

## Chapter 4

# THE WORK OF MENDING: HOW PHARPING PEOPLE MANAGE AN EXCLUSIVIST RESPONSE TO THE PROCESSION OF VAJRAYOGINĪ

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The ancient Newar<sup>2</sup> Buddhist deity Vajrayoginī has four distinct shrines at the corners of the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. The two at the southwest and northeast corners, Pharping and Śaṅkhu, are the most significant. In this chapter I will consider how the communities of Pharping recognize and cope with the non-participation by Tibetans in the annual procession of Vajrayoginī. The material gathered here offers concrete evidence of the effort required to sustain an inclusivist understanding of religious boundaries when one economically powerful group within a community insists on an exclusivist understanding. This discussion will of necessity refer to key prior studies, in particular Gellner's substantial work on Newar Buddhism (1993) and Shrestha's monograph on Śaṅkhu (2002).

In my own article on the implicit intercommunal collaboration in the ritual life of the major Newar deity Būgadyaḥ (Tuladhar-Douglas 2005) I argued that Newars engage in what we might call "tacit collaboration" insofar as specific social processes requiring intentional activity, such as the formation of secret cults and the application of secrecy, allow different segments of the same society to apply several different names to a single shrine image without generating conflict. I further argued that in a society where the patrons for a particular shrine might well change their official religious affiliation, it was a good strategy for the priests to facilitate practices ensuring flexible patronage for their shrine. This makes sense in a society, such as the Newar, where there are plural sectarian identities and where the maintenance of an overt sectarian identity is only undertaken by members of a few caste groups (such as priests), while the majority of people prefer to avoid the inflexibility and work involved in taking sides.<sup>3</sup>

The Buddhist priests in charge of Būgadyaḥ accept that Śaiva priests, sent by the Hindu king to manage the procession, believe that Būgadyaḥ is actually a particular Śaiva saint, while knowing that this is only a provisional identity maintained by the deity for the sake of non-Buddhists. Moreover, even among Buddhists there are public, private, and secret (i.e., tantric) names for Būgadyaḥ. Each name carries an

iconographic programme that may not be at all apparent from the external image. There are several secret names used by different groups in distinct worship rituals and all have distinct iconographies and associated rituals, while each is hermetically sealed off from other groups by regimes of secrecy. This muted multivocality is a specific, and rather stark, instance of a general feature of Indic shrine images, not apparent from written sources, which might be termed “polyonymy.”

The purpose of my earlier article was to show that a single shrine image, even if it has a “main” sectarian name, can easily acquire several other sectarian names while its identity is in no way reducible to any one of those names. This plurality is only possible because worshippers collude in ignoring potentially divisive behavior at the site. Here however I am concerned with a complementary process. I want to show how townsfolk assert and, if necessary, repair an understanding that all religious acts in that place should work in this manner. In trying to understand this I will call upon Michael Carrither’s notion of polytropy (Carrithers 2000) and will focus on a number of small local shrines that resist sectarian labeling.

### About Pharping

Pharping is an ancient Newar city-state, now a town, that has several distinct communities. Informants around the bus park identify three of them readily: the Newari-speaking Newars, the Nepali-speaking Bahun-Chetris, and the Untouchables. Whereas the Bahun-Chetris are high caste and the Untouchables belong to low-caste groups such as the tailors and butchers, the Newars are divided into numerous caste groups (*thar*). A Newar informant will not identify Newars as a group but will instead list the major Newar *thar*: *Maharjan*, *Bālāmī*, *Śreṣṭha*, and *Mānandhar*, followed by the smaller Newar *thar*. Newars, who are said to be indigenous and were politically dominant prior to the consolidation of the Nepalese monarchy, make up more than half the population of the town. As we shall see, the ritual geography and processes that constitute Pharping are still Newar and render the town comparable to other Newar urban centers such as Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, or Śaṅkhu.

As with any other Newar town, Pharping’s town plan is integral to its ritual life.<sup>4</sup> Shrines to the Eight Mothers<sup>5</sup> mark the entrance and exit of the old trade road,<sup>6</sup> a building with no other ritual use in the center of the town is still named as being the residence of the centuries-absent Newar king, and the main calendrical processions follow a specific route traversing each of the town’s seven squares (*toḷs*). These squares create local identity both of, and within, Pharping. A woman going to do her morning *pūjās* (ritual offerings) visits the *ṭol Ganeśa* (shrine to Ganesh) or other shrines of her family’s *ṭol*; a newborn child is taken to see that same Ganeśa on its first voyage out of the house; and football teams from the older parts of the town that have *ṭols* all take their names from those *ṭols*. Belonging to a *ṭol* is the key of belonging to Pharping. The historical stratigraphy of the town is neatly expressed by the clustering of low-caste families around the *Poḍe Ṭol*, named for

the untouchable Newar Sweepers. *Poḍe Tol* has large houses built by wealthy low-caste families, both Newar and Parbatiya (Poḍe, Kāmi, Sarki) as well as some newer Mānandhars (a Newar caste usually located just below the Maharjans) who have expanded from an older cluster of Mānandhar households around the next *tol* uphill.<sup>7</sup>

There are a few villages populated by Tamang speakers (a rural Tibeto-Burman language; speakers support both Nyingma Tibetan lamas and indigenous shamans) immediately around Pharping and, while relatively few Tamangs actually live within the town, Newar informants will, if gently pressed, often mention them as members of Pharping. Certainly they make up a significant part of the economic activity of the Pharping markets and shops.

From the Pharping bus station, it is impossible not to notice the many large, colorful Tibetan monasteries dotting the surrounding hillsides, some still under construction. The Tibetans are recent arrivals; Lévi noted that there were *bhoṭiyā* pilgrims in Pharping around 1900, but he did not identify them as actually being Tibetan (Lévi 1905: II, 400). *Bhoṭe* or *bhoṭiyā* are Nepali terms for a range of Tibetic peoples, including middle hills ethnic groups such as Tamangs or Gurungs, those from the alpine regions of Nepal, such as Sherpas, and those who are actually from the various parts of Tibet (Ramble 1997). The first Tibetan monastery was constructed before 1960 and, while there are now at least twenty-six, land continues to be acquired for the construction of even more. Pharping (Tibetan: *yang le shod*) is an important site in the mythical history of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism as the place where its founder, Guru Rimpoche or Padmasambhava, established the Vajrakīla (*rdo rje phur ba*) tantras during an intensive retreat. Hence the vast majority of monasteries built around Pharping are closed retreat centers, and they are usually paired with more public monasteries located in Bodnath, to the east of Kathmandu, or with monasteries located in Tibetan refugee settlements in India. It is a sign of wealth and prestige for an incarnate lama, teaching lineage, or monastery to build a retreat center in Pharping.

The constant stream of Tibetan monks, patrons and families is now a part of Pharping life, but their economic (and visual) impact is not always acknowledged.<sup>8</sup> In compiling lists of Pharping residents, I found I always had to ask, “and what about the Tibetans?” before any resident would mention them. So far as I know, no Tibetan actually owns land within the limits of Pharping’s old town. However, many Tibetans rent rooms or flats from local landlords, and the monasteries hold large tracts of land on the hills all around the town.

Not all Tibetans are celibate, religious, or male. Many of the male Nyingma religious in Pharping, whether officially celibate or not, take partners locally or bring them in. Nyingma Vajrayāna Buddhism, like Newar Buddhism, links celibacy and tantric practice with a partner. There are a few new families in Pharping composed of a Tibetan man and a local woman. Furthermore, there are nuns as well as monks. The only Tibetan religious in Pharping who has learned to speak Newari is a nun.

The groups labeled “Tibetans” and *bhote* are not simple ethnic blocks, though many Pharping residents see them as such and in the context of conversations about the monasteries lump them together. There are Sherpa and Tamang monasteries, for example, and the population of any monastery may be made up of a mix of genuine Tibetan refugees from different parts of Tibet, Tibetans from refugee settlements in Nepal and India, *bhotes*, and non-Tibetans from Nepalese ethnic communities such as Rai who would not otherwise be called *bhote*. While residents of Pharping can, and usually do, distinguish between these groups when talking about those outside the monastic communities, using terms such as Sherpa, *bhote*, or Tamang, the distinctions are dropped for people who dress as Tibetan lamas. All such people are called “lama” or *tibeti manche* (Tibetan). Only tourists in Tibetan lama’s clothing are labeled differently—as “tourists.”

For their part, the lamas have a limited awareness of the complexity of Pharping. Some of the resident refugee lamas know that Pharping has a mix of ethnicities, but none that I interviewed could name more than two or three Newar *thar*, and it was not clear that they were even aware that the Newars were a distinct community. They draw distinctions among Sherpa, Tamang, refugee Tibetan, refugee-camp Tibetan, and other groups, as well as drawing strong distinctions between Nyingma and other schools, and between incarnate lamas, celibate lamas (of whom there are fewer and fewer), and non-celibate lamas.

In comparison, Śaikhū is almost purely Newar. Being further north and east, it has not had the same degree of immigration from Nepali speakers (who have moved from west to east, and up-slope along the Himalayas), and as it does not have a major Nyingma pilgrimage site, it did not become a center for diasporic Tibetan activities, even though it is actually closer to the main Kathmandu Valley Tibetan settlement at Bodnath. What Śaikhū does have that Pharping lacks is a fully functioning Newar Buddhist monastery (*bāhā*). Shrestha (2002) notes that although eight of Śaikhū’s nine *bāhās* are defunct, one is still a thriving institution with a resident *sangha* (monastic community). By contrast, inhabitants of Pharping remember ten *bāhās*, but the one surviving institution (at the shrine of Vajrayoginī) has no resident *sangha*. The *Vajrācārya* priest who lives there is actually a member of *Bu Bāhā*, a monastery in Lalitpur, and he has built his home in that city.<sup>9</sup>

Pharping has three major shrines, all controlled by Newars: *Vajrayoginī*, *Dakṣiṇ Kālī*, and *Śeṣ Nārāyaṇ*. While *Vajrayoginī* is definitely a *Vajrayāna* Buddhist deity, *Dakṣiṇ Kālī* (as her name indicates) is a *Śākta* deity who expects blood sacrifice, strongly patronized by the (non-Newar) *Śāh* royal dynasty; and the deity at *Śeṣ Nārāyaṇ* is a form of *Viṣṇu*.

### Worshipping Vajrayoginī

The cult of Vajrayoginī at Pharping is at least twelve hundred years old. She is a fierce tantric deity, described in textual sources as both beautiful and wrathful. Of

the four Vajrayoginīs around the Kathmandu Valley, this particular one is known as the Flying Vajrayoginī (*khaḡamana*), although many of the Tibetans worship the image as a form of Vajravārahī, the Adamantine Sow. As with many other important Indic deities, she has both a fixed shrine complex, with a main shrine image, and a smaller image that goes on procession (*jātrā*) annually around her domain. Her shrine is above and outside Pharping in the jungle on a mountain, and is approached along an old road that leads uphill from Pharping, past a shrine to the wrathful protective deity Mahākāla. The Mahākāla shrine marks the northwest corner of Pharping and other *jātrās*; if approaching the shrine as part of a clockwise circulation, turn the corner here to go back down into Pharping.

Although she has both Śaiva/Śākta (*śaivamārgi*) and Vajrayāna Buddhist (*bauddhamārgi*) names, Vajrayoginī's shrine priest is unambiguously Buddhist, and no non-Buddhist professional religious have the right to perform worship at her shrine. Among locals, almost all Newars come to worship at her shrine at some point during the year. A visit to her shrine is required for a new bride who has married into a Pharping Newar family. Newars from outside Pharping are also frequent patrons; high-caste Buddhist families—Tulādharas, Śākyas, and Vajrācāryas—and their *guthis* (local caste-based endowed ritual societies) that come from Kathmandu and Lalitpur for their own annual rituals at her shrine. Tibetans, both lay and ordained, worship at the shrine. Bahun-Chetris and Untouchables also patronize Vajrayoginī, although the Bahun-Chetri tend to gravitate towards the other two major shrines in Pharping. People in Pharping remember the day some twelve years ago when a determined delegation of Untouchables marched to the Vajrayoginī shrine and were pleased to find that the old sign banning them had been taken down. In brief, we can say that every resident of Pharping can visit Vajrayoginī and, for most Newars and Tibetans, frequent visits are a duty.

### The Procession

The annual procession, by contrast, draws all the residents of Pharping (and more than a few spectators from nearby villages) together for a three-day festival. On the first day, the smaller image, together with her priest, descends from her main shrine to the town where, during the rest of the year, it rests in an antechamber hidden from casual view by the incumbent priests. With the help of several men under the direction of the Vajrācārya priest, this image is first lowered down through a hatch in the floor of her secret room. She is then put onto a palanquin and carried, accompanied by music, down the road into town. Twenty years ago this road was isolated, but now it is crowded with Tibetan cafés and shops aimed at tourists visiting the new monasteries that have been built on the hillside. The image passes the *Mahākāl* shrine and descends into *Śeṣ Nārāyaṇ Ṭol*. This *ṭol* is unusual in that all the families that are from, or descend from, high Buddhist castes have houses there.<sup>10</sup> Vajrayoginī is then placed in a shopfront on the square

that is set aside for her. She will stay there for the following two days. A steady stream of people, including representatives of all the major families in Pharping, arrive to offer a public worship. At times when the site is crowded they queue up outside the shrine and sit in their finest clothes on the steps of the shops opposite, with their offering plates carefully set in front of them. The Maharjans have a *guthi* especially for performing this *pūjā*. At night, *bhajan* groups (singers of devotional songs) from certain *ṭols* perform nearby.

The procession on the third evening combines spectacular individual mortification with opportunities for girls to display their finery (and boys to capture them with digital cameras). The leaders of the *jātrā* are one or more men who have undertaken to perform the vow of measuring the road with their bodies (*dhalaṃ dhanegu*). In the cases I have observed these men have all been Maharjans, but they and others insist that anyone can undertake this vow. Surrounded by family members and wearing only white cloth on their heads and bodies, these men lie full length on the ground, arms extended and hands together. Their supporters then place small oil lamps at the furthest reach of their hands. The men then stand and take three steps to the oil lamp, and again stretch out full length on the ground. In this way they will, over the following three or four hours, cover the entire procession route.

The business of managing these pilgrims is time consuming and slow, and the remainder of the procession forms up behind them (see figure 4.1). The procession falls neatly into four parts. First there are the prostrators together with their support teams. Next comes the two groups of musicians (*bhājan samiti*) who had played and sung near the deity for the previous two nights, bracketing a gang of wildly dancing young men. Third comes along a double file of women in their finest clothes. This is by far the largest element of the procession. Every woman of Pharping, whether born or married there, should walk in this double file a few times in her life. In recent years the organizers have taken to laying a long white cloth down along the route for the women to walk on which distinguishes them clearly from the prostrators, who after a few minutes are muddy, sweaty, and smeared with damp red *tika* (ritual powder). Finally Vajrayoginī herself comes surrounded by her entourage. First is yet another set of musicians, followed by more young male dancers, and then the official escort of a troupe of “guards” — flautists in antique uniforms. They are followed by a censor and a yak-tail-whisk bearer, and then finally Vajrayoginī herself, borne on a heavy palanquin supported by eight or more men.<sup>11</sup>

The place of Vajrayoginī in the devotional life of Pharping is at least partly expressed by the contrast between the male renunciants, wearing the white cloth of ascetics and undertaking an arduous pilgrimage that involves sprawling in the mud, and the long ranks of women strolling upright in their most attractive clothing on a white cloth that protects them from it. In the old Sanskrit meditations devoted to her, she is both sexually attractive and wrathful, and one of the very few female deities to appear on her own. For Pharping she is a protective deity, a major esoteric Buddhist deity and a women’s deity.

As with other major ritual events, the *mūl jātrā* (a week-long yearly festival dedicated to Hariṣankar) and the *Kārttik pyākhā* (a fortnight-long sequence of ritual dramas performed every twelve years), everyone in Pharping is assumed to attend either as a performer or an actively engaged spectator. Despite this the Tibetans do not, as far as I can tell, attend the late-night *pyākhā* nor make a point of watching the *mūl jātrā*. They do take part in a high-profile and organized way in the annual Buddha Jayanti procession (Tuladhar-Douglas 2004) as a way of signaling their Buddhism. However in the case of Vajrayoginī, Tibetans distinguish between performing rituals at the shrine and participating in the festival; Tibetans do not participate in the *jātrā*.

### Data

I was puzzled by the absence of the Tibetans at the Vajrayoginī celebration. Tibetan religious are not part of the entourage around Vajrayoginī, and Tibetan women do not walk in the women's procession. In informal conversations with Pharping residents (conducted in Newari with Newars, and Nepali with others) I found that a typical answer to the question, "do the Tibetans take part in the Vajrayoginī *jātrā*?" was something like "of course!", but then, after consideration or further questioning, "but I haven't actually seen them there." This reflects the conflict between the strongly held belief that everyone in Pharping should, and does, take part in the *jātrā*, and the empirical fact that the Tibetans simply do not. I set up a series of semi-structured interviews, keeping close track of the social position of the respondents. My goal was to construct a complete grid recording the responses of members of each social group to a question about every other social group's participation in the Vajrayoginī *jātrā*. Although I did not collect information from Tamang informants, I was otherwise able to gather a fairly complete, if coarse-grained, conspectus for the various groups of Pharping (see table 4.1) which seemed, with significant variations, to indicate that Tibetans did not take part in the Vajrayoginī *jātrā*.

### Two Views

The Maharjans have very close relations with the Tibetans through running the construction businesses that actually build the monasteries. They are also the largest nominally Buddhist Newar *thar*. Some Maharjans have learned to speak Tibetan in order to further their business interests while at least one family has sent a son to become a monk. When I asked, one evening in a busy Maharjan contractor's shop, if Tibetans took part in the *jātrā* of Vajrayoginī, the answer came back that they definitely did take part. I pushed the point, and said that I had seen scant evidence of this. The shop owner, who is an old friend and has done very well out of the Tibetan construction trade, pushed back. *Bālāmbha Phampī mī*



*he kha*—“They certainly are good Pharping people,” he said, “and they do come for the *jātrā*.” Did they, I asked, know the route of the *jātrā*? Did they know the names of the seven *ṭols* of Pharping? Other Maharjans in the shop reacted to this; knowing the names of the seven town squares through which a procession must pass is a strong marker for Pharping identity. No, he conceded, they did not understand Pharping that way, the way Pharping people do. They did give a lot of business to Pharping. They were part of Pharping! Other Maharjans I interviewed more briefly were equally firm in their belief that the Tibetans did definitely take part in the *jātrā*.

A milder, but more pervasive, refusal to notice the Tibetans lack of participation emerged as I interviewed other Pharping residents. Every respondent knew that everybody *could* take part in the Vajrayoginī *jātrā* and almost every respondent said, when asked initially, that the Tibetans *did* take part. It was only when I asked if they had ever actually seen any Tibetans take part that respondents (other than Maharjans) would, after reflection, give an answer qualified in terms of personal knowledge. Yet this never became a generalization: “No, I haven’t seen them there myself” did not lead, as it might have, to “They never take part, do they?”

Tibetans themselves, by contrast, simply denied that they took part, and responded to the query with incomprehension or explicit criticism. In 2005, I interviewed one Tibetan monk in a shop, together with two Bālāmī Newars. This monk was not ethnically Tibetan. He was a Nepali *bhoṭe* from near Ilam who had ordained as a Tibetan monk. Bālāmīs tend to patronize Śaiva institutions but, as with most Newars, see no need to draw a line between religions. This monk often stayed the afternoon in the shop, and the couple with him during this interview worked closely with the monk in an incense business. When I asked about the absence of Tibetans in the Vajrayoginī *jātrā*, this monk was sharply critical of the *jātrā*. He asserted that *jātrās* “were Hindu.” It was wrong for a Buddhist to take part, and therefore no Tibetan monk could be involved. The Bālāmīs were startled by this claim and objected, as did I, but the monk was unconvinced. If a Buddhist deity had a *jātrā*, he said, it was an example of bad Hindu influence on pure Buddhist rituals. This was not the first time I had heard Tibetan lamas criticize Newar Buddhists for being “Hindu,” but this particular criticism of a highly respected deity was unusual.

His response was more direct than some. In 2006 I interviewed three long-established refugee lamas sitting together, drinking tea and watching the Vajrayoginī *jātrā*. I asked them if Tibetans ever took part. When they said no, I asked first if lamas had ever taken part—no—and if any Tibetan girls had ever taken part in the women’s procession, to which the answer was also no. I asked if Tibetans ever took part in any Newar *jātrās*. Yes, they do, was the reply, followed by the question “have you ever been to Svayambhū and seen the Tibetan women walking there?” This confused me for some seconds. Svayambhū is an ancient Newar stūpa sacred to Mañjuśrī, and while one often sees Tibetans walking around it carrying out the ceremonial ‘*khor ba*, there are no Newar *jātrās* there. It transpired that the lama was referring to the ‘*khor ba* practice which women often



do. It is a morning or evening routine of walking along a long path, making a clockwise circumambulation of the entire hill on which the stūpa sits. It certainly is a social ritual, and one which acts powerfully to construct a sense of place, but it is distinctively Tibetan. Unlike the Nepali monk, who took an intolerant line in defense of a “pure” Buddhism that excludes Hinduism, these lamas did not direct a modernist<sup>12</sup> criticism at the Vajrayoginī *jātrā*; they simply could not conceive of a Tibetan taking part in a Newar procession. It was, literally, unthinkable, and the closest they could come to it was remembering Tibetans doing a Tibetan ritual near a site that Tibetans know Newars hold to be sacred.

While it might be objected that Tibetan lamas would not take part in a Newar procession, or a procession dominated by women, these do not seem to be reasons for their absence, nor were they ever mentioned. Important Tibetan lamas, both celibate and lay, do in fact take part in a shared *jātrā*, that of Buddha Jāyanti. This involves all the Newar *thar* in Pharping and many other groups as well; and although Tibetan lamas do participate, that participation is not without conflict (see Tuladhar-Douglas: 2004). As for Tibetan women participating in a Pharping Buddhist procession, the Buddha Jāyanti procession includes women although they are not a focus of the procession in the way that they are for the Vajrayoginī procession.

### Managing the Discontinuity

What interests me here, then, is not whether or how sacred sites are shared, but how a specific process of sharing is performed and understood by the actors who make it happen. The refusal of the Tibetans to take part in the *jātrā* creates an uncomfortable discontinuity of practice. Most Pharping residents simply overlook it, though most will not actually deny the Tibetan absence if it is pointed out. The two groups closest to the ethnic dividing line, the Maharjans on the “inside” and the Tibetans on the “outside”, have diametrically opposed answers. It falls to the Maharjans to assert and repair the inclusive social order that the Tibetans test by their principled refusal to participate.

My interviewing activities had the potential to damage this order by impolitely calling attention to an otherwise easily overlooked discrepancy. By deliberately noticing the Tibetan behaviour, I was not being a good Pharping person—and my interlocutors had to clean up after me. Recall that, even though non-Maharjan informants did acknowledge, when pressed, that they had not actually seen Tibetans take part in the procession, this never led to a general claim that they would not or could not. Rather, the general understanding that anyone could take part was protected by refusing to draw conclusions from the behavior exposed by my questions. Maharjan informants, who felt some obligation to defend the Tibetans, responded more forcefully to my tactless querying by a direct refutation of the undesirable inference.

Michael Carrithers, studying Jains and Hindus in Gujarat, Western India, has characterized the state of affairs there as a “polytropy”: “people turn towards many sources for their spiritual sustenance, hope, relief or defence” (Carrithers 2000: 834). It is an eclecticism, a pluralism, a refusal to police boundaries and, by turns, convivial or quarrelsome. Polytropy is a term that describes a social fabric woven from the plural religious orientation of families and individuals. It can be seen as complementary to shrine images having many names, each allowing a different form of worship, which I have elsewhere (Tuladhar-Douglas 2005) called polyonymy. These two processes make for a resilient pluralism of the sort observed in Pharping and, I suspect, Gujarat.

Contrary to Carrithers, I suspect that polytropy by itself is probably not enough to explain this pluralism. Boundaries do exist, both in allegiance to deities and in the naming of shrines. An individual is respectful of many, perhaps all, deities but has specific allegiances through lineage to one, through caste to another, through locality to yet another. So too a specific shrine image may have a dominant name, with others asserted or remembered as acts of resistance; or the image may simply sustain a wide range of names in different registers. Certain shrine images, as I will discuss below, may have names that—for their particular sociohistorical context—are a refusal of sectarian identity.

The complex caste and ethnic composition of Pharping may go some way to explain why polytropy is the ordinary state of affairs there. All residents, save the Tibetans, know that it is originally, and perhaps essentially, a Newar town. Its defining rituals, shrines and their officiants are all Newar. Yet almost half of the inhabitants are non-Newar *Parbatiya*, divided between the low or untouchable *thar* that live mostly below the main road and the higher Bahun-Chetri *thar* families, some of whom live in the old town and some in the upper part of town, outside the old core. None of the main ritual processions go into the low-caste *Parbatiya* areas. There are also a few Tamang living at the edges of Pharping, and several Tamang villages around Pharping. This means that the crowded vegetable market in the center of Pharping or the throng gathered in a town square for a procession is highly diverse. If there were to be exclusivist rivalries, then Tamangs, Tibetans, and some Newar castes (including the priest at Vajrayogini) would line up on the Buddhist side.<sup>15</sup>

Instead what I found was the assertion that to be a good Pharping person was to take part in, to join in, to help sustain the polytropy. Carrithers argues that it is *pūjā*, the act of worship itself, that creates polytropy. I am not so sure that this is enough. Certainly *pūjā* is important. Countless times in my fieldwork I have gone to one shrine or another for reasons that had far more to do with asserting social bonds (“they’re going in, so should we”) or a sense of place (“we’re at this end of town, we should stop at the local Gaṇeśa”) than any particular reverence for the deity of the shrine. Yet there are also attitudes and gestures that sustain the integrity of the woven cloth, so to speak. Firmly believing that the whole town (“Pharping people”) shares a willingness to join in is itself also part of creating that cloth. So too is claiming that people who do not join in are “nonetheless” good

Pharping folk. It is both a constant series of gestures (*pūjās*, visits, ways of walking) and a social attitude. In fact, a polytrophy is just as carefully constructed in its social setting as is an exclusivist, bounded definition of religion. The difference may be that a polytrophy requires a strong sense of place.

### The Importance of Place

In his exposition of polytrophy, Carrithers anchors it in the practice of *pūjā*. He makes four points:

1. Polytrophy is a wholly and thoroughly social concept, denoting that the consumers of religion actively turn to persons.
2. Polytrophy covers many qualities of religious relationship, from the occasional request ... from a distant god to the god who one visits daily.
3. These relationships ... are hierarchical and manifested through ... *puja*.
4. Polytrophy is a dynamic process.

(Carrithers 2000: 834–35)

Looking over my notes I have been struck by an emphasis on place. My Maharjan informants asserted that the Tibetans really did take part in the *jātrā* by stating that they were “good Pharping people.” I noted above that a child born in Pharping, or a football team, or a woman performing the *nhikā* (daily worship) on behalf of her household all enact their membership in Pharping through the local shared shrine of the town square. Annual participation in *jātrās* constructs, in a precise and orchestrated way, membership both in one’s local square and in the town as a whole. This is especially true for the intricate *Harisaṅkhar jātrā*, involving seven separate *raths* (carts) being pulled on various days from each of the *ṭols* through the circuit of all of the *ṭols* until the cart returns to its origin.<sup>14</sup> So too, in the Vajrayoginī *jātrā*, the deity descends from the mountain above and outside Pharping, down the old road, past the wrathful protective deity Mahākāla. After two days of worship, she travels on a palanquin as the culmination of a long procession around all seven *ṭols* in the correct order, then leaves the town by the same road and returns to her forested mountain home.

For a resident of Pharping, then, life-cycle rituals, football season rituals, annual rituals and daily rituals all not only require performers to act as Pharping people but simultaneously construct them as Pharping people. The rituals all take place around shared sites that create a sense of shared locality within the town, which in turn creates a sense of belonging to the town. What all these small, local shared shrines have in common is that they belong to deities (most often Ganeśa) who are believed by Pharping people to have no sectarian identity.

This requires some explanation. There is a well-known late Purāṇic tradition that locates Ganeśa in the family of Śiva, and almost all descriptions of Hinduism for the Western classroom give Ganeśa as a “Hindu” god. This is certainly not how he is understood by Newars. He is the god of beginnings, propitiated at the outset

of every *pūjā* regardless of whether one is formally Śaiva, formally Buddhist, or (as with most Newars) not encumbered by the question. Certainly people know the Hindu stories, especially now that Indian television force-feeds a far less nuanced version of them, but Buddhist Newars, who might be expected to assert a counternarrative, do not. Ganeśa is simply the Remover of Obstacles (*vighnāntaka*), the god of beginnings, and the pre-eminent locality deity. Every *ṭol* in Pharping has its Ganeśa. The morning *pūjā* is a chance to be seen to be a good member of the locality and exchange a bit of gossip. While the *nhikā* performed by an individual within his or her home may reflect sectarian affiliations, the public act that creates the social identity of the place and gives its residents their sense of place, refuses them.

In Pharping, defence of polytrophy is an inherent aspect of maintaining the social fabric of Pharping itself. It would not make sense to go to the trouble of repairing the polytrophy except inasmuch as it is part of Pharping, and the agents who create Pharping are themselves created of Pharping.

As is clear from other studies of Newar society (Gellner 1993), this practice is not specific to Pharping. For Newars, polytropies are local, and it is possibly precisely because individuals are grounded in the ritual construction of a shared locality that each participant feels a profound sense of place. What is especially interesting about the Pharping case is that historically newer Nepali-speaking populations who have settled in and around Pharping have, at least to some extent, accepted and been folded into the Newar ritual process of creating Pharping and its polytrophy.<sup>15</sup> The rules may be Newar in appearance, but each morning the locality deities watch a heterogeneous population make their offerings. Some Parbatiya Nepalis—who do not include Buddhism in their polytropies and polyonomies elsewhere in Nepal—live within the old core of Pharping, belong to one of the seven *ṭols*, and worship the local deities. A far larger number commute in, just to take part in the Vajrayoginī *jātrā* and other formal Newar rituals.

So far, this integrative process has failed to include the recently arrived Tibetans. I am currently researching the specific genealogies of their intolerance, but at a minimum we can say that there simply is no shared sense of place. The Tibetan claim to Pharping is based on a foundation myth for the Nyingma school and on events in the life of their founding figure, Padmasambhava. Very few Tibetan lamas know that Padmasambhava, twelve hundred years ago, worked with Newars in Pharping to found the Nyingma school. For the Tibetans, implicitly or explicitly, Pharping is part of a Tibetan geography of the Himalayas that has gained stridency in exile; their identity, whether individual or corporate, owes nothing to modern Pharping town and its hybrid Newar pasts.

There may be general conclusions to be drawn here about the relationship between a socially cohesive sense of place and the possibility of sharing sacred sites. While, in this case, I have argued that the tendency to defend a shared understanding of the Vajrayoginī *jātrā* arose together with a sense of place constructed through microlocalities, it is also true that, for all Newars, Vajrayoginī is part of their total geography, one of four Vajrayoginīs that ring the whole of the

Kathmandu Valley. All four of these shrines (all five, if we include Guhyeśvari in the center) are examples of shared shrines, and the narratives and namings that allow for sharing at this broader level are part of Newar identity as a whole. Something similar is true for shared pilgrimage sites such as Mount Kailash (Śaiva, Jain, Buddhist) or Lake Rewalsar (Śaiva, Sikh, Nyingmapa) that are located within a common Indic sacred geography.

The opposite condition, the *dislocation* experienced by diaspora populations and industrialized families moved about as a result of enforced labour mobility, may in turn explain the failure of sympathetic imagination that underlies one sort of inability or refusal to envisage a shrine as mutually sacred. If a family does not have the time to settle in one place for long enough to appropriate and then transmit a sense of place, how can they ever learn to share it?

### Hard Work

In closing I wish to draw from this study some conclusions on the likely outcome of an antagonistic encounter between an inclusive, polytropy-and-polonomy style of managing religious identities, and an exclusive and perhaps modernist style of asserting a single identity (see Hayden 2002). In brief, when the dominant mode is tolerance, then striking a sectarian posture is hard work; but when there is a powerful economic or political group that practices intolerance, it becomes hard work to maintain the inclusivist stance, especially along the zone of contact. It requires common effort, and the willingness to expend that social effort only makes sense once we see that the identity of a Pharping person is derived from a sense of place built through successive acts that depend on the refusal of simplistic intolerance, single allegiances and single identities. Intolerance is a threat to the fabric within which each person's identity is discovered.

It is the very effort involved in sustaining and repairing the fabric that explains why exclusivist behavior tends to be disavowed or resisted by those who practice polytropic inclusivism. In Pharping the entire community must collude, albeit implicitly, to make good the damage caused by the Tibetan refusal. If the community understands itself to be acting as a whole, bar one troublesome part, then each actor's agreement to understand their participation as an element of a holistic community itself constitutes that whole. It is this agreement which is central; in the case described above, the Tibetan's non-participation created a vulnerability but did not in itself cause real damage—the damage was done when I inquired about their non-participation. Some of the work of repair is evident in the Maharjan claim that, despite non-participation, the Tibetans were good Pharping people.

How well this intercommunal fabric will withstand the shears of the next fifty years is very hard to say, for it is under attack from several quarters. With the changes of the 1991 People's Movement and the establishment of a parliamentary monarchy,<sup>16</sup> Christian missionaries have gained a foothold in the area. The appeal

of conversion to Christianity is that it gives the convert cash at the same time as it frees his or her family from ritual obligations. The missionaries are perceived to be heavily subsidized—stories of recent converts being given free air tickets to the United States circulate constantly. Converts, and by extension their families, are freed from the need to get up for the morning *pūjā*, the need to sponsor expensive lifecycle rituals, the need to pay dowry and to maintain a long succession of post-funeral rituals. The appeal of conversion pits individual wealth against collective effort and, as we have seen, it takes coordinated social effort to maintain the inclusive Pharping. On another front, the remittance economy now provides most of Pharping's wealth. This, too, furnishes a powerful narrative of wealth and an eventual promise of escape, although rather than liberating the local kin of remittance workers from their social obligations, it requires them to display ostentatiously their improved ability to act within Pharping rules, by using money from elsewhere until they too can finally escape the stage. Finally the Maoist movement, which is particularly strong in Pharping, has added its own critique of burdensome ritual duties and bogus ideologies preserving caste, class and religion, and its advocates proclaim revolution as yet another means of escape from the ritual cycle and the fabric of obligations that maintains it.

Yet a Newar removed from this fabric feels its lack most keenly. In conversations with Newars who have traveled outside Kathmandu Valley, or those now living in the United Kingdom, I have found that one of the most common expressions is grief at the absence of the most local and ordinary forms of public religion. “There are no *Ganeśas* here” they say, and go on to bemoan the lack of a sense of place, the fact that there is nowhere to meet the neighbors, no shared shrines, no



**Figure 4.1.** Prostrating Maharjan, ringed by family and supporters, leading the *jātrā*. Photo W. Tuladhar-Douglas.

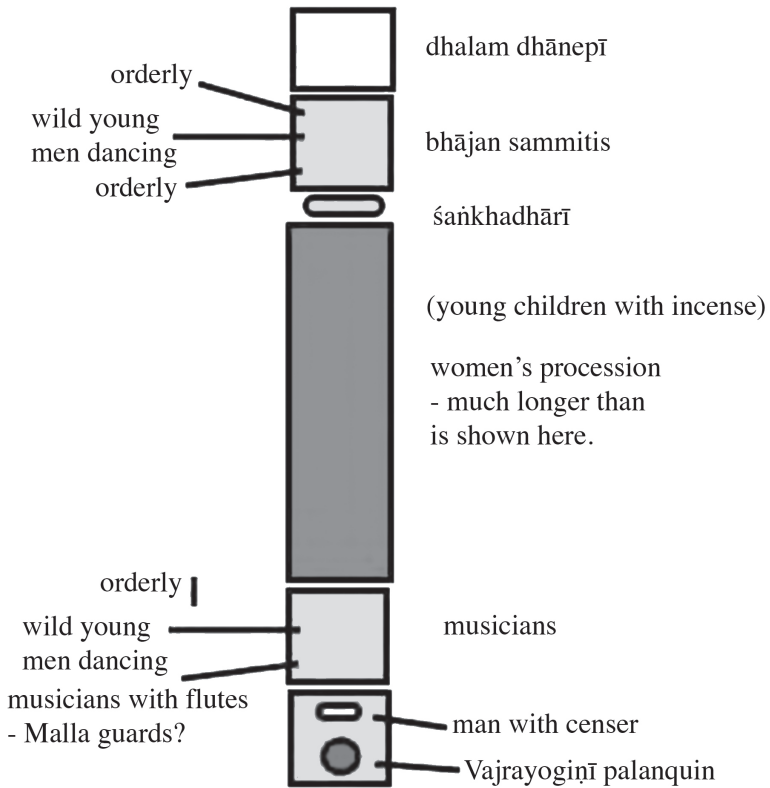


Figure 4.2. Structure of the Vajrayoginī procession in 2005 and 2006. Diagram by W. Tuladhar-Douglas.

polytrophy, and, most literally, no “place” to raise children correctly as Newars. This concern, which I have heard voiced numerous times, points directly to my supposition that dislocation prevents the transmission of inclusive religious behavior.<sup>17</sup> The palpable sense of relief at returning home suggests that the international Newar community will be closely tied to a thousand small localities scattered throughout the Kathmandu Valley for at least a generation to come.



**Table 4.1.** Table correlating informant views (columns by group) about participation in Vajrayoginī jatra (rows by group) with observed participation (final column). Table by W. Tuladhar-Douglas.

Respondent Group attending	Bahun- chetri	Tuladhar	Srestha	Jyapu	Balami	Manadhar	Damai-Sarki	Tibetan	Observed by ethnographer?
Bahun- chetri	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes, especially eligible girls
Srestha	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	yes, do puja	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes, especially eligible girls
Jyapu	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	yes, have guthi	yes, have guthi	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes, including vrata
Balami	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes, including vrata
Manadhar	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes, including vrata
Damai, Sarki	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	attend and perform vrata	?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes, including vrata
Tibetan	yes/few	no/few	no/few	yes	no	no/few	no/few	no	no

## Notes

1. My thanks to Pharping informants, my family—especially Bhavana Tuladhar-Douglas—and the participants in the ASA panel on shared shrines organized by Glenn Bowman.
2. The Newars are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, with a complex urban society built up through repeated historical in-migrations and organized around caste, religion, and locality groups. Their wealthy mercantile city-states, never politically united, were colonized by the nascent Gorkhali empire in the eighteenth century, and modern Newar culture has developed inside an oppressive Nepali-speaking state that was officially a Hindu monarchy until 2007. Although their language is one of the only Tibeto-Burman languages to have a classical literate tradition, only half or fewer of the roughly million people calling themselves ‘Newar’ now still speak the language. Good introductions to Newar society include Toffin (1984), Levy and Rājopādhyāya (1992), and Gellner (1993).
3. On this see the discussion by Gellner (1993: 68ff.). A Bālāmī informant in Pharping expressed this clearly, saying “We Bālāmīs were here before there was any talk about ‘Baudha’ or ‘Saiva.’”
4. See Gutschow and Kolver (1975) on Newar space and ritual.
5. The Eight Mothers (*Aṣṭamātrkāh*) are a collection of wrathful female deities, led by Gaṇeśa in a wrathful form, who mark the limit between urban space and wild (*jāṅgala*) land. They appear and dance (as masked dancers) in the twelve-yearly autumn ritual dance (*Kārttik pyākhām*). Where the mild Gaṇeśa marks the centers of the *ṭols*, the Eight Mothers guard the perimeter of the town.
6. The old path leading from the Valley is now rarely traveled, but a Mahālakṣmī shrine is still present; the southbound path leading, eventually, to the Tarai and India is still used by people walking to nearby villages such as Lamaḡāū. The Mahālakṣmī shrine there is well known. Both shrines are at small fords on the downhill paths leading from the plateau on which Pharping sits.
7. In fact, the vast majority of low-caste families are now Nepali-speaking Parbatīya incomers who live outside the seven *ṭols*, below the new metalled road built about ninety years ago for the Nepali king.
8. These monasteries also attract small groups of wealthy visitors from Eastern and Southeastern Asia, Europe and North America. These, as well as people who come on day trips in tour buses and occasional resident foreigners, are politely called “tourists.”
9. His father was also the priest at *Vajrayoginī*; but prior to his father a different lineage were the incumbents. They, and even the lineage before them, were also from Lalitpur monasteries, though not *Bu Bābah*.
10. These families have contested status as “Pharping people.” There is one family of Tulādhar (who, although resident in Pharping for six generations, are still not fully localized) and one house is owned by the Vajrācārya incumbent at Vajrayoginī, built for him when he took up the post. The previous lineage of Vajrācāryas, who lost the priesthood when their son married a Mahārjan, also have a house there. Most of the other households in the *ṭol* are Mānandhar or Śreṣṭha.
11. In 2005, an outsider who dressed as a Hindu priest and who had been staying near Dakṣinkālī, placed himself, carrying a conch, into the *jātrā* just before the women. This was not regarded as problematic by onlookers; he had been inserting himself into town life in various ways.
12. The term “modernist” here refers to Buddhism as a self-consciously reformist and carefully bounded world religion, such as the movements promulgated by, among others, Dharmapala and Ambedkar.
13. David Gellner (2005) studied polytrophy in the Newar case and showed that “modernist” or “exclusivist” stances against polytrophy were adopted, for example, by Buddhist activists. In Pharping, however, even faced with pointedly Hindu gestures by Śreṣṭhas and Bahun-Chetris such as aggressive *bhajan* groups who take over public rest houses, cover them with Hindu posters, then bar and lock them, the countermovement of a strident Buddhist modernism of the sort recorded by Gellner has not occurred.
14. B. Tuladhar-Douglas is currently studying the intricate organization of this *jātrā*. Families who have moved to a different part of Pharping will return to their original *ṭol* to help with the rituals and the pulling of that locality’s cart.

15. Historically, small groups of certain low-caste Parbatiya groups such as the *Jog* have been a part of Newar urban sites for several hundred years.
16. While the 1991 People's Movement did not lead, as many had hoped, to the disestablishment of Hinduism as the national religion, it did lead to legislation allowing missionaries to practice inside Nepal for the first time in centuries.
17. In Tuladhar-Douglas (2010), I have tried to link this sense of place to a performance of place that links human and non-human persons through social construction of the landscape.

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