers of public meaning. Publics hail people into their discourses, constituting that audience into a mass subject (a public) whose members may share very little with each other except their attention to similar public discourse (Warner 2002, Cody 2011). Public and often global discourses about preserving national heritage and the cultural value of the past, I suggest, provide a language for those not directly involved with such projects to think and talk about their own family inheritances and their own personal pasts. The cultural significance of these different memory projects extends beyond the individual actively working in the political field, or the world of Nepali scholars, or in any of the institutional organisations mobilised in the heritage project. They are part of a broadly shared sensibility about the cultural past, a structure of feeling that characterises post-democratic and newly secular Nepal.

Heritage Lost: UNESCO, Preservation, and Markets

The sentiments expressed in Dixit's article quoted at the beginning of this article echo a much broader fear about the loss of cultural heritage among many contemporary residents in Kathmandu.⁷ Unlike the industrialising England of which Raymond Williams writes in *The Country and the City*, the romance of a rural way of life is not the primary object of urban nostalgia (Williams 1973). Instead, upper-class Nepalis like Dixit focus their attention on the loss of cultural objects, statues, icons and buildings—all visual and physical signs of the city's decay. Connected to this urge to retrieve cultural property is the recent surge since the mid-1980s in restoration and conservation projects of temples, buildings, and monuments throughout the Valley, all of which are supported by international organisations.

UNESCO is one of the main institutions to promote cultural heritage,

7 The interest in preserving artifacts and revising cultural and national histories of Nepal dates back to long before the contemporary moment—religious temples and statues are constantly being restored and repaired, and these acts of preservation are engrained in the very use of these spaces as religious sites (Owens 2002). While family-based restoration of small temples has been going on for centuries, at least since the 1970s the large-scale restorations of temples have been almost entirely dependant on Western aid funding. In addition to temple restoration, historians during the 1940s and especially after the dissolution of Rana rule in 1951, engaged in a nationalist project to revise and amend Nepali history by looking at temple manuscripts, in order to 'rejuvenate our own ancient knowledge' (Pant 2002: 7, cited in Onta 2011b: 6).

and the Nepali government's efforts in promoting the Kathmandu Valley as an attractive tourist destination (see Owens 2002 on the reinvention of Swayambhu stupa as a world heritage zone and Hausner 2007 on Pashupati temple also becoming a world heritage zone). The history of UNESCO projects in Nepal sheds light on the way Nepali heritage or history has been influenced in part by broader global agendas. UNESCO's first major project in Nepal was the Hanuman Dhoka Conservation Project, undertaken in 1972 to coincide with King Birendra's coronation (Bajracharya et al. 1993: 44). In 1979, UNESCO designated the Kathmandu Valley as a World Heritage Site and established an office in Kathmandu in 1998 (Owens 2002). UNESCO helped to establish the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, based in the US, which is one of the most active organisations financing the restoration or rebuilding of numerous buildings, temples, houses, and the other palaces throughout the Kathmandu Valley.

UNESCO's global project to preserve cultural heritage may be seen as part of an overall imperial strategy to signify certain objects, buildings, and people as exceptional examples of tradition or heritage (Collins 2008). As John Collins has argued, UNESCO has given heritage a redemptive power that animates both meanings of the word 'exception' —those things and people which are marked as noteworthy as heritage are extraordinary examples of the very essence of cultural tradition and, simultaneously, they are often excluded from the centre of national planning. Heritage is, writes Collins, 'a technique employed by nation-states and transnational organisations to lift objects out of impoverished contexts and burnish them so that all members of society may make out some shared, if factitious, basis of belonging' (Collins 2008: 297). Collins' argument focuses on people who have been tagged by UNESCO as the 'symbolic ancestors' of Brazil, and who themselves now claim that they are a 'form of patrimony, or possessions of the nation' (Collins 2008: 282).

The redemptive value of heritage that Collins identifies may go beyond those particular buildings, objects or people specifically marked by UNESCO. There is a broader structure of feeling about the city's cultural heritage, as Dixit's article suggests, that touches people beyond those directly involved in heritage projects. Heritage is linked to ideas of patrimony, or material items of the past that are passed down to future generations. Ideas of heritage have links to domestic inheritance practices, and therefore the growing interest in heritage promoted by agencies like

UNESCO provides a language for Nepalis to discuss and dispute their familial inheritance.

The booming heritage industry in the Kathmandu Valley—which works closely and in tandem with the tourist industry—clearly often serves as a source of cash. Consider the story of Manoj Shrestha,⁸ a middle-aged man from the center of Patan, who considers himself Hindu and whose family is part of the merchant caste of Newars. In 1998, I met with Manoj Shrestha, who told me about a dispute he had with his brother several years ago as they were dividing their *angsa* property (ancestral birth-right property). The conflict centred around the importance of cultural heritage. His brother wished to knock down his inherited portion of their 18th century home in order to build a new concrete home. ‘This would be destroying our own culture!’ Manoj exclaimed. He used the English word ‘culture’, which is frequently invoked by those working in the heritage industry, suggesting a view of culture promoted by agencies like UNESCO that is materialised in physical objects or buildings. It is unclear exactly when this dispute took place, but it is worth noting that a portion of his house had been renovated by an American architect, who no doubt had many conversations with Manoj about the historic and cultural value of his house, during 1995–96. Manoj took his case to the Department of Archaeology, and through their work (*uniharuko kam*)—the details of which he left extremely vague—he was able to prevent his brother from executing his plan. In 1997, the house was designated as a house worth preserving by the GTZ Urban Development through Local Efforts (UDLE), and soon gained support for restoration through the Department of Archaeology and UNESCO. According to Manoj, when I spoke with him in 1998, UNESCO proposed to rent the house on a long-term lease and turn the house into a guesthouse providing bed and breakfast.⁹ Manoj laughed as he told me this. ‘More than the Nepalis, the foreigners will be happy about this! One day this house will become a museum!’ he

8 I follow the accepted anthropological convention of using pseudonyms for all the people represented in this essay.

9 In 1976, UNESCO described one of the fundamental principles of the organisation as being that ‘cultural property is a basic element in a people’s identity’ and ‘a deprivation of possession which is a deprivation of being’. Ironically, as Herzfeld has pointed out, heritage ‘too often...entails the destruction of local society in the name of preservation’ (Herzfeld 2008: 310). In this case, Manoj was a beneficiary of the UNESCO plan. More research is needed to determine who, if anyone, suffered in this transaction.

chuckled, suggesting his own awkwardness around this proposal. Manoj seemed reasonably happy to enter into this contract (at the time, Manoj said they initially offered him 2.8 million rupees), though he had not made his final decision. If he agreed, he told me, he too could build an enormous concrete house with the money like his brother.¹⁰

In 2006, eight years after our initial conversation, the Shrestha house opened as a traditional bed and breakfast inn with Manoj and his wife as the innkeepers.¹¹ It is one of several homes in the Valley that have been targeted as ideal houses for restoration and the promotion of tourism (Dixit 2006). That one's own house could become an abstracted display of a Nepali (or Newar) home has profound implications for how people like Manoj imagine their family history in connection to the nation. When a house becomes a museum, as Manoj once called it, inherited property is no longer simply a means of generating familial affections and memory, but it also becomes a potential icon of national history. Being a Newar house that is advertised as exemplifying the traditional lifestyle of the Kathmandu Valley, it perhaps unwittingly participates in some of the most heated political debates about the Valley's true indigenous inhabitants being Newars. The tension is also between elite Nepali engineers and architects, who are actively pursuing a reconstruction of the city, and middle or lower-class Nepalis whose houses and objects are the sites of their desire.

Manoj's ambivalent wish (at the time) to turn his house over to UNESCO also resonates with the increasing symbolic significance of *angsa* or ancestral property that became a subject of public debate in the mid-1990s. *Angsa* is less a resource on which people depend to live and more a statement of *how* one lives (Kunreuther 2009; Karpowitz 1998). *Not* dividing one's family's *angsa* is a sign of familial harmony that accumulates over the years, and this has become an important form of symbolic capital among today's urban middle class residents. The symbolic significance of *angsa* exists alongside the wish to live one's life separate from one's

10 A small but growing number of Kathmandu Nepalis have turned to rebuilding their homes in what they refer to as 'old style', adorning a new concrete home with fixtures like old wooden Nepali windows, most of which are newly constructed. This is most evident, not surprisingly, in areas like Patan where more old buildings are still standing and where the heritage industry is most active.

11 More research is needed to determine the specific process and contractual relation that supported this transformation.

brothers and to declare one's independence from the more restrictive aspects of genealogical ties. When a house can become a museum, this form of symbolic capital is taken to its extreme: no longer would the *angsa* simply be a sign of familial prestige, but it would condense the family's genealogy into a sign of national and cultural heritage. When a house becomes a national icon of heritage it transforms the private property of a family into a public symbol and evidence of a broader historical narrative. '...[T]his house not only belongs to the "Shrestha family"', they advertise on the website to the inn, 'but also to all "Heritage lovers"'.

Curio shops and houses: the sale and display of Heritage

The tide of conservation and restoration projects ebbs and flows with a growing contraband market for Nepali household items, sold to wealthy Nepalis and foreigners as authentic traces of a Nepali past. The logic of the heritage industry works, then, not only through the preservation or conservation of buildings, temples, and houses. It also sustains a market of Nepali household items in curio shops that have proliferated with the preservation projects over the past twenty-five years. The sentimental significance of inherited possessions is often compared to the potential price of the objects in these shops. The common rhetoric of historical or cultural significance used in the heritage industry has been given another accent by people who are not directly involved in this industry.

When I visited Nepalis in the *bahals* of Patan, frequently an Indian merchant would arrive in the inner courtyards with a large wicker basket slung over his shoulder that he would set down and begin shouting in Nepali, 'Old things! old things!' (*purano chij, purano chij*). This was an invitation to sell any household items the residents might have in their homes: preferably, the merchant told them, objects from one or two generations back. People knew that once these artifacts were sold, the objects suddenly became valued as antique or simply old. Through contact with these merchants and by traversing public discourses of preservation, objects from one's family inheritance become items that could be lost to the market or marked as antique; they are an ambivalent sign of one's own wants and the desires of others.

Instead of emphasising the cultural or historical significance of public buildings, their own inherited objects become the means to possess what many Nepalis often referred to as 'history' (in English; in its Nepali

equivalent, *itihās*; or in the Nepali word for culture, *sanskṛiti*). History (*itihās*) usually refers to interpretations of events, an accurate portrayal of facts. As a popular discourse among many Nepalis, though, the discourse of history (*itihās*)—and its association with cultural heritage—is often used as a more general term to discuss objects, artifacts and buildings that have recently acquired cultural significance and that people often fear have been or will be lost. The public discourse of history has become a way to discuss inherited objects that one could potentially sell, or objects that one could choose deliberately not to sell. By withholding such objects from the market, a person's familial inheritance becomes not only a material trace of their own genealogy, but also, as they describe it, a relic in their possession that carries national and cultural history.

Many farmers and members of the emerging Nepali middle class I knew would regularly sell items from their homes to pay for a wedding or for house repairs. These items would then be carried to one of the many curio shops that were filled with bronze bowls, pots, dishes, lanterns, and wine and water jugs. Nepalis use these same shops to trade in their old bowls, dishes, and kitchenware for newer, more sturdy kitchen items, exchanging the weight of the metal for another item of the same weight. With the current emphasis placed on craft by those in the heritage industry, the goods are now distinguished not only by the weight of the metal, but also by the object's age and aesthetic value. It is precisely because these household objects have become aesthetic objects that they help cultivate sentiments for history among Nepalis who sell their items as well as among those who collect. This transformation traces the 'cultural biography of things' (Kopytoff 1986), as objects move from one regime of value to another, endowed with the added significance of history.

Sunita Sakya is a middle-aged woman from the highest Newar priestly caste. She lives in a *bahal* in the middle of Patan that has recently been designated by UNESCO as a site worthy of preservation. Once, Sunita told me, she sold some large keys to one of the travelling merchants who frequently traversed through her *bahal*. She was not particularly disturbed by the sale: 'the keys no longer worked in the door anyway', she said. In many ways, she did not think of these keys as her own. They were items stored in her husband's house from long ago, and items to which she, even as a full member of the house, remained somewhat unconnected. But the sale did give her a keen awareness of the traffic of things that

she partially facilitated. 'Now those things are so expensive they never can be brought home', she told me. With sardonic humour, she chuckled, 'Nepali people don't have the chance to travel. Only our things can travel and see the world'. Sometimes she asked me if the houses in the United States were filled with these Nepali items, or how many museums held items like her keys.

Sunita's keen awareness of the changed social life of such objects became all the more clear after visiting a Newar friend of hers who had married an American. Usually, the world of the sellers from *bahals* of Patan and the world of the foreign or elite buyers do not intersect within the space of either of their homes. There are rare occasions when they do meet, like this one, and these moments reveal social tensions which are materialised in the changed meanings of such objects. Sunita remembered the visit by recalling the display of household items that were sold in curio shops:

I walked into the room and I was amazed by two things. First, there were all sorts of old Nepali things, Nepali pots, wine vessels, bowls, puja items, a Newari window all along the walls, all laid out to see. Things that we would put under the bed, too old to use. The other thing was how clean the bathroom was—I couldn't even go, I might make it dirty!! I stayed in the room while she made me tea and I couldn't keep my eyes off these things. It was not yet a year since my mother had died, but I forgot. I took the milk-tea and drank the whole cup. I wasn't supposed to have milk for a whole year, but I forgot. Then when I got home, my throat closed up, I was sick and couldn't eat. *Dai* [her husband] asked me then, 'Did you drink milk in your tea?' Then I knew, I remembered. That's why I got sick. I had to stay in bed for three days to recover.

Sunita's surprised reaction had to do in part with a confrontation and recognition of her own hardly noticed habits and things: the old bowls and pots that she, like most other Nepalis of her class, kept under the bed or in a trunk. The display she confronted represents what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) would call the 'aristocratic aesthetic', which elevates everyday objects to the status of art. The pots, old Newar windows and bowls that Sunita saw on the wall of her friend's home placed a distance

in time and space between the owner's current life and Sunita's current life, as well as between the object's current display value and its past life of everyday usage. They were no longer the separate pots and bowls that might be brought out individually for a wedding or holiday feast. Rather, they presented an abstract image of Nepal and Nepali history, an aesthetic image of history or culture writ large. As Susan Stewart argues, the collection always works against history, precisely because of the decontextualised and personalised nature of the display (Stewart 1993). The narrative is no longer related to the particular history of an object; rather, it becomes a narrative of the owner's aesthetic sensibility and self. In this case, the display is more complicated because while it may erase traces of the object's use, it may also be valued as traces of the owner's past, a person who had in many fundamental ways severed her ties with Nepali and Newar communities.

To Sunita, these objects seem to be both an embarrassment and a potential source of pride. 'Why shouldn't Nepalis be doing this also? Making these old things look so nice?' she asked me rhetorically, despite the fact that the friend she visited is Nepali and Newar like herself. Sunita's confrontation with this display is a confrontation with the material inequalities—obscured through ideas of history and aesthetic taste—inherent in the efforts to preserve or display heritage. Unlike Dixit, who argued fiercely against the sale or theft of Nepali cultural objects, Sunita is not schooled in the cultural politics of buying and selling cultural property, though she knows the implications quite well. Her confrontation with these class differences is not at the level of an articulate class or third-world politics, but at the level of latent structures of feeling (Steedman 1987). Being arrested by the sight of things that resembled the household objects she simply pushed under the bed, Sunita told me that she momentarily forgot her own memorial practice.

The market for such household items is quite clearly linked to the growth of the heritage industry, as relayed to me by an owner of one of the curio shops in Bhaktapur. Foreigners as well as elite Nepalis involved in many of the conservation or preservation projects began to come to his shop in the late 1970s, he explained, and purchased everyday kitchen items that they described as well crafted or antique. He quickly learned that he could raise the price on such items, and soon hired a staff of Nepalis and Indians to search out such old things (*purano chij*) in people's houses.

‘They mainly look in the farming communities’, he said, referring to the lower- and lower-middle class areas of Patan and Bhaktapur. I turn now to the reflections of one of these farmers, Gyano Maharjan, who has begun to think of his household items and religious texts as tokens of history.

Domestic archives: inherited objects as tokens of history

Gyano Maharjan lives just outside the *bahal* where Sunita lives and is around the same age. He is from the caste of farmers, a group that maintains ritual and religious obligations to the Sakyas but are generally considered less strict and more open to innovations (see Gellner and Quigley 1995). When I first got to know Gyano in the mid-1990s, he lived in the family’s old brick-and-mud house, three storeys high, located just across from an old rice mill and adjacent to the Patan *bahal*. The second floor of the house was a neighbourhood gathering place to watch professional wrestling, American cops-and-robber films, and the Saturday Hindi film. Often when I met with Gyano, he was upstairs on the roof feeding his doves. ‘I’ve kept these doves for years’, Gyano told me, pointing to the chicken wire cages behind him. ‘They will never be eaten by a cat up here. I love them, care for them here’. He sprinkled some grains of corn on the bricks, where the doves pecked away. ‘I feed them, and I let them fly. But they always come back. They know where they are fed. They might fly away for a while, but they return. They know where they belong’.

Like many of his neighbours, he has sold some of his family’s possessions to the itinerant merchants in search of *purano chij* but, unlike many of the others I spoke to, he told me that he now regrets his decision to sell. In my conversation with Gyano, he elaborated what he felt was a shift in his own attitude toward his family’s possessions. The objects that Gyano discussed with me that day—jewellery, books, coins and other objects he had inherited from his parents—were parts of Gyano’s domestic archive that he discussed in terms of history rather than in the idiom of genealogy (*vansha*). He used both the English word ‘history’ and the Nepali word for written histories, *itihās*. His conversation wove between the things and people that fly away and then come back, some that are lost in the flight, and others that he now deliberately keeps to make certain they will always know where they belong.

I refer to the practical work of actively reimagining one’s past through objects, books or houses as the creation of domestic archives. Domestic

archives reveal a relationship between the personal, the home, and the state,¹² and they are a growing effect of a public heritage industry that often evades public or scholarly attention.¹³ In Nepal, the first archive for important documents of the state was called the *Jaishi Kotha*, or the room of the astrologers (Thapa 1967), thus suggesting a connection between collecting, the interpretation of the past, and the generation of possible futures. Astrologers are called upon to read into the future to determine what lies ahead and what actions should be taken in the present moment. As keepers of the archive, they also prescribe what documents should be kept for the future. The astrologers' social role as readers of the future—that is, their ability to determine fate—was directly connected to their literary skills. The government report describing the founding of this archive notes that 'in actual practice the word [*Jaishi Kotha*] denotes the writing chambers, and these came to be so-called because it was the astrologers, who, in consideration of their monopolistic literacy in the ancient days, were employed in the beginning as the writers and keepers of documents' (Thapa 1967). Their ability to perform these prophetic acts in the archive was based on their ability to write, and their knowledge of written texts.¹⁴

The popular urge among many like Gyano in Kathmandu to save traces of a personal, familial or cultural past illustrates what Jacques Derrida (1995) calls 'archive fever'. Archive fever refers not to the pulse or intensity of inscribing documents within an archival space; rather, the concept refers to the simultaneously reproductive and destructive forces

12 The notion of an archive is rooted in the law and the home. We describe texts in an archive as being *housed* there, and the Greek *arkheion* was the domestic residence of the rulers, as well as the place where their documents were stored (Derrida 1995: 2).

13 Domestic archives are not in themselves new phenomena in Nepal. Inheritance customs require that certain household objects, property documents, and written genealogies be kept and passed down between family members. In this sense, archiving in itself is not exclusively a modern practice, despite the necessity of state archives to produce modern stories of the nation (Stoler 2009). Yet the way that these archiving projects are conceived of now and the frequent search for these desired pasts in material evidence – buildings, vehicles, objects, documents, or other texts – is an aspect of modern historical consciousness in Nepal that brings together history and heritage (cf. Chakrabarty 2000: 239). It is a way of knowing the past that is closely linked to processes and practices of archiving, and imagining that documents and material traces of the past have important public and often national meaning in the contemporary moment.

14 For an intriguing comparative discussion of the prophetic nature of written history see Florida (1995). See also Ahearn (2001) for an analysis of the relationship between writing and agency in Nepal.

involved in *any* process of recording, documenting, storing or saving a body of knowledge and transmitting it through time. This observation is not new nor exclusive to Derrida; many have noted the dual processes of remembering and forgetting, saving and losing, entailed in any practice of archiving or preservation (e.g. Stoler 2010, Steedman 2002, Trouillot 1995, Burton 2005, Stewart 1993). It is clear that Derrida's use of the term 'archive' is not meant to be about actual archives; but rather, a metaphor for practices and desires to uncover or reveal in the origin of knowledge, ideas, texts, and things. The domestic archives that people create out of their inheritance exhibit a similar tension between possession and loss: between which inherited texts or objects will be deliberately held on to and which will be lost or sold.

As Gyano spoke to me about his domestic archive, he described objects he had once sold and what he claimed to be a relatively new attitude toward his family's possessions over the past few years that he linked to education and the knowledge that is required to recognise that something is of historical value. The most desired inheritance today, Gyano and others would repeat, is education and the skills required to earn a living.¹⁵ When Gyano was young, he decided to go to school, much against his parents' wishes. Entry into the world of national education, he told me, led him to sell one of the family's religious texts formerly used for ritual purposes.

Gyano curtly admonished the older generation for being steeped in a religious ideology that prevented them from *really knowing* the contents of this book. Having decided to go to school after he was twenty years old, he entered into a new relationship with books and the new communities that centered around these texts. The context for reading secular books in school was obviously quite different from the context of calling upon palm-leaf manuscripts to serve as esoteric symbols of ritual power. These differences in technology are paralleled by the different communities to which these texts relate. The religious palm-leaf texts that are kept within Newar homes are signs of belonging to caste-specific Newar communities. The printed books distributed at schools were part of forging a Nepali national community during the Panchayat years. With a bold stroke of

15 The emergence of personal earnings (*niji arjan*) as a legal category in the 1977 amendment was a result of the general shift towards middle-class families' increased dependence on earned income that required specific learned skills (Karpowitz 1998).

pride about his education, Gyano refused his grandfather's command to never open the puja books kept for religious purposes:

My grandfather used to do puja to this book. 'One should keep this one', he said. 'No one should open and see it', he said. We kept it, kept it, kept it ... But I (say), 'A book that one should not even open and see—is that really right?!' So I opened it and read it. I saw what was inside. And it was *very* good. 'I didn't even know that we had such a good book as this', I told someone. La!!

Their person found out and came (to my house). 'I'll give you 80,000 for this', (they said). Well after seeing that much money ... La, they bought it and went off with it.'

'So your father had not read what was inside either, had he?'

'No, he hadn't read it! He didn't know anything'.

'You, on your own...'

Gyano interrupted me:

I forcibly (*jabarjasti*) went out against my parents' wishes and studied [in school]. How many of my friends came and yelled, 'This must be studied/read'. Nowadays, it is pointless to live, if one has not studied. Everyone said this, so I also went to study.

Books were to be read, he learned in school, and implicitly the knowledge one gleaned from books was to generate money. By opening up these religious books, Gyano imputed another significance to the sacred object, and began imagining it as something that he might sell. As he reflected on that moment over thirty years ago, he regretted that he 'did not know' the value of these books—not as money, but as tokens of a more abstract notion of history. He regretted not listening to his grandfather's wish to keep the book—yet for a different reason than his grandfather ostensibly gave. Gyano viewed the sale of these books in terms of his own connection to a broader social history.

'No one knew', he tells me, as if there had a revelation some years back. 'No one knew anything about this...It did not mean anything then'.

‘There was no meaning?’ I ask, a bit perplexed. ‘And now there is meaning?’

‘Now, because there is meaning, now we don’t sell! That’s what I’m trying to tell you. ‘Why sell?’ people started saying. When I too found this out, I didn’t want to sell even one thing’.

‘How did you find out?’

‘Instead of selling, I put things in a trunk’.

‘When did you find out?’

‘It only lures (*lobh lagcha*) you. If one sells and sends away [such things], later our own history, one would not be able to see. I found that out... We couldn’t see our own *history* (*hamro afno *history* herna sakenaum*)’.

He remains deliberately vague about how or when he began thinking in this way, but it is easy to surmise that this desire emerged from the public discourse about history, heritage, and education that surrounded him: “‘Why sell?’ people started saying’, Gyano reports. Instead of selling he puts it in a trunk, creating his own domestic archive, his collection of treasured items that become tokens of his own history, evidence of a broader cultural past to which he belongs. Gyano’s description of peering inside the book bears a striking resemblance to his later desire to see history. In both cases, the emphasis on seeing is an apt metaphor for possession and for the knowledge from which Gyano and his family had been excluded. The religious texts that his grandfather told him to worship and to keep closed were signs of esoteric knowledge that remained inaccessible to them as members of the Maharjan caste. Opening up this forbidden source of knowledge is an act of possession that ironically leads to Gyano’s sale, or dispossession, of the religious text. Seeing, as E. Valentine Daniel (1996) suggests, best captures a way of relating to the world that places an emphasis on questions of knowledge: what there is to know and how one should know it. Here, seeing connects to an objective form of knowledge—such as history—that can be learned about through books. Unfortunately for Gyano, he only learned that he could see history *after* he had already sold the religious texts he peered into.

Gyano spoke about the objects that he saved in a trunk as items that he could potentially sell, but actively chose not to. His father’s collection of old coins of buffalo leather, clay, and silver, for instance, would fetch

quite a few rupees, but Gyano tells me forcefully: 'Even if someone came to buy these coins for a lot of money, I wouldn't sell even one!' We can almost hear Gyano's regret in this statement about having once sold texts that he now feels he should have kept for the sake of history. Paradoxically, while education is what leads him to feel this sense of regret, initially it was education that led him to peer into the forbidden texts and sell them, allowing the texts to circulate as commodities (rather than sacred objects) in the market. He told me about his mother's jewels, stored in a box below: 'Those jewels I need to keep, and do nothing with them. She bought them with her wishes (*icchale kineko*), so without doing anything to them I put them away. Later they will be nice to look at. Later they will become *history*'. By referring to the objects he inherited from his parents as tokens of *history*, he imputes a sentimental and broadly cultural significance to these personal items, projecting their meaning onto a wider social sphere. By referring to them as objects that he could sell, Gyano affirms both their personal and historical significance. Implicitly, it is also an assertion that he has no need to sell, a statement of his emerging middle class status.¹⁶

There are two different publics to which Gyano's self-declared novel interest in history can be linked. His attitude toward his inheritance is implicated in the broader state and internationally-funded heritage industry discussed above, institutionalised in organisations like UNESCO that emphasise the importance of saving cultural heritage in the form of material culture. Members of UNESCO had visited Gyano's *tol* several times and designated the temple inside the *bahal* as worthy of preservation. He also had contact with the discourse of preservation through his daughter who took a job with UDLE, one of the key organisations supporting the restoration of old homes.

His designation of the inherited objects from his parents as tokens of

16 While I do not discuss this here, Gyano's changed relation to his inheritance was quite likely also affected by the 1962-64 Land Reforms. Regmi suggests that socially and psychologically they were among the most profound reforms in the history of Nepal, especially for farmers, who found themselves catapulted into heavy dependence on cash (Regmi 1976). The Land Reforms were particularly difficult for farmers like Gyano's family, who had been servants or functionaries of the Rana government. Operating under a basic feudal system, they had received fields rather than a salary as compensation for work. Unlike Indian *jagirdars*, in Nepal there was no compensation for these fields. As Regmi writes, there was very little opposition from the *jagirdars* because they were 'too few and demoralized' to pose any real resistance (ibid.: 86).

history could also easily be understood in terms of the growing public discourse of (ethnic nationalist) organisations that proliferated in the 1990s, and Gyano's occasional participation in the *Maharjan Samiti* for members of his Newar farmer caste. The *Maharjan Samiti* was not considered by all to be a true *janajati* group.¹⁷ But like other *janajati* groups, they are similarly devoted to learning the history of this Newar farmer caste, gaining political access to resources they feel they have been denied and transmitting their discovered history to their children. 'A person born from the place of farmers should not leave these things', Gyano told me. 'Many times I said to my daughter, "We are from the farmer caste... Other work when compared to farming is a bit higher, this means nothing to us. Born from this earth, one must show how to work it, and to study, too". That's what I say (to her)'. Later, he clarified: 'One should *know* that [we] are farmers, but one does not have to do the work of farmers' (*kisan hau bhanera thaha-paunu parchha, tara kisan ko kam garnai parcha bhanne chaina*). Possession of knowledge about one's caste/ethnic identity requires possession of history and knowledge about one's past—a common motto in many *janajati* organisations as well as among global heritage organisations like UNESCO. Mary Des Chene quotes a banner held by members of a Tamu *janajati* organisation that succinctly states the agenda of many *janajatis* groups: 'If tradition is lost, knowledge will be lost. If knowledge is lost, culture will be lost. If culture is lost, the *jati* will be lost' (Des Chene 1996: 111). When this history has not been written or remains largely inaccessible, inherited objects and artifacts from one's family become possible sources for a future knowledge of this cultural and familial history.

In the public forums of magazines, speeches, songs, and historical tracts, *janajati* activists have taken up the task of writing their own histories (see Des Chene 1996, Fisher 1993, Gellner et al. 1997, Hangen 2009, Tamang 2008, Onta 2011a). But this popular and passionate engagement with history writing is not limited to those directly enmeshed in *janajati* politics at state level. One middle-aged man, Kiran, who lived in the same *bahal* community as Gyano and Sunita, spent the better part of two years collecting documents, making photocopies of foreign and Nepali histories, taking rubbings of temple inscriptions and compiling his own religious

17 Newars were of different minds about whether they should be considered *janajati* or not. See Gellner 1997. At this time, however, the public pull of the *janajati* movement was compelling to Newar farmers like Gyano.

texts and personal writings with which he planned to write a history of the *bahal*. Like Gyano, he was an occasional participant in the *Maharjan Samiti*. But his reasons for creating this history, he claimed, were not for the organisation, nor did he express a specifically national or global political agenda. Rather, he wished to teach the minority of Buddhist high caste Sakyas in his *bahal* and the surrounding area that the Maharjan farmers were in fact the original, indigenous (*adivasi*) inhabitants of the area. Using the relatively new and popular designation of *adivasi* that has gained traction among *janajatis*, many in this Newar farmer caste were (and still are) devoted to proving that they were the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. When I went to visit Kiran in his house, he showed me his domestic archive—an enormous green trunk filled with his collections of hundreds of pages of handwritten notebook paper that outlined his ordinary history. He refused to let me look at the documents until he had finished writing. While recent important scholarly work focuses on the political projects of these ethnic nationalist groups (Hangen 2009, Lawoti 2007, Onta 2011, Tamang 2008), the public *janajati* rhetoric has a force that potentially shapes people's thinking of their personal inheritance as a token of a broader history.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed different everyday events in which Kathmandu Valley residents express a desire to see history (*history hernu*) as an emerging way of being in the Valley. Using the English word for 'history', as Gyano (who otherwise speaks no English) does, suggests its entanglement with international interests that I have discussed above. But it is not a global agenda alone that has shaped the significance and meanings of the past in Nepal. I have suggested that these personal projects resonate with a broader structure of feeling, evident in the recent proliferation of revisionist histories published by ethnic minority organisations, especially after 1990. This structure of feeling is also part of the growing heritage industry, populated by a small but vocal group of middle-class Nepali architects who work in tandem with German or Austrian development/preservation projects.

The individuals I discussed in this article are all from Patan, and all are Newar. The urge to save traces of one's personal/familial past is not something specific to Newars, to Patan, or even to *janajatis*. Yet, given

the number of Newars in the capital region, they (and especially the buildings in which they live) do have a particularly prominent place within the heritage industry throughout the Kathmandu Valley. International global heritage activists like to assert the prominent place of Newars in the history of the Valley, and frequently describe the Kathmandu Valley as the ancient home of the Newars. These international projects dovetail with the local *janajati* movements that have sought to link ethnic groups with their proclaimed original territory. Though they are all Newars, the three individuals all occupy different social positions within broader Nepali (and Newar) society. Manoj is more solidly situated within the middle class in terms of education and access to global knowledge and resources, whereas Gyano and Sunita remain at the edge of middle class life. While Sunita is a Sakya woman from the highest Newar Buddhist priestly caste of scholars and religious experts, Gyano's parents were completely illiterate. He pursued an education much against his parents' wishes when he was twenty years old. In terms of caste, then, Gyano is considered somewhat lower in the hierarchy than Sunita. But, as a man, he has certain privileges unavailable to Sunita, most fundamentally the security of his place within his family home and inherited genealogy. While the feelings they express for the objects under discussion—inherited and dispossessed—are connected to their specific biographical trajectories, they are not only expressions of their autobiographical or narrative identities. Rather, they speak more broadly to the conflicts inherent in these overlapping social identities, and they are to some degree the products of the public discourses of heritage and cultural preservation that surround them.

The desired stories and objects of Sunita and Gyano suggest that ideas about heritage and history production itself shape the practices of saving, producing, and the circulation of objects and narratives through domestic archives. The making of domestic archives—by collecting objects inherited from one's parents as Gyanu does, by carefully displaying old objects in one's home as Sunita witnesses at her friend's home, or in restoration projects on one's home that follow UNESCO heritage ideas as Manoj does—all generate affective memories that conflate notions of the personal with notions of the historical. These objects, texts, jewels, coins and homes are felt to be profoundly precarious, and may or may not become the stuff of public history in the future. Inherited objects and texts become a way for

non-political, emerging middle-class participants to imagine their own lives as part of a social history that either has not yet been written, or one in which they are not represented but imagine that they may one day claim as their own.

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