THE PRACTICE OF CULTURE:

THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION IN FORMULATING NATIONAL DESIRES FOR THE RESTITUTION OF REPATRIATED IDOLS IN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

A distinguishing feature of Nepali heritage and what I am terming practice of culture is the people's affective connections to their Gods. This is epitomised by Nepali heritage restitution efforts, wherein communities, museums, and the state are actively encouraging the return of repatriated Gods back into the very communities and shrines from where they were taken. This is contradictory to Western conservation principles as these ancient artefacts are removed from secure museum infrastructure and reinstated into temples where they can be interacted with, admired and worshiped. I focus on the framework of the *Guthi*, or traditional socio-cultural organisations, through which these idols are preserved, maintained, restored and replenished. Through interviews with my grandfather, a prominent photographer and head of the Sincha *Guthi*, I conduct an oral history to analyse our ancient practices which have preserved inherited idols that date back to 1406 AD. These and other traditions, through which idols and statues are brought 'alive' and given personhood, instantiate and create an important affective dimension between the people and their heritage, which defines peoples' relationship and outlook towards their heritage. I argue that the roles of contemporary museums—to protect, authenticate and ensure access to artefacts—are better fulfilled by the Nepali practice of culture, and that it is this affective dimension that has ushered in the uniquely Nepali approach to heritage restitution.

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INTRODUCTION

A distinguishing feature of Nepali heritage and the *practice of culture* is the community's affective connection to and inter-dependence with their Gods. Beyond the several year-round religious festivals, sacred temples, and the thriving culture, which have made Nepal a unique destination for tourists, this affective connection is perhaps most exemplary in the field of heritage repatriation. This thesis is interested in finding connections between the successes of the Nepali heritage repatriation efforts, including the role that museums and activist groups play in it, and the Nepali experience of this heritage, the emotional connections with culture and especially stolen artefacts.

Recent developments in the Nepali government and museums' outlook towards heritage repatriation are marked with a concerted effort in 'emptying' the museum collections and returning the Gods back to the very communities, temples, and shrines that they were originally taken from. This shift in approach, instigated with the return of the *Laxmi Narayan* idol into its original shrine in the city of Patan, has been argued to be a counter example to Western art conservation practices (Selter 2022). While museums in non-colonial powers often push for the repatriation of stolen heritage, Nepali museums are going further by facilitating the restitution of the already repatriated heritage back into the source-communities. For my analysis, I make a distinction between "repatriation" and "restitution", where the former is seen as the bringing back of looted cultural property to the source-nation, whereas the latter goes a step further: returning them to the source-communities, often the same temples and shrines, from where they were initially taken. While the dominant theories on the display and conservation of cultural artefacts rely on the museum sphere, the Nepali

policy to no longer display repatriated Gods in museums but to reinstate them into the pedestals that they were stolen from, provokes as many questions as it does praises. Why are these fragile statues and sculptures put back into public spaces from where they can again be subject to theft and destruction? Why are museums not taking the responsibility to preserve, study and display these repatriated idols for the benefit of all people? What are people to gain from this?

These questions can be approached from manifold perspectives. This thesis analyses museums as the primary locus of knowledge, wherein decisions about cultural artefacts are made in conjunction with the pertinent laws and regulations. A comparison of the modus operandi and purported values of 'Western museums', or museums in former colonial metropoles, illuminates how exactly the Nepali museums represent a shift in museological approaches. I then focus on the Nepali practice of culture, including the ancestral faith and emotions attached to culture, using a case study of the *Guthi* system, or small-scale community organisations, in Kathmandu Valley. My use of the concept "practice of culture" includes not just everyday banal religiosity, but also the monthly and annual ceremonies and rituals that have been observed for centuries, systems of faith and cosmology, as well as other secular traditions that inculcate a deep emotional connection between the people and their heritage. I rely on an oral history from my grandfather Shridhar Lal Manandhar, a prominent documentary photographer as well as the head of the *Sincha Guthi*, one of many in the Kathmandu Valley, to which I too belong[1]. Focusing on the ancestral idols that the *Sincha Guthi* members have worshipped for generations, I pursue an object-oriented ethnography to highlight the deep-rooted connection that people have to their Gods and Goddesses. Through

[1] The head of the *Guthi* is known as the *Thakuli*, in the Newari language or Nepal Bhasa. This position is taken by the eldest member of the families within the *Guthi*, and upon their passing, it is passed down to the next eldest member.

interviews with a prominent cultural heritage documentarian and activist, Alok Siddhi Tuladhar, I outline the role of these *Guthi* in heritage conservation and observance today as well as the salience of common conceptions of the 'living' heritage of Nepal. There is an important affective dimension to Nepali restitution efforts embedded within the beliefs, traditions, gossip, and lore that surrounds the Nepali practice of culture, which is where we find its successes. I conclude with a critique of Western ideas that have permeated the deep-rooted understandings of conservation, instead promoting the practices of living culture, within and beyond the *Guthi* system, through which Nepali people have preserved the centuries' old heritage that they have inherited.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Nepali practice of culture, in my analysis, is an idea that encompasses the customs and way of life but also the historical development of the culture, the artistic and architectural development of the artefacts, temples, and buildings as well as the development of the religious and cultural beliefs, superstitions and lore. Gauging particularly on the geographical focus of my study, the Kathmandu Valley is an example of a bustling part of Nepal where this "practice of culture" is constantly visible and alive. Housing the capital city of Kathmandu, along with two other cities Bhaktapur and Patan, the valley and the culture within it developed from the *Bagmati* civilization, believed to have started around 723 BCE (Pudasaini 2019). While there have been many dynasties and rulers since then, contemporary Kathmandu Valley is most famous for the traditional architecture, cultural sites, and cosmologies from the native *Newari* ethnicity. These cultural riches that have come to give a unique identity to Nepal for tourists travelling into Kathmandu includes not just the grand *Durbar* Squares or Palace grounds, but also intricate detailing on the typical wooden carved windows in every house, carvings of religious motifs on every stone waterspout, as well as the meticulous jewellery adorned by each idol, whether in a grand temple or a street corner (Schick 1997).

Kathmandu valley is commonly seen as the economic and cultural hub of Nepal. Alok Siddhi Tuladhar, explaining the chronology of how the valley developed, outlines the role of nature in the flourishing of the valley and its people (Tuladhar 2024). As it was previously a lake formed from the Himalayan ice melts, which drained over time, the mineral-rich soil led to a flourishing agricultural sector. Alok remarks that this drainage has now been scientifically proven but had always involved myths and legends of how a gorge was cut to drain it out by

Lord Krishna, in the Hindu faith, or by Lord Manjushree, in the Buddhist faith. Due to this, the Valley was seen as sacred and holy, which attracted sages and intellectuals from neighbouring settlements, making it a melting pot for different thinkers and pilgrims and through them, a major hub for trade (Tuladhar 2024). The development of the trade routes allowed local merchants to travel into neighbouring regions in India and China, and soon, Kathmandu valley became a rich settlement marked with a harmonious intermixing of traditions, architecture as well as religions and faiths. Examples of this can be found, still, in the practice of the Kumari system, where a Buddhist girl is worshipped as a virgin Hindu living goddess, and thought of as the protector of the, then, Hindu nation. The accrued wealth, through both trade and agriculture, manifested not in the personal enrichment of the local families, but through philanthropic expenditures in building grand temples and devotional shrines, as well as in organising grand feasts celebrating good harvest during religious festivals (Tuladhar 2024). Here we can already find the deep-rooted connection between the people and their culture whereby the culture, community and faith are prioritized over the self.

One of the major channels through which Nepali art and traditions proliferated and flourished was through the *Guthi* system. As the dominant system of civic, social, cultural and religious institutions, these *Guthi* were community collectives made up of different families who commissioned, managed and preserved the idols, temples and heritage that make up Kathmandu today (Subedi and Shrestha 2024). *Guthi* delineated one's caste, social class, and ancestral occupation and each *Guthi* generally have their own ancestral idol, commonly referred to as *Kul Devata*, which was commissioned and funded by their forefathers. Recent records from the government-run *Guthi* Corporation show that 12,000 religious structures in Nepal find their custodianship in existing *Guthi* (Subedi and Shrestha 2024, 2). These

inherited idols could be of any scale: their *Kul Devata* could be an important God worshipped by the entire country, they could also be the custodians of the Kumari – of both the tradition and of the living Goddess herself – and their *Kul Devata*s can also be of a much smaller scale, housed in a sacred trunk and taken out only once a year. Through the rites and practices built into each *Guthi*'s traditions, they have become especially responsible for the maintenance and preservation of their inherited idols, and the role of the Guthi is visible within the several religious festivals that take place in the valley as part of their annual *Guthi* responsibilities. As even today, *Guthi* assume custodianship of various artefacts, an analysis of the experience of growing up within this system, helps analyse the emotional relationship people have towards their heritage through which the restitution of repatriated artefacts takes precedence.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will give an analysis linking different perspectives on heritage repatriation and the role of museums in various contexts. When investigating the restitution of contested collections, it is important to analyse the museum sphere as the prime institution in which such artifacts are housed, held in transit, or displayed. However, this strong emphasis on the value of museums is an argument that many scholars heavily rely upon, leaving little room for its critical analysis. American art historian James Cuno (2014) identifies the potential of museums while recalling his visit to the Louvre, in Paris. Looking at a 4,000-year-old alabaster bust, he puts himself in the long line of admirers who have been able to see the statue since its creation in ancient Mesopotamia. This is an emotion that perhaps a lot of people find themselves in, looking at thousand-year-old cultural and artistic objects that have made their way into museums for the public to see. Calling this the "power and promise of encyclopedic museums", he argues that *encyclopedic* museums, which hold artifacts from various time periods and geographies advance the ideas of global interconnectedness, integration and harmony (Cuno 2014, 122). Unlike National Museums which hold objects that highlight, exclusively, the nation's history, he argues that these museums teach its visitors how dependent each civilisation, ethnicity and nation is to each other, therefore fostering a cosmopolitan worldview.

In the influential paper entitled *The Public Interest in Cultural Property,* John Henry Merryman also proposes a cosmopolitan approach to cultural property, warning against the "cultural nationalism" that comes about when emphasizing and designating cultural artifacts to its origins (Merryman 1989, 361-362). Discussing different policies on cultural property, which he defines as artistic, religious, cultural, and scientific objects made by humankind,

Merryman argues that the intrinsic value they hold, warrant them a "public interest" (Merryman 1989, 353). They hold symbolic, and mythological value, and indicate strong connections to the politics and religion of the nation. Merryman agrees that the outlined "sources" of public interest pave way for the exploitation of such cultural property, ultimately proposing three core values of "preservation", "truth" or authenticity and "access" when debating the fate of cultural property (Merryman 1989, 355). He argues that these core values should be central in any policy decisions, including those about transportation, conservation, and repatriation of cultural property. Museums, particularly, play a significant role as integral spaces for the adequate preservation, accurate authentication, and widespread access to the cultural property. Little is mentioned though, as is common with other scholars who agree with him, about the interests of specific groups of people for whom the cultural property under deliberation holds a much deeper meaning.

This is where we can trace a markedly Western approach to museums and cultural objects, encompassing the practices of curating, conserving, interpreting and studying artifacts from nations the world over. Erin Thompson, engaging directly with Merryman's influential paper, rejects his three core values, asking which public does he represent, what interests and values is he biased towards? (Thompson 2017, 305) Using examples from different source countries, she shows how these values only prioritise the current holders of the artefacts, along with educated archaeologists, anthropologists, curators, and politicians involved. Indeed, the privileged rooms in which the consideration of his core values occurs, actively alienates the creators of these artefacts. The stakeholders from the source country are far removed from decisions about the preservation of the artefact, the process of discerning the authenticity and of deliberating repatriation claims (Thompson 2017, 308). Echoing this positionality, Cuno, calls the granting of repatriation claims, "denials of cultural exchange", and urges museums

not to acquiesce to "frivolous, if stubborn, calls for repatriation [that are] often accompanied by threats of cultural embargoes" (Cuno 2014, 120). Literature in the field of heritage repatriation is largely saturated with similar ideas about cultural exchange, scientific and technological preservation, and access to the artistic beauty held by such artefacts, and there is seldom any space provided for proponents arguing for them to be repatriated back into the source countries. These notions of repatriation, and of the extent to which some requests can go, have also permeated the sphere of the museum who, through the history of colonization, loot and conquest, have come to possess such artefacts.

In *Against and Beyond the Museum*, Mozambican scholar Alirio Karina gives a holistic approach to analysing museum practices (2022). Karina is critical of the idea that museums, particularly in Western metropoles, are inherently a social good. She writes that the conditions of encounter between the source communities and those who looted cultural artifacts from them, are marked with a "banality of colonial ill" (Karina 2022, 653). It is through this banal acceptance that the wealthy traveller from the metropole was able to obtain cultural artefacts from the colonized and the subjugated parts of the world. This stands in stark contrast with Cuno, who rejects the idea that museums are remnants of imperial dynamics and instead sees it as a means through which different cultures were able to develop and learn from each other (Cuno 2014, 122). Karina also pushes back against Merryman's focus on the presence of widespread 'access' to museum possessions, using examples of Africans and post-independence travellers who are subject to intense visa regimes in making the travel into countries holding their cultural patrimony (Karina 2022, 652). In the case of Nepal, Merryman's values can easily be questioned when looking at the high rejection rates amongst those lining up in embassies to get their visas. In attempting to decolonize museums, Karina finds that museums and their practices have become a fact of

habit, a wrongly assumed *positive* that evokes a collective memory not through interaction but through exhibitions and bullet-proof cases.

The call for repatriation and restitution often comes from a history of global injustice, coercion, and domination. Activists and source community locals have called for the return of their artefacts not only because it was unlawfully taken, but because of the role it plays in identity formation and cultural preservation, which current literature often glosses over. Elke Selter, in the article *Returning the Gods to the People: Heritage Restitution in Nepal* (2022) writes about the central value of these artifacts in Nepal, pointing us to a distinguishing feature of Nepali heritage repatriation efforts. In her study in Kathmandu valley, she notes that there is a unique relationship between the community and their religious-cultural statues and artefacts, wherein religious statues are symbolically brought alive, after which the Gods depicted in them are thought to be living inside them (Selter 2022, 117). This reflects the 'living' nature of Nepali heritage which underscores the current Nepali practices of heritage repatriation and restitution. This dimension marks, also, a shift in the Nepali restitution approach, demonstrated in a case study of the return of the *Laxmi Narayan* idol to her original shrine in Patan. This concerted effort of Nepali museums, government and the community to empty their museum possessions and reinstate them back into their source communities stands as a contradicting example of Western influence in heritage repatriation and restitution, which only very few authors have been attentive of.

What is also lacking when understanding the place of the museum in efforts to repatriate and reinstate stolen cultural heritage, is the means through which these artefacts could be ordered, standardised, and understood. Anthropologist Ken Teague in *Tourism, Anthropology and Museums: Representations of Nepalese Reality* (1995) attempts to categorise different types

of artefacts based on the history of the development of culture, art, and tourism in Nepal. Through the museums' concern of "authenticity", Teague identifies two types of artworks, collector's art and tourist art, which dominate the material representations of Nepali reality (Teague 1995, 50). Collector's art could be understood as traditional artefacts made for the people by their own techniques and standards while the category of tourist art is "externally directed", towards the dominant external culture through a process of acculturation (Teague 1995, 52). In a country highly dependent on tourism, analysis of artefacts keeping in mind pressures borne out of tourism is an ever-important perspective. The government of Nepal, through the Ancient Monument Preservation Act 1956 (referred to as AMPA) also classifies artefacts into 'archaeological objects', those made more than a hundred years ago, and 'curio', which are less than a hundred years old (AMPA 1956, 3-4). Based on the archaeological dating of these objects, such a classification has salience not only in the request for repatriations and the sale of artifacts, but it also determines who takes the responsibility of the protection of these artifacts and what kinds of penalties are accrued over violation of those responsibilities.

Seminal literature documenting the disappearance of Nepali artefacts also has come from a very Western perspective of fetishization, exoticisation and a push for its preservation within Western museums. German scholar Jürgen Schick, in *The Gods are Leaving the Country: Art Theft from Nepal,* writes of the strong impression Nepali art made on him during his visit in the 1970s: a period in which the theft of Gods and Goddesses was at its peak (1997). The book compiles information on various idols, including which God they represent, where they were found, their measurements and, in some cases, the act and date of when they were stolen. His analysis of these "mystic" artefacts was weary not only of the fact that the valley housed a history of 2000 years which was "still untouched by the spirit and unspirituality of

the modern world", but also of the fact that more than half of the Nepali works of art had already been stolen or taken out of the country in the 40 years after the end of the isolationist regime pursued by the country (Schick 1997, 33-37). Schick writes, "Kathmandu Valley can be termed a large open-air museum – certainly one of the most beautiful and richest in the world", which is also one of the first times the concept of 'open-air museum' was applied in Kathmandu (Schick 1997, 15). While the city is still described in a similar vein, especially by tourists and foreign scholars, I argue later that this tag still connects the valley to a Western-centric idea of museums, which shifts the focus of Nepali 'living' culture into one that warrants 'better' protection and conservation.

Western projections can also be traced within the works of scholars who are still held in very high regard in Nepal. In a study about the academic facilitation in the illicit trade of cultural objects, art scholars Smith and Thompson identify the involvement of the scholar Mary Slusser, the wife of an American diplomat, in the direct and indirect illicit trade of cultural artefacts from Nepal (2023). Even today, as inscribed on the entrance of Patan Museum, Slusser is revered as "one of the leading experts in cultural history of Nepal" (Smith and Thompson 2023, 23). However, the basis for such reverence, in this case, Slusser's influential book *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of Kathmandu Valley* (1982), also reveres notions projected by the Western scholars. Not only was her direct involvement in illicit trade identified, some purchased by her own sister for example, Smith and Thompson also identify, many self-serving biases in Slusser's book, through which she justified the extraction of artefacts by citing possible physical and aesthetic peril (Smith and Thompson 2023, 30). Slusser's usage of phrases like "rescue", "failure of care", "endangered" and "neglected cultural objects", do invoke some sense of urgency in the need to protect the decaying

heritage, but it is also very important to gauge the motivations of such language, considering the readership of the book published in English.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology I use to investigate the Nepali affective dimension to heritage and heritage repatriation involves both theories and practices written about by scholars as well as personal experiences and oral histories from those engaged in conservation and ritual observances. I interviewed my grandfather, Shridhar Lal Manandhar, 84, over phone call on the 16th of May 2024 to ask specifically about his experiences of growing up within the culture and traditions that he so loved. Referred to, in the rest of this thesis, as Shridhar, he was an invaluable source of knowledge for me growing up and it is to him, and to my family, that I credit my curiosity and fascination with Nepali culture. That being said, I interview him chiefly as the head of the *Sincha Guthi* and a (retired) prominent photographer, who famously refused a job offer from the Nepali Royal Palace. He is most interested in documenting the festivals and culture of Nepal that he felt was disappearing, used later in many exhibitions at home and abroad. He is also particularly interested in Kathmandu's history which he recounts through photos and through documents with which he has made a family tree, which I rely on in my analysis. I also interviewed a prominent Nepali heritage activist, Alok Siddhi Tuladhar, on 18th May 2024, who has been involved in many activist movements mostly in Kathmandu. He specialises in the Newari culture and heritage of Kathmandu, particularly through interactions and interviews with priests. In an article about him, Ghimire writes: as he, "delved deeper into the rituals, he unearthed a hidden science and logic, revealing the practicality behind the ancient practices." (Ghimire 2024) These "practicalities", and their manifestations within preservation, maintenance and conservation, as I argue later, become strong arguments against Western conceptions of the value of museums.

I follow in the oral traditions with which Nepali myths, legends and lores are passed down from generation to generation. In my interview with Shridhar, I conduct an oral history asking him about his experiences growing up when the *Guthi* system had more salience in daily life. Beyond the ceremonial aspects, he also provided personal perspectives and experiences with which we can gauge what these ceremonies meant to people. I use these experiences to show people's relationship with their heritage, forged from childhood, through which people form an affective connection to their heritage. From the knowledge Alok has accumulated, through the studies he conducted while participating in the cultural festivities, rituals and tradition, my interview with him brings an important perspective in my thesis, through which the scientific, philosophical and practical rationale is formed that helps maintain and preserve Nepali heritage. This way, my interviews are not only sources of qualitative data, but also, by my leaning on my interlocutors' personal experience and knowledge that they have gathered, either through socialisation or by anthropological interests, these interviews become a window through which we can assess the personal and emotional connections that people have towards their heritage.

IV. The Nepali Practice of Culture

A. Current Repatriation and Restitution Efforts

Figure 1: *Laxmi-Narayan* after restitution
with her original jewellery that didn't fit the replacement idol placed besides her
(Machamasi 2021)

Calls for repatriation and restitution of stolen artefacts make headlines ever-so-often in the world media. These are often requests that have surrounded some type of controversy, either of the illegality of its first removal or of high-level diplomacy ending in blatant rejections of the source countries' requests. In Nepal, what has gained press is the joyous return of the repatriated Gods from museums into the temples and shrines that it was originally taken from. This, as Elke Selter writes in *Returning the Gods to the People: Heritage Restitution in Nepal*, is a contradicting example of Western influence in art and conservation practices. Using, as an example, the restitution of the Laxmi-Narayan idol— first from the Dallas Art

Museum to the Patan museum, and then to its original shrine in the city of Patan—Selter documents a shift in the restitution approach in Nepal marked by the coordinated efforts of the community, activists, museums and the government. Selter outlines the formal procedure for the return of stolen idols into their original shrines, starting first with the reception of the stolen idols to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, from here the Ministry's Department of Archaeology hold the idols (Selter 2022, 121). The custom before was to hold those objects within the department (Tuladhar 2024) but in the past few years, some of the objects have been handed over to the National Museum in Kathmandu, which has the discretion to either entrust it to other regional museums or to return it back to the source communities (Selter 2022, 121).

The role of citizen activists, both at home and abroad, is pivotal in this process. Particularly by using social media, activists are spreading awareness about Nepali lost art which has successfully helped to identify these cultural artefacts in foreign museums and collections. The anonymous Facebook account 'Lost Arts of Nepal' is one such example, which compiles pictures of stolen Gods and Goddesses, often using historic sources documenting these artefacts like Schick's *The Gods are Leaving the Country*, to be posted in social media platforms (Smith 2022, 267). Once identified it is taken on by activist groups — chiefly the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign, or NHRC, consisting of activists, advisors and lawyers from Nepal and abroad (Hickley 2023). By preparing the legal documentation, filing FBI reports, submitting formal claims and coordinating between the relevant ministries and museums, the NHRC has already taken a major role in repatriating more than forty cultural objects, including the *Laxmi-Narayan* statue (Fig 1), with many more ongoing cases (Smith 2022, 268). Working on a voluntary basis, the activists in the NHRC, as well as other heritage conservationists have in mind not just the reunification of emptied temples, but also the value

of the 'living' culture Nepal has. Sanjay Adhikari, one of the members of NHRC expresses in an interview, his sorrow when looking at the Gods encased behind glass walls, unable to be ornamented, worshipped, and prayed to. To him, as well as other activists and citizens, these imprisoned Gods—still with remnant vermillion powder from centuries ago—seem to ask, "Don't I have the right to dignified life?" (Pradhan 2022, 00:11:00-00:12:20)

The activists' and communities' hope to be able to worship their Gods and Goddesses is being largely echoed by the museums and the government. The principal legislation regarding cultural heritage in Nepal, the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act 1904, stipulates the rules regarding what kinds of archaeological objects can be moved, traded and taken out of the country. Article 20A was added in 1986 which stipulates that if the ancient monument, "is requested by the concerned owner or the trustees to be given back to them for reinstalling or for keeping it to its usual place […] the Department of Archaeology may, if deemed proper, give back the said object" (AMPA 1904, Article 20A). The National Museum in Nepal has also made provisions for a special room in which 62 repatriated deities are currently displayed where the public can come and worship them (Gurubacharya 2024). The director, Jayaram Shrestha said in an interview, "I don't want to store them in storage, they should be made available" (Gurubacharya 2024). For their removal and reinstatement back into their original shrines, the National Museum has requirements that support the broader values of the living culture that Nepal enshrines. Writing from heritage law perspective in a different paper, Selter outlines that the community first needs to show proof that the idol was originally theirs (Selter 2022). The main requirement is that the community needs to prove that the idol will be worshipped "as part of their living culture", then needing to prove that necessary security measures, that the community is committed to, for prevention from further damage or theft. This requirement that the idol must be worshipped as part of their living

culture emphasizes the entangling of tangible and intangible heritage in Nepal, promoting a culture that is interactive, performative and alive.

The return of the *Laxmi-Narayan* idol was not only a starting point which instigated the return of other idols into source communities, it also helped people at home and abroad realise the power of these cultural artefacts. It is crucial to underscore, in the restitution of the Laxmi-Narayan and some others that followed, the grand festivities and celebration that took place. The array of Nepali news clips, documentaries, and locals posting videos of this festival to mark the return of the 12th century statue of Laxmi Narayan, highlights the success of this shift in approach that Selter outlines. The Goddess was paraded in a palanquin with bands of musicians to be reinstated to her original shrine in her temple freshly decorated with garlands for her arrival. The idol of Laxmi Narayan made after the original idol's disappearance was put to the side, and the original idol was placed on her shrine, ornamented with the original brass jewellery that didn't fit the previous idol. This festive restitution of the lost Goddess, to me highlights, both the successful coordination of activists, museums and governments through which other Gods can be returned to the shrines to which they belong, as well as the deep emotional connection that people have to their idols. They are not seen as artistic and archaeological objects in need of display, but as Gods and Goddesses illicitly taken from their temples and shrines, from where the common people can revere and worship it.

B. The Living Nature of Nepali Heritage

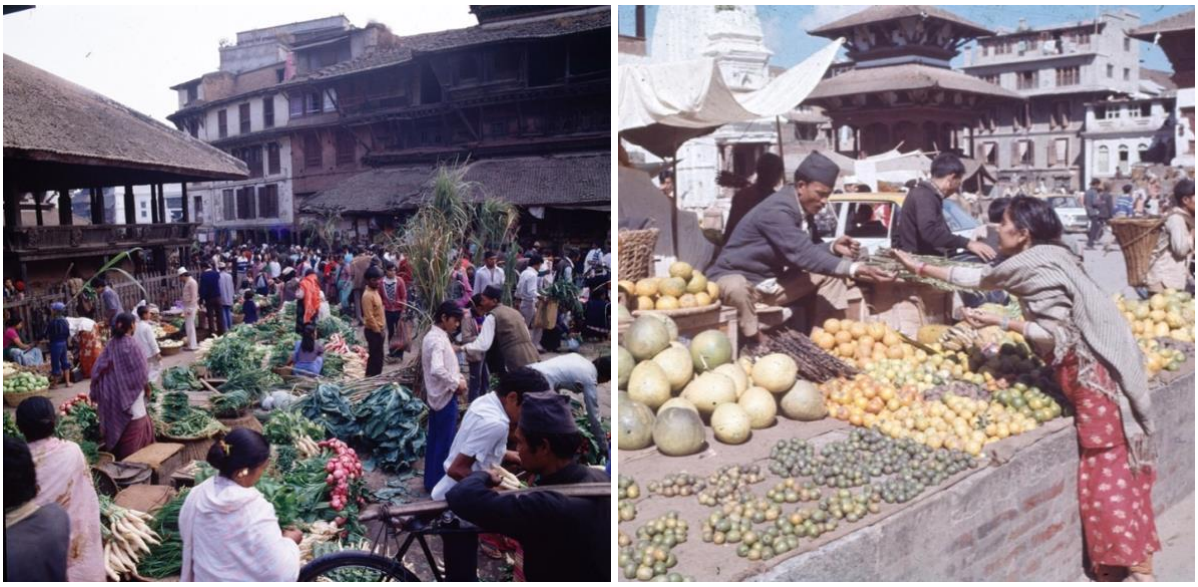

Figure 2: Morning Vegetable Markets in the *Durbar* Square which still remain a daily scene. © Shridhar Lal Manandhar ca. 1968

Nepali culture has been frequently understood to have a 'living' component to it. The visible heritage that seems to be omnipresent and in continuous interaction—with devotees and tourists alike—is what allows for the delicate balance between Kathmandu as a place for living culture, and the city's perception as an open-air museum, borne by the western touristic gaze. Alok outlines that the presence of shrines and monuments within the city—on street corners, rooftops, on the way to school and back—shows not only the intertwined nature of the culture in Kathmandu, but also how woven this culture is within the daily lives of the people (Tuladhar 2024). It is often the case, even today, that people stop over at numerous temples and shrines on their way to work, sometimes carrying offerings, ringing the temple bells, and putting on the *tika*, or holy vermillion powder, on their foreheads as blessings. This omnipresent nature, making it hard to separate one's personal, social, and religious life, adds to the living nature of Nepali culture: the interactions between people and their heritage are so seamlessly blended, making it an irreplaceable feature of each other. Shridhar remarks that

this interaction is not necessarily even religious, giving examples of the daily mundane interactions that take place in steps of grand temples and *Durbar* Squares. Through his anthropological interests in photography, he's taken several pictures of these vegetable markets (Fig 2) and of the people sitting right below steps of grand temples in the *Durbar* Square (Fig 3 and 4), a site we can still see today.

Figure 3: People watching the Kumari Festival atop a temple
© Shridar Lal Manandhar ca. 1972

Figure 4: People Resting on the Steps of a Temple
© Shridar Lal Manandhar ca. 1961

While travellers and scholars acknowledge the visible traces of this 'living' heritage, it is perhaps harder to go deeper in uncovering what it is that makes Nepali heritage '*alive'.* Elke Selter outlines the dual meaning of "living heritage": that the idols themselves are considered living beings and that it is still practice today, linking the past, present and then future (Selter 2022, 117). The former meaning, that the idols are alive, is one that best encapsulates the essence of the Nepali case, however the latter motivates the affective dimension between the people and their heritage, driving the national desires for the restitution of repatriated idols. Selter notes the tactile interactions between the people and their idols, seen across Nepal within daily, monthly and special worshipping practices. These interactions are marked by the belief that the God that is represented in an idol or statue is living within it. This follows the every-day meticulous banal religiosity whereby devotees place marigold garlands on the idols, apply vermillion powder to their foreheads, provide offerings of rice grains and food, and bow their heads and touch the feet of the idol. In Kathmandu, examples of this also range in the monthly and annual processions where different idols are bathed, ornamented, and in some cases, paraded around the city in palanquins and chariots.

These worshipping practices highlight the reverence of the idol beyond its archaeological or artistic value, but into the value of its essence and its soul. Alok mentions, when asked about this 'living' nature, the religious consecration practices through which an idol, initially considered a piece of art, is transformed into a living holy representation of a God (Tuladhar 2024). The meticulous process through which an idol becomes God, starts with the commissioning and carving of the idol, which itself involves sacred prayers and rites ensuring its purity and holiness. Then, together with the persons who commissioned it, the artist and priests, a religious *Praan Pratisthapan* ceremony is conducted, understood as, "the process of giving life to that image with divine powers, by sending God into the image, only then it is

worthy of worship" (Tuladhar 2024). The Sanskrit word *Praan* translates to life force and *Pratisthapan* means to establish or install (Roche 2024). In Kathmandu Valley, this consecration ceremony is done for both Hindu and Buddhist Gods in accordance with their individual faiths, rites and done by their own priests. This was also seen as a "cause for celebration", mentions Tuladhar, as it often involves *yagya* or fire sacrifice, animal sacrifice, and elaborate feasts celebrating the establishment of the new idol, shrine or temple. Oftentimes this auspicious day, which is sometimes documented as an inscription on the idol, is celebrated for generations after, through the framework of the *Guthi* system.

C. The *Guthi* System

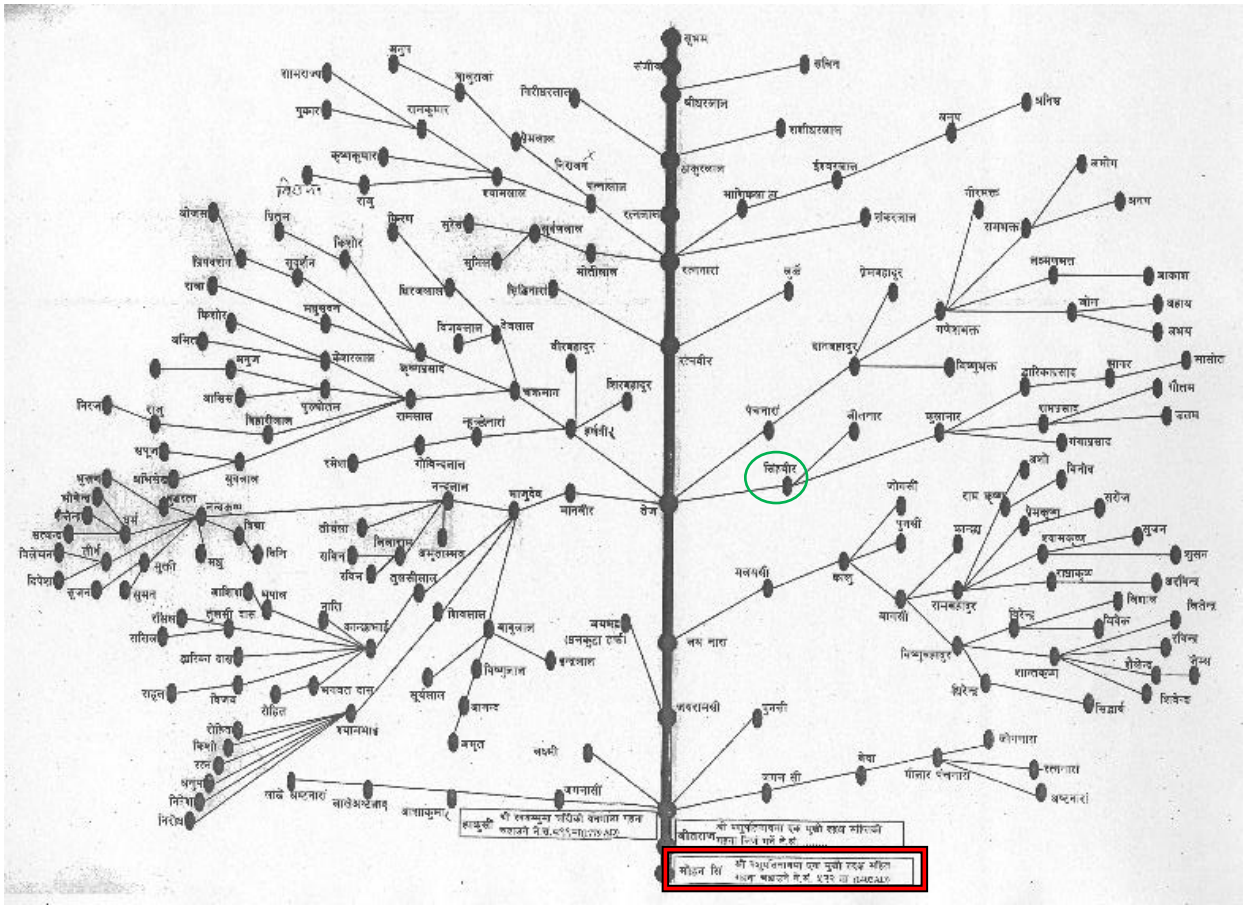

Figure 5: Family Tree made by Shridhar Lal Manandhar, 2012
Highlighted in green: Singhbir which is where the name *Sincha* comes from,
Highlighted in red: Mohan Singh's bequest of the *Ek-Mukhi Rudrakhsya* to the Pashupatinath Temple in 1402 AD

The *Guthi* system is a key aspect, when analysing the *practice of culture,* through which the affective connection is inculcated within the Nepalese people. While the system is prevalent outside of Kathmandu Valley as well, it is within the valley and in the cosmology of the Newari ethnicity, that the value of these collectives can be visibly analysed. These *Guthi* groups are formed of families from the same caste or clan whose lineage date back to the same ancestors: directly connecting the past to the present. In the *Guthi* that I belong to, my membership was preceded by the membership of my father, grandfather and so on, and while families can separate from these traditions, the entrance of others not related by lineage is strictly prohibited. Visible in the family tree created by my grandfather with the help of other *Guthi* elders of the time and other recorded documents and photos (Fig 5), the direct lineage between people in the *Guthi* and their forefathers is an essential component in its formation. In the case of the *Sincha Guthi,* this lineage is so central that the name itself is derived from one of my ancestors, *Singhbir Manandhar*—taking the Nepali diminutive suffix *'cha'* into *Sin-Cha* highlighted in green in figure 5 (Manandhar 2024).

History is also ever-present in the religious ceremonies of the *Guthi*: central to which is the ancestral God, the *Kul Devata,* which dates back to many generations. The numerous annual festivities of the *Guthi* system, which my grandfather calls "our excuses to get drunk"[2], involves practices that directly and indirectly celebrate their history. Ancestral idols would've been commissioned multiple generations before, and through the rites and ceremonies within the *Guthi* system, these idols would've been both worshipped and preserved for the future generations. In many cases, the dates at which these idols were consecrated in the '*Praan Pratisthapan'* ceremony, along with the name of the persons who commissioned them, are

[2] It is common to drink sacred rice wine, *aaila,* offered to the deities during Nepali festivals. Shridhar mentioned how these would be the only occasions in which drinking was socially permitted.

inscribed in the idol itself. Alok underscores the value of these consecration ceremonies in the *Guthi* practices: evident in the *Busaa Dan* (in English: Day of Birth) ritual, celebrating the anniversary of the consecration of the *Guthi* idol (inscribed also on the idol). Beyond the feasts that are often involved, this is also the day when one's ancestors are remembered, religious offerings are made to *Guthi* idols, and annual cleaning up and maintenance is done. In figure 6, the *Busaa Dan* ceremony in the *Sincha Guthi* is pictured in front of an ancestral Buddhist shrine in our ancestral neighbourhood of *Wotu*, with the then head of the *Guthi*, other members and the Newari high priest wearing his ceremonial crown.

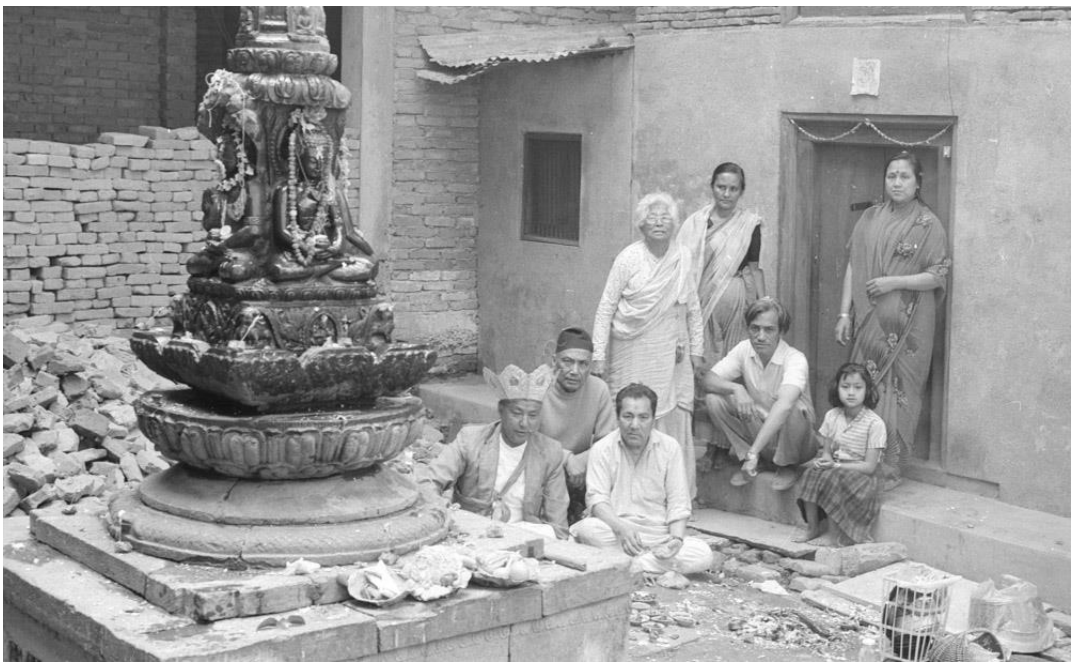

Figure 6: Busaa Dan ceremony of the *Sincha Guthi*
© Shridhar Lal Manandhar ca. 1965

Another important *Guthi* tradition that Alok highlights is the *Tisa Bichaha* ceremony, which translates from Nepal Bhasa[3] to 'Ornamental Inspection' ceremony. This is an important tradition which, also, involves a ritualistic *puja*[4] and a large feast but is primarily surrounded around the 'inspection' of jewellery or other precious ornaments, donated to temples by *Guthi*

[3] The Newari Language is commonly referred to as Nepal Bhasa.
[4] *Pujas* are religious rituals done on an everyday basis, but also in larger ceremonies.

ancestors. Giving an example of the *Janabahal* temple, Alok talks about this ingenious tradition whereby the large volume of donations made by the public are logged in inventories and safeguarded. The descendants of the donors, during this ceremony, go to the temple and demand that the *Tisa* or jewellery is shown to them. This "fool-proof" ritual ensures that individual ornaments are tallied and documented, and avoids mishandling, in that "the priest cannot do any 'hanky-panky' anymore" (Tuladhar 2024). Shridhar also recalls this ritual within the *Sincha Guthi* when during his youth, members would go to the Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu, have a big feast there and stay the night. This tradition in the *Sincha Guthi* spans almost 12 generations after my oldest recorded ancestor Mohan Singh donated an '*Ek-Mukhi Rudrakshya'*—a gilded necklace made out of seeds from the *Rudrakshya* tree—to a temple of Lord Shiva in the year 1402AD (highlighted in red in Figure 5). I too follow in this tradition by going to the temple last year during my summer break. While we don't get to see the jewellery anymore, we submit an annual monetary donation for the jewellery's upkeep and maintenance. Built within the premise of *Guthi* traditions, this ceremony helps ensure continuity as well as, by its design, the remembrance and maintenance of these artefacts for the generations to come.

The documentary practice of dating each artefact is carried out even today, especially in the addition of new jewellery, ornaments and other articles within it. For example, the below figure shows the addition of a silver *Torana* to the Kul Devata palanquin in the *Sincha Guthi*, inscribed with the name of Ganesh Bhakta Manandhar and his children, who commissioned the *Torana* in the year Bikram Sambat 2068.01.30, in C.E: 13th May 2011 [5] (Fig 7). Smaller silver jewellery is also offered to the *Kul Devata* in celebration of special events or birthdays: one was donated by my grandmother, and another, within figure 8, is even inscribed with the

[5] The Bikram Sambat is one of the calendars followed in Nepal, in addition to the Newari Calendar. Conversions done: https://www.hamropatro.com/date-converter

name Sagar and Sashwat who are both current members of the *Sincha Guthi.* These donation practices—done either to celebrate special events, job promotions, or even just to "beautify the gods" as done by my grandmother—can be of any scale. Additionally, the documentation practices of the donation, upgrading, replenishing and repairing of the jewellery and the idols themselves is built into the *Guthi* system, ensuring its constant preservation and continuity for future generations. It is this system of ensuring continuity, by preserving and adding to the repertoire of tangible heritage through constant intangible practices of culture, that the 'Nepali equation' is completed, as Alok says, the *Guthi* system is just one example of the 'mechanisms' that was put in place for its smooth facilitation into the future (Tuladhar 2024).

Figure 8: Toran dated to 2068 Bikram Sambat (CE 2011)
© Sanjeeb Manandhar, May 20, 2024

Figure 7: Sincha Guthi Kul Devata
© Sanjeeb Manandhar, May 20, 2024

D. Museums' Place in Kathmandu Valley

Given this intricate relationship between the people and the artefacts which make up the culture, the values and function of conventional forms of museums often seem to misalign. When asked about this role in a society that's ordered in non-conventional value systems, Alok argues that, "the concept of museums cannot be drawn parallel with what we have in Nepal. If you look at the western concept of museums, I think it is the antithesis of culture" (Tuladhar 2024). The value of the artifacts, idols and temples, in a city likened to an open-air museum, is completely nullified when put up as museum pieces—inside of humidity and temperature-controlled glass boxes. In unveiling the common conception of museums as a public good, Alirio Karina starts her essay, *Against and Beyond the Museum*, with a thought-provoking proposition: "the goal is to close the museum" (Karina 2022, 651). Addressing the assumed positives argued for by proponents of Western museums, she writes: "There is a fantasy that the museum – particularly one holding hostage pieces of other worlds, parts of others' bodies – might be a context from which to teach empathy and understanding" (Karina 2022, 654). I would argue further that this 'fantasy' of museums as spaces for education is one that has trickled down to the imaginaries of people and of museums beyond former colonial powers. Focusing on who learns from these museums, Karina finds that tourists and schoolchildren are the two biggest groups of museum dwellers worldwide. However, retention of information from museum artefacts within these demographics is easily impeded by tight schedules, rapid guided tours and the superficial downpour of detailed information (Karina 2022). In the case of Nepali museums, where cultural artefacts are removed from the cultural context in which it was created and worshiped, what is purportedly being taught and imparted is a rather unfinished picture, stripped of what it is that makes it valuable.

This incompatibility of the conventional museum practices and the display of Nepali living cultural artefacts invites a new consideration of museology through which the Nepali collective memory can be evoked and exhibited. Central to this, I argue, should be the practice of culture as well as the sacred artistic traditions involved, both of which make up the scaffolding of these artefacts. The Nepali artistic traditions span the entire history of its development, and, focusing on my area of study, "the finest craftsmen of Nepal have always been the Newari people of the Kathmandu Valley." (Teague 2024, 44) Buddhist Newari metalworkers were the main group of metal workers in the country and the traditions with which these artefacts were created—including the sourcing of the materials, the tools, techniques and the rituals observed in the process—have remained largely the same. Museums, both in Nepal and abroad, are equally guilty of sidelining and deemphasizing these traditions and practices, which ultimately lead to a decline in its observance. A new museology that encompasses the values of the historic objects it displays, in attempts to educate and invoke emotions of collective memory, must do so within the context of both its cultural and artistic genesis. A strong example of this envisioning is the display of the *Ṣaḍakṣarī Lokeśvara* in the Museum of Nepali Art (MoNA), in Kathmandu (Karki 2021). This *Paubha*, a typical Nepali meditative painting—of the Buddhist God of compassion credited for the Buddhist matra *Om Mane Padme Hom*—is unique from his very commission. Painted not just for its artistic or aesthetic beauty, the painter Ujay Bajracharya followed precisely the rules and regulations associated with this art, including: the *Hasta Puja* ceremony where a priest blesses the hands and painting materials, daily purification rituals, meditation, and observing a fast until each day's painting is completed (Tuladhar 2024). Displayed at the MoNA in a special room, this is a unique example of museum practices as the *Paubha* has been considered a holy object of worship upon its consecration or *Praan Pratisthapan* rituals. In my interview with him, Alok commended the display of this art work

and the traditions associated with it, not just because of its educational value, but also because of its potential to cultivate the artists and artistic traditions of Nepal.

V. CONCLUSION

In my search to uncover the affective connections between the Nepali people and their culture and heritage, the theme of restitution stands as only one of many examples of this dimension. The outlined rituals, traditions, and festivities, whether grand or banal, are examples of perspectives that are ignored and underappreciated in common imageries of cultural practices. These are overtaken by western concepts, for example of the open-air museum, which at first glance, seem to bridge the gap between Nepal and the West. However, through my analysis of the practice of culture which constantly gives meaning to Nepali heritage, I argue that Western concepts such as these obscure the meaning that cultural heritage has for the local people. The heritage within the valley is seen less as living pieces of a puzzle that makes up the culture and more like artefacts that are in dire need of extraction from the risky public places, corrupted by overpopulation, pollution, stray animals, and theft.

I show that the Nepali practice of culture not only gives meaning to its material heritage, it is also the framework through which the material heritage is preserved, protected and replenished. Merryman's three core values, with which he promotes contemporary museums and its modus operandi, are already fulfilled within Nepali cultural traditions and practices. The annual *guthi* responsibilities—for example, the *Busaa Dan* ritual to celebrate the day of consecration of inherited idols— "preserve" cultural property. The *Tisa Bichaha* ceremony ensures both preservation and "truth" as it is predicated upon the provenance and authentication of cultural property that was commissioned and consecrated centuries before by their ancestors. These are both strong examples of how the Nepali practice of culture, through scientific documentary traditions and ritual traditions invoking remembrance, ensures that the inherited cultural heritage will be preserved and protected. Merryman's third core

value of 'access' is also maintained within Nepali cultural practices, as temples and shrines are often open for the public for worshipping. Gods and Goddesses under *Guthi* custodianship are also taken out on an annual basis where these can be worshipped by the public. While there are indeed secretive idols that are not open for anyone to see[6], the worshipping of the temples in which they are housed is permitted annually. While these main ideals hailed by contemporary museums are already implemented within the Nepali traditions, the cultural objects themselves are—most importantly—unencumbered by glass barriers or entrance fees, allowing for the daily interactions between the people and their heritage.

Throughout my research, I was conscious of the possible biases that I might harbour towards my own culture. Like Slusser, mentioned in the critique of her contribution to Nepali heritage, I too might also have self-serving biases through which I seek out only that which supports my preconceptions. While I leave my conclusion with a focus on the practice of culture that, as I show, preserves its tangible heritage, it is equally important to acknowledge that this practice also encompasses the larger cosmologies that surrounds the Kathmandu Valley. Although the focus is on the protection of material heritage through intangible practices, this cosmology enshrines the value of impermanence: neither we nor our material possessions are permanent. In my interview, Alok mentioned how even the modern chemical vermillion powder used for worship corrodes the stone and metal idols; the goal, therefore, is not just to preserve one particular object for eternity, but to preserve the living traditions and way of life. Just as the *Praan Pratisthapan* practice is used to consecrate an object to be worshipped, the reconsecration ceremony is also common when an idol is replaced due to

[6] The most famous example being the *Taleju Bhawani*, a "*Gopya deuta"* or secretive goddess, seen only by the priests from the *Guthi*. The Goddesses' bejewelled necklace, stolen, found its way to the Art Institute of Chicago in 2010.

worldly decay, theft or damages. This becomes a cycle through which the intangible heritage ensures that material culture is preserved and protected and when the time comes, replenished and replaced. My research, although focused on the conservation of the material culture *through* the "practice of culture", ultimately hopes to add to and enlarge the little that is written about the wider cosmology and beliefs of the Nepali society.

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