

The House of Letters: Musical Apprenticeship among the Newar Farmers (Kathmandu Valley, Nepal)

Franck Bernède

“Étoit-il étonnant que les premiers grammairiens soumissent leur art à la musique, & fussent à la fois professeurs de l’un & de l’autre?”

J. J. Rousseau, *Essai sur l’origine des langues*

“Is it surprising that the first grammarians subordinated their art to music and were teachers of both?”

J. J. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Language*

This article explores the principles of musical discourse among the Jyāpu farmers of the Kathmandu Valley as revealed through the teaching of the *dhimay* drum. During this purely ritual apprenticeship, it is through the transmission of a corpus of musical compositions, based on mimetic syllables that are perceived as an expression of the voice of Nāsadyaḥ, the local god of music and dance, that the discourse of authority of the masters is expressed. The instrumental pieces played during religious processions originate from these syllables, which imitate the sounds of the drum. In addition, *dhimay* drum apprenticeship is inextricably linked to that of acrobatics, which includes the virtuoso handling of a tall bamboo pole. I propose to discuss here the nature of this musical language in its traditional context, as well as its recent transformations in Newar society.¹

In 1995 when I embarked on my investigations in Kathmandu Valley, I was looking for a master musician who would be willing to teach me the rudiments. At that time Jyāpu farmers

¹This article was translated from the French by Josephine Marchand. This study is based on research carried out in Nepal between 1995 and 2012. The first elements resulted in a university dissertation, some aspects of which have been presented in an article (Bernède 1997a and 1997b). First of all, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the late Dev Narayan Maharjan, my *dhimay* guru, for his esteemed guidance. This research would not have been possible without the help of many people, in particular Kriṣṇa Prasad Rimal, my first guide through the labyrinth of Newar culture. I also wish to thank my partners at the Singhinī Research Centre, Rameshwar Maharjan, Babu Raja Maharjan, and Ramesh Maharjan, as well as the members of Nāsadyaḥ guṭhi of Om Bāhāḥ twāḥ for their generous help. I would like to express my gratitude to colleagues and friends in Himalayan studies for making editorial comments and offering generous advice at different stages of this work: Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Anne De Sales, Alexander Von Rospatt, Kashinath Tamot, and Manik Bajracharya. I also give thanks to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

were not disposed to share their musical knowledge with anyone, even less so with a stranger. However, I was put in touch with Dev Narayan Maharjan, a master-drummer from Om̐ Bāhā twāḥ, a neighborhood in the south of the city. After we had been introduced, Dev Narayan looked me over in silence. Suddenly, he said curtly: *Ji guru kā* (“I am a master”). I nodded to show him that I did not doubt it for an instant. “No,” he said, “you don’t understand; I am a Master.” And as if to affirm his statement he got up abruptly and took down a little cloth bag that hung from the ceiling. Opening it carefully, he held it under my nose, repeating: “You see, I am a Master!” The blood stained bag contained a freshly cut buffalo’s ear. After a few moments of heavy silence, he disappeared into his attic and came back with a battered violin. Holding it towards me he said: “It’s your turn now. Show me what you can do! Repair this violin and play something!” When I had gotten over my surprise, I went ahead as well as I could, repositioning the strings, which had been put on the wrong pegs. After I had straightened the bridge and tuned the instrument I put it between my legs, as cellists do, and—thinking it would please him—started playing a Newar melody that I had heard a few days before. He did not seem the least bit interested in my rather inaccurate rendition, but kept his eyes riveted on my right hand. Interrupting me to comment on my playing, he said, “Yes, the way you use your wrist proves that you are also an ‘expert’ in your music. Let us go to the temple of Nāsadyaḥ. He and only he will decide if I can teach you!” We went off to the temple of the god of music, and there, taking an egg out of his pocket, he smashed it against the altar and examined the contents closely. After many long minutes he turned around and said, “Nāsadyaḥ has accepted. Come early tomorrow morning, because I have to go to the fields.” As this episode shows, the musical apprenticeship among the Jyāpu can only be undertaken inside the framework of a relationship with a master and under the patronage of the deity who presides over dancing and music.²

This article is organized into three parts. The first part presents the god of music and the *dhimay* drum that embodies him; the second part is devoted to the highly ritualized teaching of the instrument by a college of masters; and the third and last to a musicological and symbolic study of the repertoire.

Nāsadyaḥ and His Sonic Form, the *Dhimay* Drum

Nāsadyaḥ is described either as an aspect of Śiva Mahādeva, with whom he shares the Sanskrit names Nāṭyeśvara and Nṛtyanātha, or in the guise of the *Bodhisattva* Padmanṛtyeśvara (Figs. 1 and 2).³ There is hardly a Newar locality that does not have a shrine dedicated to him.

²As the following pages attest, traditional apprenticeships are here essentially community activities. My contact with the Master drummer contrasted sharply with that of the young Jyāpus. It nevertheless constituted the first immersion of my research, opening the doors of this society, which in those days were still very restrictive to outsiders.

³All these epithets refer to the original function of the lord of the cosmic dance (see Ellingson 1990:227). According to the Sanskritist Mahes Raj Pant (in a personal communication), the syllables *nā* and *saḥ* are thought to be contractions, respectively originating from the Sanskrit root *NĀT-*, “to dance,” and the name *Īśvara*, “Lord.” The contraction of Sanskrit syllables is frequent in Newari, a monosyllabic language. For the ethnomusicologist G. M. Wegner, the name Nāsadyaḥ is derived from the terms *nāsaḥ*, meaning “charm, charisma, inspiration,” and *dyah*, “god” (Wegner 1992:125).



Fig. 1. Nāsadyaḥ. Sundari coka. Royal Palace, Patan. Photo by the author.



Fig. 2. *Bodhisatva* Padmanṛtyeśvara. Mural painting in the vestibule of the temple of Śāntipur, Svayambhūnāth, Kathmandu. Photo by Stanislav Klimek.

Primarily associated with the qualities of skill, talent, perfection, eloquence, and right action, Nāsadyaḥ is revered above all for the powers (*siddhi*) he bestows on his devotees, without which no creative act is possible. Today he is worshipped publicly mainly by Jyāpus. Nāsadyaḥ is sometimes presented as a tribal deity who preceded Hinduism and Buddhism. We shall see, however, that the characteristics of musical apprenticeship, as well as the rituals associated with it, almost certainly refer to an ancient culture of Indian origin.

At once masculine and feminine, and also, possibly, androgynous, Nāsadyaḥ is usually represented in the form of cavities in temple walls (Fig. 3). These niches (*nāsaḥ pvāḥ*) remain, to the Newars, one of the most characteristic representations of



Fig. 3 *Nāsaḥ pvāḥ*. Temple of Wangḥ Duchenani, Kathmandu. Photo by the author, 1996.

the god.⁴ Usually aniconic, they take the form of openings in the walls of the shrines. Their number and geometric configurations vary from a single triangular crevice to three, sometimes five, more or less stylized openings (Wegner 1992:126).⁵ Most temples have only three, symbolizing the god and his main assistant musicians, Nandi and Bhṛṅgi. Where there are five cavities, the last two are usually associated with Gaṇeśa and Kumāra, the two sons of Śiva. In Kathmandu the few shrines that have them seem to be directly linked to royalty. This is particularly true of Maru Nāsadyaḥ Temple, situated near Kāṣṭhamaṇḍapa, which is intimately associated with the figure of King Pratāpa Malla.⁶ Another shrine, located in the heart of the royal palace, is exceptional in its configuration. According to a ritual handbook it has seven openings, linked to the seven notes (*svara*) of the musical scale. It should be noted that these cavities are not the prerogative of the god of music and are sometimes found associated with female deities. I should also mention a little known aniconic representation that, in the guise of an uncooked brick (*kaci appā*), is another manifestation of the sanctified presence of Nāsadyaḥ in some temples. It is used in particular during rites presiding over the apprenticeship of *kāhā* funerary trumpets.

Nāsadyaḥ, the phonic god *par excellence*, manifests himself naturally in the form of

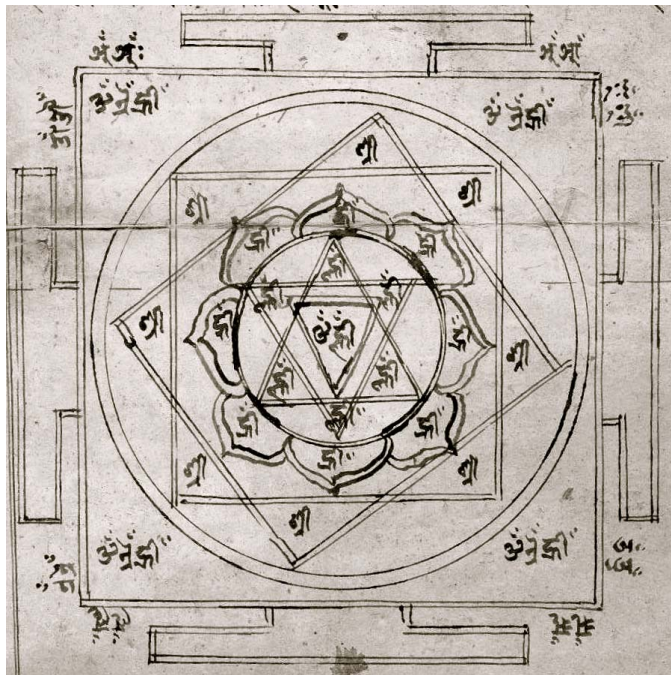


Fig. 4. Yantra of Nāsadyaḥ.

musical instruments. In the Himalayas, only the Newar seem to have developed such an elaborate cult devoted to musical instruments. Among these, the *dhimay* drum holds an exemplary place. Because it is considered by the Jyāpu to be a tactile and sonic form of the god, it is the object of particular veneration. As the master explained to me, “Without *pūjā* the instruments only produce noise; they have to be made animate, like statues.” Nāsadyaḥ can also be represented in the shape of a cosmogram (*yantra*), such as the one below, taken from a “*Nāsadyaḥ-pūjā-vidhi*” handbook and shown here as an example (Fig. 4). Its configuration corresponds exactly to that of Nāṭyeśa (a four-armed aspect of Śiva Mahādeva).

⁴These recesses are sometimes named *bālā pvāḥ*. According to Duwal and Maharjan (1997:5), “the slit representations of Nāsadyaḥ are called *bālā pvāḥ* when located in a shrine, and *mibhū* when found in a private house, although they have the same appearance in both cases.”

⁵The existence of other aniconic deities in the Newar tradition is to be noted, in particular Lukumahādyāḥ (see Michaels 1993).

⁶It is said that “Kavīndra,” the “King of Poets” (as Pratāpa Malla was known), composed his works in the upper pagoda of this temple, which was destroyed in the 1934 earthquake.

The Yearly Ritual of Nāsadyaḥ

The music god's yearly ritual reveals the highly ritualistic character of music teaching and the nature of the relationship between master and pupils. The ceremony, in the course of which the *dhimay* drum is consecrated (Fig. 5), takes part in each neighborhood of the city independently. It can be divided into two parts: the first consists of different offerings—musical, in particular—and the second is an animal sacrifice called *sī kāygu* (“take the head”) in honor of Nāsadyaḥ.

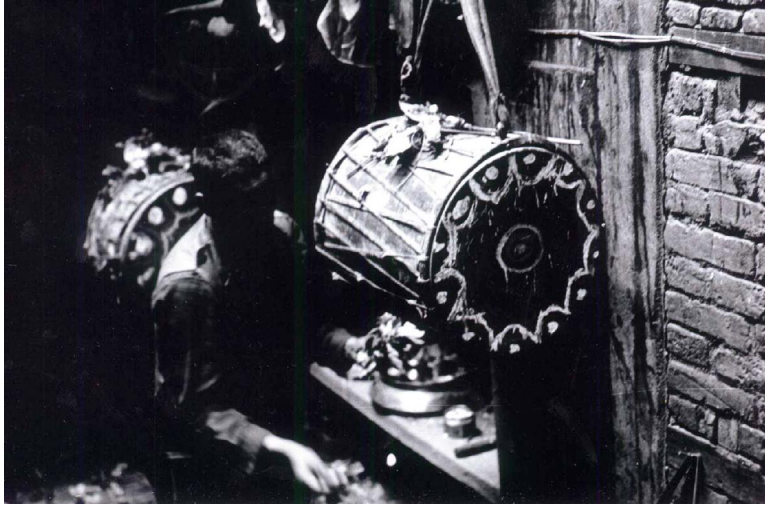


Fig. 5. *Nāsaḥ dhimay pūjā* at Tanani twāḥ, Kathmandu. Photo by the author, 1995.

To begin with, an auspicious diagram (*maṇḍaḥ cvaygu*) is drawn on the ground. The deities Gaṇeśa, Nandi, Nāsadyaḥ, Bhṛṅgi, and Kumāra are successively established. The *sukunḍā* lamp is lit, a *svastika* diagram is drawn in front of Nāsadyaḥ, and the ingredients of the ritual (flowers, incense, and so on) are laid before Kumāra. A cotton veil (*dhakīṃ*) is then hung in front of the temple niches (*pvāḥ*). The ceremony starts with the *abhiṣeka*, the lustration of the shrine. The celebrant, who in this context is none other than the

main master drummer (*mū dhimay guru*), lays down three rice cakes (*gvajā*), which represent Nāsadyaḥ and his assistant musicians, Nandi and Bhṛṅgi. Auspicious marks (*īṅkā*) are then drawn onto the instruments and the ritual implements. Following these proceedings, various offerings containing threads of cotton (*jajamkā*) are made, which represent gifts of precious clothing, a mixture of grains, meats, alcohol (supposed to be served as food for the deities), and flowers.⁷ The participants throw uncooked rice (*jāki*) into the air, after which incense (*dhūpa*) and burning wicks (*itāḥ*) are presented to the deities. Finally, the black mark of Nāsadyaḥ (*mohanī sinhaḥ*)⁸ is applied to their foreheads by the main guru. The clan elders recite mantras and the master gives instructions as to how the rest of the ceremony should be carried out. An offering called *baupā*, devoted to wandering spirits, concludes the first part of the ceremony.

The second part of the ritual opens with the consecration of both the butcher's knife (*nāy cupi*) and the sacrificial victim: a cock, a kid goat, or even a buffalo. In the first two cases the officiant sprinkles water on the animal's head until it shakes itself, which is taken to mean that

⁷ *Samay* is a mixture of grains of rice, rice flakes, black soybeans, puffed rice, ginger, roasted meat, black grains, cake made from black grains, and alcohol.

⁸ The word *mohanī* is related to the Sanskrit *mohana*, “illusion,” which is also one of the epithets of the god Kṛṣṇa. As for the term *sinhaḥ*, it means “mark” or “sign of vermilion” in Newari. During the ritual, this black mark (*īṅkā*) is placed on the forehead of all the participants. It is made from soot that comes from a burnt cloth, mixed with mustard oil.

the deity accepts the sacrifice. If a buffalo is sacrificed, sprinkling water is not considered necessary. The animal's throat is slit from top to bottom and the jugular vein is extracted. The blood of the sacrificial victim is then applied to the tympanum of the temple. Another morsel of flesh is presented to the flame of a ritual lamp and placed in a saucer. The animal is then beheaded and the head laid on the altar. The shrine is sprinkled with the blood of the victim. A lit cotton wick, extracted from the lamp, is then placed there. The flame, here, is interpreted as a tangible sign that the constituent parts of the buffalo have been reabsorbed into the five fundamental elements (*pañcatattva*). The head officiant then applies a *ṭīkā* of blood onto the membranes of the drum. The animal's head is placed in a pot and presented to the participants who use its blood to apply a *ṭīkā* on themselves. Egg whites are offered to all the deities as well as to *khyā* and *kavaṃ*, the children of Nāsadyaḥ. Students then go to the music master's house (or sometimes to the house of the clan elder, *kaji*) to receive his blessing. The animal is butchered without delay. Its head is divided according to a strict hierarchy. The horns—parts that are considered indivisible—are offered to Nāsadyaḥ as a “remnant” of the sacrifice (Skt. *śeṣa*) and are hung at the top of his temple.⁹ Today this rite, which is essential for the acknowledgement of the elders' status, is the subject of controversy among the Jyāpu community, especially among those who are Buddhists. It seems to be gradually disappearing from the ritual landscape. When I asked Dev Narayan Maharjan about the origin of this sacrifice, he recounted the following legend:

Kṛṣṇa wanted to learn the art of singing. He knew that Nāsadyaḥ was the uncontested master and that his talent depended on a precious stone that was stuck in his throat. Repeatedly, the “divine charmer” tried to convince Nāsadyaḥ to show it to him, but he always refused. However, being susceptible to flattery, one day Nāsadyaḥ ended up by spitting out the famous gem. In a flash, Kṛṣṇa got hold of it and swallowed it. It is said that the magical character of the stone gave his flute its inimitable sound. To seek forgiveness Kṛṣṇa offered to give Nāsadyaḥ a buffalo every day in compensation, which he accepted.

As Dev Narayan Maharjan liked to point out, “Luckily ‘every day’ for Kṛṣṇa is just one day a year for us!”

The feast that follows the ritual, which can bring together several hundred people, is concluded late at night by a session of devotional songs (*dāphā mye*) and a last tribute to musical instruments in their quality as visible and tangible forms of the divine presence. During the festivities the different parts of the buffalo's head are given to the music teachers following a strict hierarchy, thus signifying their respective musical functions. I include here two tables, which synthesize this subtle hierarchy as I observed it in two localities in Kathmandu (Om Bāhā and Wotu twāḥ). It is worth noting the strict hierarchy between masters and future masters, which is borne out by granting of a different part of the head of the sacrificial animal. Each master has a particular function, the two principal masters being responsible respectively for *dhunyā* pole training and *dhimay* drum apprenticeship.

⁹ It should be noted that this sacrificial rite is not exclusive to the cult of the god of music, but conforms to most of the annual and occasional celebrations of Newar religious associations (*guthī*).

Status	Rank	Functions	Parts of the buffalo	Transmission
<i>mū dhunyā guru</i>	1	principal <i>dhunyā</i> master	right eye	1st <i>dhunyā</i> and <i>dhimay</i> student (<i>cobināyah</i>)
<i>mū dhimay guru</i>	2	principal <i>dhimay</i> master	left eye	1st <i>dhimay</i> student
<i>tisā māḥ guru</i>	3	<i>dhunyā</i> master	right ear	3rd <i>dhunyā</i> student
<i>kote māḥ guru</i>	4	<i>dhunyā</i> master	left ear	4th <i>dhunyā</i> student
<i>kote māḥ guru</i>	5	<i>dhunyā</i> master	tongue	5th <i>dhunyā</i> student
<i>kaji</i>	6	organiser	muzzle	Hereditary office (<i>tuī</i>)
<i>guru</i>	7	<i>dhimay guru</i>	right cheek	2nd <i>dhimay</i> student
<i>guru</i>	8	<i>dhimay guru</i>	left cheek	3rd <i>dhimay</i> student
<i>hāmu</i>	9	messenger	right feet	volunteer
<i>lipā guru</i>	10	future <i>guru</i>	hooves	new student
<i>lipā guru</i>	11	future <i>guru</i>	hooves	new student
<i>lipā guru</i>	12	future <i>guru</i>	hooves	new student
<i>lipā guru</i>	13	future <i>guru</i>	hooves	new student
<i>lipā guru</i>	14	future <i>guru</i>	hooves	new student
<i>lipā guru</i>	15	future <i>guru</i>	hooves	new student

Table 1. Annual ritual: *dhimay Nāsaḥ pūjā* (Orī Bāhā twāḥ).¹⁰

Status	Rank	Functions	Parts of the buffalo	Transmission
<i>mū dhunyā guru</i>	1	principal master of the <i>dhunyā</i> pole	right eye	hereditary office
<i>mū dhimay guru</i>	2	principal master of <i>dhimay</i> drums	left eye	
<i>bhusyāḥ guru</i>	3	master of <i>bhusyāḥ</i> cymbals	right ear	
<i>kēpuī guru</i>	4	master of the <i>kē</i> disk	left ear	
<i>kaji</i>	5	organiser	muzzle	
<i>chomani guru</i>	6	master of the <i>dhimay</i> drum	tongue	temporary, renewed every 12 years during the apprenticeships.
<i>betā māḥ guru</i>	7	master-acrobat	right cheek	
<i>yākaḥ māḥ guru</i>	8	master-acrobat	left cheek	
<i>sī tuti guru</i>	9	master of stilts	front legs	
<i>hāmu</i>	10	messenger	hind legs	hereditary office

Table 2. Annual ritual: *mū dhimay guṭhi pūjā* (Wotu twāḥ).

As can be seen from these tables, the distribution of the parts of the animal's head differs greatly depending on the neighborhood, the type of ritual, and the circumstances surrounding the

¹⁰ During the *pūjā*, precedence of seating does not depend on age, but is decided according to the importance of the master's function.

teaching. While the eyes and the ears—the parts considered to be the most prestigious¹¹—are usually distributed first, in Om Bāhāh they are offered respectively to the two senior masters of the *dhunyā* pole and the *mū dhimay*. In contrast, in Wotu twāḥ, where idiophone players (of *bhusyāḥ* cymbals and *kēpuī* disks) also have the status of “principal master” (*mūla guru*), the masters of these instruments receive the same parts. The muzzle (*tunāḥ*) is always given to the *Kaji*, whose rank in the hierarchy (6th in Om Bāhāh and 5th in Wotu) depends on the number of masters preceding him. It should also be noted that the way the status of guru is obtained is also subject to variations: it may depend on the skills of practitioners, as it is in Om Bāhāh, or is inherited as in Wotu. Finally, it is of note that the masters of the *dhunyā* pole always have priority over instrumentalists. These two examples suffice to show that it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish a fully unified system applicable to the entire city, and that the neighborhoods demonstrate in these matters a relative autonomy with regard to the urban territory as a whole, reminding us, if it were necessary, of their origins as villages.



Figs. 6 and 7. Singhinī and Vyāghrinī. Detail of the “Rāto Matsyendranātha Temple” paubhā, Rubin Museum of Art. C 2006-42.2 (Har 89010).

The *Dhimay* Drum of Kathmandu: an Organological Touchstone

Amidst a rich array of instruments, the *dhimay* drum stands out, without exaggeration, as the sonic archetype of the Newar world. Its playing, described as one of the oldest musical

¹¹ The pre-eminence of the right eye over the other parts of the head is not typical to this ceremony.



Fig. 8. *Mā dhimay*. Seto Matsyendranātha *jātrā*. Photo by the author, 1996.



Fig. 9. *Yalepvaḥ dhimay*. Wotu *twāḥ*. Photo by the author, 1996.

expressions of Kathmandu Valley, is an integral part of the Newar identity. The perceived value of this ancestral tradition is confirmed in a myth:¹²

At Lumbini, Buddha was plunged in profound meditation. The gods and goddesses, hoping to establish him in the valley of Kathmandu, wished to bring him out of it. Neither the songs nor the dances of the *apsarās* succeeded in troubling his concentration. So the Deva asked Gaṇeśa to play the *dhimay* drum, while Hanumān was asked to maneuver the *dhunyā* bamboo pole. Buddha eventually emerged from his meditation and was led with great ceremony into the valley. On his way, he travelled along the back of Vāsukī, the abyssal serpent, and was preceded by the Goddess Sarasvatī, who laid carpet on his path.¹³

Well represented in ancient iconography, the *dhimay* drum appears as an attribute of the gods, as it is here for Gaṇeśa. It is also placed in the skillful hands of lesser deities, such as Singhinī and Vyāghriṇī, assistants of the god of music (Fig. 6 and 7). Its powerful sound, combined with the

¹² As told to me by a master of *dāphā* singing in Kathmandu in 1995.

¹³ The same myth is treated at length in Bühnemann (2015:108).

clash of cymbals, is often linked to the roaring of these two mythical figures, a lioness and tigress respectively.

Although the *dhimay* does not have a place in the scholarly repertoire, it seems to have always been highly esteemed. Malla (1982:72) has noted its participation in theatrical performances (*pyākhām*) in the palace. This is confirmed by the ritual texts that I have examined, dating from the later Malla period. Known also as *dhemāsa*, it has a prominent place in many ritual handbooks, such as those devoted to the goddesses Aṣṭamāṭṛkā and Navadurgā.

The *dhimay* drums are mainly seen during processions, which are one of the major forms of Newar religious life.¹⁴ In these instances, they are invariably placed at the head of the procession, followed by other drums recognized as originating in India.¹⁵ The *dhimay* is of central importance in a pool of musical instruments that includes no less than 23 types of membranophones.¹⁶ In Kathmandu in 1997, forty-five formations (*dhimay bājā khalah*) were counted, with thirty-four in Patan (for forty-five Jyāpu neighborhoods) and eleven in Bhaktapur. Although it is mainly played by farmers, the *dhimay* is not, however, the prerogative of that caste. Sharma and Wegner (1994) point out that it is also played by the Pahariya at Baḍikhel¹⁷ and, as I noticed, on the outskirts of urban centers by members of the Duī (Nep. *Putuvāra*) caste, in particular in the localities of Icaṅgu Nārāyaṇa and Lubhu.¹⁸

In contrast to the two other ancient royal cities of the valley, two varieties of *dhimay* can be clearly distinguished in Kathmandu: a big drum, called *mū dhimay*, and a smaller one, called *yalepvaḥ dhimay*.¹⁹ Considered to be one of the forms of Nāsadyaḥ, the *mū dhimay* is the ritual instrument *par excellence*.²⁰ The *mū dhimay* is the exclusive prerogative of music masters, but when it is played by other members of the neighborhood association, they call it *mā dhimay* (Fig.

¹⁴ The three ancient royal cities are also associated with different instruments or with a specific repertoire: Bhaktapur is thus renowned for the playing of the *pacimā* drum, while in Patan the *dāphā-khim* is appreciated above all. In Kathmandu, on the other hand, the acrobatic practices (*dhunyā*) associated with the *dhimay* drums are particularly valued.

¹⁵ According to Thakur Lal Manandhar, (cited in Grandin 2011:108), the *dāphā khalah* repertoire—the local equivalent of the devotional *kīrtana* songs of Northern India—originated in Mithila. Other Newars, however, believe that it comes from Southern India. On this repertoire, see R. Widdess (2013) on the *dāphā bhajana* in Bhaktapur.

¹⁶ For a general introduction to the Newar instrumentarium, see Wiehler-Schneider and Wiehler (1980).

¹⁷ Baḍikhel is a village situated in the south of Kathmandu Valley, not far from Lele, another locality where the oldest stele relative to *dhimay* drums is found. See Wegner and Sharma (1994).

¹⁸ Totally absent from the urban centers, the Duī, once carriers of royal palanquins (Nep. *Rājābhāka* / *Putuvāra*), are principally established on the outskirts of villages such as Tusāl/Tupek, in Icaṅgu Nārāyaṇa, in south-east Buḍhānīlkaṅṭha, to the north of Bodhnātha, around Lubhu, and near Purāṇo Guheśvarī (Bālāju). Their practice of the *dhimay* drum, at least as I was able to observe it, seems less ritualized than in the Jyāpu community. They are also the custodians of a tradition of masked dance.

¹⁹ On the tradition of the *dhimay* drum in Bhaktapur, see Wegner (1986). On the same instrument in Kirtipur, see Grandin (2011:105).

²⁰ A shrine called *dhimay lvahām*, made relatively recently not far from Svayambhūnātha, is dedicated to him. The instrument is worshipped there in the form of a stone, in the *pīṭha* manner.

8). The instrument is also called *mā* when it is associated with the bamboo pole (*dhunyā*).²¹ A less common, but significant, appellation, *twāḥ dhimay* (the “neighborhood *dhimay*”), is also recorded, illustrating the instrument’s prominent status as a factor of musical identity in the different territorial units.

As for the *yalepvaḥ dhimay* (Fig. 9), also known as *dhāḥcā*²² or *cigvagu* (“little”) *dhimay*, it is described as a relatively recent invention and attributed to the Kumāḥ caste of potters. This group, slightly inferior in status to the Jyāpu, yet related to them, does not have access to the apprenticeship of *mū dhimay*. According to the celebrated drummer Kriṣṇa Bhai Maharjan, himself of Kumāḥ origin, it was his community that created the drum—whose existence seems to have been known of for only a hundred years or so—in order to better their condition. Other explanations are also put forward: the *yalepvaḥ dhimay* is said to have come, as its name would suggest, from the neighboring town of Patan (Newari *Yala*).²³ The farmers of this town, who call it *yamipvaḥ* (*Yam* is the ancient name for Kathmandu), claim it originated in the capital. Each group claims that the other is responsible for its creation! Whatever the truth, this little drum today enjoys unsurpassed prestige. The *yalepvaḥ dhimay* is above all the instrument of celebrations and festivities.

Organologically speaking, these two forms of *dhimay* are attached to the great family of *ḍhol* drums common all over northern India (see Kölver and Wegner 1992). These are cylindrical double-sided drums made from wood or hammered brass (*lī*). Their sizes, as well as their shapes, are not standardized, and vary in height from 35 to 42 cm with a diameter of 23 to 27 cm for the *yalepvaḥ dhimay*, and from 45 to 50 cm in height with a diameter of 38 to 50 cm for the *mū dhimay*.

The body of the instrument is generally thought of as a tactile form of the deity, but it is, above all, the membranes that are sacralized: they are not allowed to come into contact with the ground. Each drum skin is invested with a symbolism that is actualized in a contrasting way in each of the three ancient royal cities. In Kathmandu the right-hand skin is identified with Nāsadyaḥ and the left-hand skin represents *māhāmkāḥ*,²⁴ while in Bhaktapur the left hand drum skin is associated with Haimādyāḥ, an obscure divinity who is apparently unknown outside of the city.²⁵ Lastly, in Patan the membranes are thought to correspond to the two aspects—wrathful

²¹ According to Surya Maharjan (in a personal communication), the *mū dhimay* is the instrument associated with the *dhunyā* bamboo pole, to which we will return later, and which, with the exception of the south quarter of Orṁ Bāhāḥ, is circumscribed by the north part of the town. As for the *mā dhimay*, it is associated with the *poṅgā* trumpets that are played in the northern neighborhoods.

²² The term *dhāḥcā* refers to the *dhāḥ* drum of the Urāy Buddhist merchants (Nep. *Tulādhar*). This instrument presents many organological similarities with the *yalepvaḥ dhimay* of Kumāḥ. However, their respective techniques vary considerably, producing different timbres. While the *dhimay* is played with a bamboo stick, the *dhāḥ* is vibrated with a heavy hardwood stick.

²³ Wielher-Schneider and Wielher, 1980:129, n.48.

²⁴ The term *māhāmkāḥ* seems to be a contraction of the name Mahākāla, a deity of “the transcending time.” Several informants (especially in the southern part of Kathmandu), however, have told me that *māhāmkāḥ* is derived from *mā*, “mother,” and *kah*, “place,” and means “place of the Mother.”

²⁵ On the god Haimādyāḥ, a deity specific to Bhaktapur, see Wegner (1992:125).



Fig. 10. *Mā dhimay* drums decorated with *svastika*. Seto Matsyendranātha *jātrā*, Kathmandu. Photo by the author, 2013.

and benign (*tāṇḍava* and *lāsya*)—of the dance of Śiva Naṭarāja.²⁶ As we have seen, these drum skins are “animated” during sanctification rituals. These procedures are in many ways similar to the consecration of images as can be found in the Hindu world. In addition to the apposition of the *ītkā* of blood, which has already been mentioned in relation to the Nāsadyaḥ *pūjā*, the skins are also subject to various graphic markings (*yantra*, *ṣatkoṇa*, *svastika*, and so on), made with red and white powders, which refer to the fundamental masculine-feminine opposition pointed out above (Fig. 10).

The *dhimay* drum is never played alone but at the very least in pairs and accompanied by other instruments. However, when it is played in a group, it gives its name to the ensemble: *dhimay bājā*.²⁷ In Kathmandu, to be complete, *dhimay bājā* includes idiophones that regulate the tempo (*tāla*). Two varieties can be distinguished, depending on the area, neighborhood, and circumstances of execution: a pair of large *bhusyāḥ* cymbals and small discs and metallic plates called *kēpuī* and *ghau*. Interestingly, the two elements forming the pair of cymbals (with a diameter of about 30 cm) are dissimilar. The left, supposedly heavier, lies flat in the hand; it is retained by a cord passed through the fingers in a V shape, and is linked to the feminine pole, while the masculine, right hand cymbal is maintained by a bamboo twig held in the twisted cord, and is likened to the *liṅga*. The *yalepvaḥ dhimay* group in Kathmandu and all the *dhimay bājā* groups in other areas of the valley require that they be played together. These cymbals are, in theory, forbidden as an accompaniment for the *mū dhimay* in the capital, at least in the lower part of the town (Kvane). As for the *ghau* and *kēpuī* plates and discs, they are distinguished both by their forms and by their respective ranges: *ghau*, the more highly pitched of the two, is played in the lower part of the city, in Bhaktapur and in Patan, while the *kēpuī* (from the Newari *kē*, “disc,” and *puī*, the rope “handle” used to hold the instrument) is only played in the upper neighborhoods (*Thane*).²⁸ The playing of these instruments, which is deemed an honor because of their function as regulators of *tāla*, is often the preserve of the elders (*Thākulī*). Finally, the natural *poṅgā* trumpets should be mentioned. These instruments are also played with the *dhimay bājā* in the southern part of the city, and are used in the repertoire of devotional songs (*dāphā mye*).

²⁶ It will be recalled that popular etymology holds the word *tāla* to derive from the combination of the *tā* (from *tāṇḍava*) and *lā* (from *lāsya*) syllables.

²⁷ In Nepal, the word *bājā* is a generic term employed to designate all the music groups. It is not exclusive to the Newar world.

²⁸ According to Kashinath Tamot, the vocable *kē* could come from *kay*, “bell metal” (Skt. *kāṃṣya*).

Apprenticeship of the *Dhimay* Drum

Dhimay training is a major event in the life of the Jyāpus. Apart from the Kumāh potters, who are traditionally excluded, all the young people of the community are expected to participate. Although it is shared by all Jyāpus residing in the valley, the teaching follows different rules in each of the three ancient royal cities. These are much stricter in the Nepalese capital than anywhere else,²⁹ and more liberal in Bhaktapur and Patan, where there is no distinction, such as exists in Kathmandu, between the variety of *dhimay* drums, and where their apprenticeship is not subject to a ritual calendar.

In Kathmandu *dhimay* teaching (New. *dhimay syanegu*) is organized, in theory, every twelve years in every neighborhood of the city. It takes place during the three months of summer. The transmission of this apprenticeship—in many ways an authentic rite of passage—is mainly oral, and is wrapped in a shroud of secrecy. The sessions are held in quasi-reclusion in specialized houses called *ākhāh chem*, or “house of letters” (Fig. 11). The word *ākhāh*, related to the Sanskrit *akṣara*, means “letter” but also “imperishable.” It is akin to the meaning for “phoneme,” defined as “le plus petit élément, insécable a-tome (*a-kṣara*) de la langue” (Padoux 1980:75). These phonemes make up a musico-ritual language.³⁰ In the context of Newar traditions, it is not surprising that a site of acquisition of knowledge—founded above all, as we shall see, on the word—should be called the House of Letters.



Fig. 11. *ākhāh chem* of Wotu twāh, Kathmandu. Photo by the author, 1995.

²⁹ On the tradition of the *dhimay* drum in Bhaktapur; see Wegner (1986).

³⁰ We should remember that in the pan-Indian musical context, from the Purāṇa on, the term *akṣara* was the technical name given to a number of syllables corresponding to different drum strokes. Thus, the Viṣṇu Dharmottara distinguishes a certain number of syllables, among which *ka*, *ṭa*, *ra*, *ṭa*, *gha*, and *ja* (*da*?) are associated with strikes to the right side of the instrument, *ma* (*ga*?), *ha*, and *tha* to those of the left side, while *ṭha* (*da*?) on the head, *ka* (*kha*?), *ra* (*tha*?), *ṇa* (*ṇa*?), *dhva* (*dha*?), *la*, and *śva* (*ya*?) struck simultaneously with both hands. See Daniélou and Bhatt (1959:157 n.1).

The Theory, or “Musical Discourse”

The teaching is preceded by a collective initiation called *wahlāḥ cvanegu*.³¹ This ceremony, carried out well before the musical apprenticeships, mobilizes all the young boys between three and eight years of age in the neighborhood. The apprenticeship can be schematically divided into two main periods, which are themselves punctuated by four ceremonies, respectively called *Nāsaḥ sālegu*, *kṣamā* or *kṣamā pūjā*, *bā pūjā*, and *pidanegu pūjā*.³² Each of these, accompanied by a blood sacrifice, is followed by a community feast.

The *dhimay* apprenticeship invariably begins on the Thursday or Sunday following the festival of *Gaṭhāmugaḥ*³³ and finishes a few days before the festival of *Nalaḥ svanegu*, on the first day of the festival of *Mohani* (Nep. *Dasain*). Thursday is preferred, as it is an auspicious day dedicated not only to *Nāsadyaḥ*, but also to *Bṛhaspati*, the archetypal master (*guru*) in the Hindu tradition. It starts with the propitiatory rite of *Nāsaḥ sālegu*³⁴ or *dyāḥ sālegu pūjā*. The objective of this ceremony is to transfer the god’s energy from his temple in the neighborhood to the house of apprenticeship (*ākhāḥ chem*). The principal master³⁵ and his students meet to establish the *kislī*, an embodiment of the god in the form of a terracotta saucer containing uncooked rice topped with a coin on which a betel nut is placed. The master first establishes his own *kislī*, considered the main one (*mū kislī*). Each student makes and keeps his own *kislī* in the house of letters and worships it twice daily throughout his apprenticeship. The first apposition of *Nāsadyaḥ*’s black insignia (*mohanī sinhaḥ*) on the foreheads of the postulants marks the ritual with the seal of divinity. Without this any teaching would lack validity. The power conferred by the ritual is only given temporarily to the postulants; the insignia must without fail be given back to the deity at the end of the apprenticeship.³⁶ This is carried out at the end of the first public performance of pole raising (*māḥ thanegu*), a ceremony that marks the conclusion of the teaching and to which we will return later in detail. The process in question consists of laying the *ṭīkā* on a flower petal and then placing it on the deity’s altar, thus dispossessing the students of

³¹ In Newari, the term *wahlāḥ*, derived from the Sanskrit *ahorātra*, means “a day and night” and *cvanegu* meant “to stay, to remain.” Here, the expression refers to the two days and a night spent by young children in initiation every year. For a general description of this ceremony, see Toffin (2007:86).

³² *Nāsaḥ sālegu* designates the propitiatory rite dedicated to *Nāsadyaḥ*. The term *kṣamā* means “excuse” in Sanskrit and Newari. Obligatory in Kathmandu, the *kṣamā pūjā* is rarely part of the apprenticeship of the *dhimay* drum in other sites. It does not exist in Kīrtipur and is optional in Patan. In Newari, *bā* means half and indicates the intermediary ritual done at the mid-term of the training. The word *pidanegu* indicates the conclusive ritual of the whole apprenticeship.

³³ The festival of *Gaṭhāmugaḥ* concludes the period of subterranean traveling of the gods and the prohibition of sound production, at least for emblematic instruments such as the *dhimay* or the *khim*.

³⁴ *Sālegu* means “to drag” in Newari. Here the deity is accompanied from his temple to the house of apprenticeship.

³⁵ The principal master (*mū guru*) is, in this context, named *Nātha Guru* in reference to the epithet *Nātha*, “Lord,” given to *Nṛtyanātha*, one of the Sanskrit names of *Nāsadyaḥ*.

³⁶ The procedure whereby the postulants “return power” to the god is reminiscent of another operation of the same type, prevalent among the high Newar Hindu priesthood castes. Dyczkowski (2004:201) points out that when a *Karmacārya* initiate dies, a rite consisting of giving back the *mantra* to his elective deity must be carried out.

the power with which they had been temporarily invested and that had been given to them by the god himself.

The first part of the teaching lasts about six weeks and is exclusively devoted to the acquisition and memorization of the repertoire, which, in the case of the *mū dhimay* in Kathmandu, includes about fifteen pieces.³⁷ These are recited forwards, backwards, in mirror fashion, and in alternating sequences. The aim of these mnemonic techniques, which consist of first isolating every segment of the musical phrase before reconstituting the whole from its parts, is to establish metric regularity while at the same time developing the independence of the hands. The number of “mother-syllables” in use today seems, however, to vary from neighborhood to neighborhood. Thus, according to Purna Kaji Jyāpu, a drummer from the northern neighborhood of Pyangaḥ, a new syllabary bears witness to a more elaborate classification, integrating an important number of derivatives based on the five phonemes commonly used. Thirty or so syllables would seem to be associated here with the playing of the right-hand drum skin, fifteen with left-hand playing, and four with the play of both hands. The reader who is familiar with Indian musical theories will hardly be surprised by these technical developments, which could have been inspired by *tabla* playing. Although the majority of masters from other neighborhoods seem unaware of its existence, this classification deserves to be mentioned as it bears witness, to my mind, to recent technical developments in certain less conservative neighborhoods.

These mnemonic techniques are reminiscent of other teachings, by which they were perhaps once inspired. The study of the Vedic corpus comes to mind,³⁸ in which different types of recitation offer similarities. Among these there exists a bodily participation (postures linked to drum strokes), which is also present in the instrument’s dance repertoire (*dhimay pyākham*).³⁹ This without doubt facilitates the memorization of the drum repertoire (Bernède 1997a), which is regularly controlled on two levels: by the daily recitation of formulas for the master, and every week, usually on a Sunday evening, during a ritual of collective offerings in the temple of Nāsadyaḥ. While this reflects the high status accorded to human masters, these teaching methods also show an ultimate subordination to the god of music who, in the collective consciousness, remains the ultimate reference for the transmission of knowledge that is primarily religious.

The first part of the teaching concludes with the *kṣamā pūjā* ritual. This procedure is not limited to the context of music. It is indissociable from all Newar rites and ceremonies and plays a part in the sacralization of craft activities. When an icon (*mūrti*) is being made, the rite is carried out at the decisive moment when the deity’s eyes are “opened.” From a musical standpoint, the *kṣamā pūjā* is above all seen as a *prāyaścitta*, that is to say a process of purification of faults, here those of incorrect enunciations committed by the students during the recital of musical syllabaries. This particular ceremony, in which both students and teachers take part, is directly related to the question of right utterance. It concerns the accepted pronunciation

³⁷ The ritual repertoire comprises no more than fifteen or so pieces in each of the neighborhoods of the town, totaling about 500 compositions for the city of Kathmandu.

³⁸ Eleven forms of Veda recitations exist. Their purpose is to impress the phonic sequence on the memory of Brahman students, independently of the meanings of the words. On this subject, see Filliozat (1992:13-19).

³⁹ In Newari the term *pyākham* not only means “dance,” but also designates theatrical performances.

of the musical syllabary, itself envisaged by the practitioners as a complement to, or even as a substitute for, an eminently sacred word. I will return to this point later.

Playing, or the “Musical Gesture”

Once the theoretical elements of instrument playing have been learned, the third ceremony, *bā pūjā* (*bā* means “half” in Newari), is celebrated. This rite clearly establishes the frontier between the two main stages of the apprenticeship. A blood sacrifice (*bali*) is required to mark this phase of transition. In this case a chicken is offered up to Nāsadyaḥ and the master gives the right wing to his best student (*cobināyaḥ*). Interestingly, the animal must be stolen by the students themselves. Dev Narayan told me, “They must be stolen at night. The students must learn to overcome their fears. They must be crafty, and show their ability to act and react quickly: all these qualities are required to become a good musician.” He added: “They must also be attractive, for it is by the grace of Nāsadyaḥ (and the power of his black *tīkā*) that they will be able to steal the hearts of girls.”⁴⁰

This sacrifice precedes the phase of instrumental practices. Interestingly, these are nothing more than the application of the syllabic corpus to instrument playing. It is, indeed, important to note that a progressive integration of instrumental techniques is not taught. The pedagogy here is concerned with a relation to “knowledge” in which, as a master confided in me, it is not so much discovering something outside oneself that is important, but rather revealing something inside oneself. More prosaically, the practice of *dhimay* is initially assimilated by osmosis. The trade secrets are acquired through use. Non-Newars may find it useful if I briefly describe the main elements of these playing techniques. The instrument is hung over the shoulder by a strap and is usually played standing up. The right-hand drum skin is hit with a bamboo stick and the left skin by the left hand. The instrument is held at a slight angle so as to provide a better angle of attack for the drum skins (especially for the rebound technique on the right skin, and for a better projection of the left hand). The stick is held between the thumb and the index finger. The position of the pronated hand and a supple wrist facilitate the back-and-forth movements (from top to bottom and from bottom to top), which correspond to the two dental syllables, *tā* and *nā*.⁴¹ For obvious reasons of handling, the stick should, in theory, measure no more than 30 centimeters. In reality, their sizes vary according to the drums: the stick used with the *mū dhimay*, shorter and lighter, gives excellent vibratory results when used on large membranes, while those used for playing the *yalepvaḥ dhimay* are longer, better suited to a more percussive attack, and seem to be better adapted to the virtuoso repertoire associated with them.

Let us note, and this detail is of some importance, that the instruments are not the property of the musicians, but belong to the religious associations (*Nāsadyaḥ guṭhi*) to which they are attached. In fact, they are not practiced regularly, but only at specific required times. The

⁴⁰ For a reconstitution of this event, see Gert-Mathias Wegner’s (1988) documentary film on the *dhimay* teaching in Bhaktapur. Concerning the use of stolen chicken feet, it is of note that nine-tenths of the spoils go to the *gurus* and that the rest is given to the best students. The same is true when the operation is repeated for the *pidanegu pūjā*, a concluding rite carried out before the first public performances.

⁴¹ For a systematic presentation of the syllabary, see below.

objective here it is not so much to maintain a certain level of playing, as it is—when the time is ripe—to “reawaken” knowledge that is viewed as inherent.



Figs. 12 and 13. Masters and students, Om Bāhāḥ twāḥ. Photos by the author, September 2011.



Fig. 14. *Māh thanegu*. Detail of the paubhā Dīpaṅkara Buddha, Rubin Museum. Photo by the author.

Acrobatic Practices

Far from being restricted to instrumental disciplines alone, the second period of teaching also integrates acrobatic practices. These are known as *dhunyā syanegu*, “the apprenticeship of the *dhunyā* pole,”⁴² *dhunyā munyā*, “handling of *dhunyā*,” or, more simply, *māḥ thanegu*, literally: “the raising of the pole,”⁴³ this last term referring to one of the figures (see below).⁴⁴

The handling of poles and the acrobatic figures associated with them are ancient disciplines. According to Wiehler-Schneider and Wiehler (1980:92): “These poles were originally a military sign and are relics of the time of the Malla Kings, when the Jyāpu—whose caste alone play the *dhimay*—were taken into military service, together with the Nāy or Kasai.”⁴⁵ Thus, the *dhunyā* seem to have been, at an ancient date, related to victory poles (*dvajā*), and their handling directly linked to the art of war. A number of informants have told me that after the fighting was over, poles were decorated with the heads and limbs of the vanquished. If the origins of this tradition are obscure, it has, however, been well documented since the later Malla period and seems to have been carried on without interruption after their fall. This is witnessed by a votive painting (*paubhā*) dated 1853 representing Dīpaṃkara, the Buddha of the previous age (Fig. 13).⁴⁶ This work, which includes two *mā dhimay*, a pair of *bhusyāḥ* cymbals, an idiophone (probably a *ghau* disc), and a *dhunyā*, gives some idea of the formations that were current at that time.

The handling of the *dhunyā* is specific to the Nepalese capital and exists almost nowhere else in the valley. Nineteen neighborhoods maintain the custom inside the limits of the ancient urban territory.⁴⁷ With the exception of Om Bāhāḥ this discipline is exclusive to the northern parts of the City.⁴⁸

⁴² The term *dhunyā* may derive from the Sanskrit root *DHĪ*—“to shake, agitate, rattle” (Renou and Stchoupak 1978 [1932]:343).

⁴³ The expression *māḥ thanegu* literally means “the raising of the pole,” and contrasts with a similar term, *māḥ kohthegu*, which means, also literally, “taking down the pole,” a complementary figure in the cycle of postures performed by the best students at the end of the apprenticeship.

⁴⁴ The term *dhunyā munyā* (*dvaja punja* in Sanskrit) designates also “a multitude of yak tails at the top of the banner.”

⁴⁵ The Nāy butchers are the custodians of another tradition of the drum, the *nāykhim bājā*. See Wegner (1988).

⁴⁶ This image, a detail of a *paubhā*, comes from the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art collection. Titled “Dīpaṃkara Buddha, *Buddha of the Previous Age*,” and dated 1853, its inventory number is F1997.17.23 (HAR 100023).

⁴⁷ The 19 neighborhoods that are the depositaries of this tradition are, respectively 1) North quarter (Thane *twāḥ/Thathupvīm*): Thabahi (Thamel, two *dhunyā* groups), Lagache, Kusumbiyālāchhi, Cwasalabū, Tyauḍa, Jamah, and Asan. 2) Middle quarter (Dhathu *twāḥ/Thathupvīm*): Kilāgal, Nyeta, Wangah, Mahābu, Wotu, Makhā, Yetkhām, Maru bahī, and Khichapukhu 3) South quarter/(Kvane/Kvathupvīm): Om Bāhāḥ (two *dhunyā* groups).

⁴⁸ It is worth noting in passing that acrobatics are not exclusive to the Jyāpu; they are also found among other ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman origin, such as the Rai and the Limbū, “Kirāṭi” populations of the east of the country, who share certain affinities with the Newars.

Three qualities are taken into consideration when making the poles: length, straightness, and strength. The way they are dried is also important. They are suspended above the ground to avoid contact with the damp and stretched for several weeks, until they have obtained the curve necessary for their rotational use. Today their size, which has increased considerably if we are to believe ancient representations, is between 5.50 and 6 meters. Their ideal diameter, of about 5 centimeters, must be as comfortable as possible for gripping and rotating in the palms of the hands. There is no specific procedure for the way they are selected, cut, or made. However, a consecration ritual (*dhunyā pūjā*) is carried out when the poles have taken their final form, inaugurating the end of the apprenticeship period. Their replacement does not correspond, as in other cultures, to the death of the “principal master” and they are neither destroyed, burnt, nor buried. They are replaced every twelve years for the apprenticeships. Although all the *gūṭhiyār* participate in their decoration, only the eldest of the clan is authorized to give them their final forms. The poles are decorated with flags and yak tails, which are associated in some neighborhoods with the ancient Malla, or even Licchavi, dynasties. They are therefore seen above all, sometimes with a touch of humor, as a symbol of royalty. A *Maharjan*, whom I questioned in 1996 on their meaning in the Seto Matsyendranātha procession, commented its passage in these words: “The King must not fall, that would cause great misfortune, but here, at least. . . we are able to make him dance as we please.” This is also true today but, as another *Maharjan* recently told me, “Today it is not the King who is being made to dance. . . .” However, the symbolic attributes differ according to the neighborhoods. According to the *dhunyā guru* of Om Bāhāḥ, these attributes represent the *pañca* Buddhas, while black, red, or white yak tails—according to the neighborhood—are manifestations of the god Bhairava. As for the pole itself, it is closely associated with Hanumān, who, as has already been pointed out, is thought of as the lord of musical rhythm. He is represented here at the top of the pole by knotted strands of hemp. Another symbolic relationship is worth mentioning, which establishes a correspondence between the different components of the *dhunyā* and the five fundamental elements. The pole itself is thus thought to represent the element earth (*bhūmi*), while the yak tails (*cvāmvah*) represent water (*jala*), the five flags (*pañca patākā*) represent air (*vāyu*), the knots in the bamboo (*tvāca*) represent fire (*teja*), and, lastly, the sound of bells (*ghaṅgalā*) corresponds to ether (*ākāśa*), the quintessence.

The teaching of pole handling is a direct continuation of drum teaching and starts on the day of the *ḥṣamā pūjā*. It is usual for the ritual of offerings to start early in the morning with the *Nāsaḥ pūjā* and the offering of the students’ *kislī*. It is followed by a feast. The teaching lasts on average about 45 days. Teaching as such does not start until dusk. For obvious reasons of staging, and although daily sessions are theoretically the preserve of the participants, they are conducted outdoors in the neighborhood courtyard, opposite the House of Letters (*ākhāḥ chem*). The private nature of the teachings is, nevertheless, signified by the ban on instrumentalists playing outdoors. The drummers are confined indoors, in an adjacent room. The guru first invites students to worship Nāsadyaḥ and Hanumān in order, he says, to sharpen their powers of concentration. Any technical advice focuses on the laws of balance (“standing straight as a pillar,” in the master’s words) and rotation techniques. Postulants train in three separate corpora; the first includes a wide range of individual postures and balancing exercises, and aims to confer virtuosity and stamina. The second, which involves the student swinging the pole over his head,

is valued as an “offering by gesture.” According to the masters, this is the equivalent of a sonic, instrumental offering (*dyahlhāyegu*). The third group of figures is collective and is of another type altogether. Made up of about fifteen postures, it is devoted to the creation of a human temple whose elements, made up of the participants themselves, are destined to receive at their summit the best among them, the *cobināyah*—he who has been chosen by the college of elders to become the future *mūla guru*, the first master of the neighborhood after the death of its current representative. In many ways this consecration of the *cobināyah*, the true climax of the *dhimay syanegu*, is also the symbolic summit because, literally at the pinnacle of this human construction, he symbolically incarnates the god. Each posture is accompanied by a specific musical composition. The reader will find a revealing example of this repertoire in the notation of the *dhunyāpvah bol* (in Appendix 1). This piece is a good illustration of the conventional outline of the word/action in which each section of the choreography coincides with the mimetic syllables linked to the drum strokes.

According to Dev Narayan Maharjan, the participants’ first public appearances were previously spread out over almost a month, during which period the novices visited the 32 peasant neighborhoods of Kathmandu alternately, and sometimes prolonged their tour as far as the neighboring city of Patan. This period, which was already over when I made my first investigations in 1995, was called *bvasā wanegu*.⁴⁹ Internal quarrels seem to have been at the origin of its disappearance, and in 1996 only the closing rites, carried out in the neighborhood of each group, remained. However, a new approach to my field of study (September 2011) contradicts my earlier data, and many of the performances seem to have been partially restored. Today, however, they are limited to four symbolic sites: the locality of origin of the association, the sanctuary of Svayambhūnātha, the home of the *cobināyah*, and the temple of Pacali Bhairava. Carried out between the festivals of Dasain and Tihār, these four performances are similar, with the exception of the last one, which concludes with an ultimate tribute to the instruments and the chanting of an auspicious song (*mangal mye*).

In concrete terms, the closing ceremony (*pidanegu pūjā*) takes place in the symbolic center of the neighborhood, which is none other than the temple of Nāsadyah himself. It is preceded by a vigil in his sanctuary—an event that, in the memory of the youngest boys, is often remembered as a moment of terror. From dawn onwards the poles are prepared and decorated in the neighborhood courtyard facing the *ākhāḥ chem*. The masters attach the hemp ropes, the flags,

⁴⁹ When I met him in March 1996, Kriṣṇa Bhai Maharjan gave me a description of the successive stages: “The group that was finishing its apprenticeship visited each of the neighborhoods of the town alternately, and was received with great pomp. After carrying out an offering of sounds (*dyah lhāyegu*), the students engaged in a demonstration of acrobatics with the *dhunyā* pole. A *pūjā* to the musical instruments was then enacted by the inhabitants of the quarter that was being visited. They made offerings to the masters of large turbans and strips of cloth (*kokhā*) to the musicians. This gift of cloth preceded important feasts (*bhvāy*), and was followed by a musical performance called *mangalhāyegu*, ‘auspicious word’, or *mangala boli*, ‘auspicious syllable’. During the performance, five sorts of cereals were offered to the participants (beaten rice, rice, wheat, whole rice, and corn). Thus, from neighborhood to neighborhood, the cereals—considered as being consecrated offerings (*prasāda*)—piled up. They were intended for the making of two types of drink (rice alcohol, *aylā* and beer, *thvam*) used during the last ritual, called *litayamkigu pūjā*, a term meaning ‘go back to.’ On the last day, after these peregrinations, the masters and the students carried out a last ritual in their home neighborhood, during which the energy of the god, in the form of a saucer of *kislī*, was taken from the house of apprenticeship to the neighborhood temple. This was an opportunity for them to receive for the last time the blessings of the god, touching the *kislī* with their heads and affixing Nāsadyah’s black *ṭikā* to their own foreheads. At night, all the participants met up for a last community feast.”

and the yak tails in turn to the tops of the poles, “establishing” alternately the gods Hanumān, Bhairava, and the *pañca* Buddhas. The main musical offering to Nāsadyaḥ, the *mūdyah̄lhaegu*, is drummed at that moment. Balancing on the shoulders of one of his colleagues, the *cobināyaḥ* brandishes the principal pole (*mū dhunyā*) in front of the neighborhood temple. The twelve poles are joined to it and a banquet is served. Masters and students join in together. This is the start of the ceremony proper. It opens with the placing of marks on the participants’ foreheads (red *ṭīkā* in honor of the Goddess and black for Nāsadyaḥ). The official presentation of the poles, then the drums, follows. These are handed out by the masters. Under the watchful eyes of members of the association (*guṭhiyār*) and family members, the students perform for several hours, making the fifteen choreographic figures associated with the creation of the human temple and engaging each in their turn in the individual handling of the *dhunyā*. The “*dyah̄lhāyegu* through gesture” is here executed by the best student at the pinnacle of this human pyramid. Below is a recapitulation of the chronology. The reader may consult the accompanying video sequences to appreciate this art in living movement.



House of Letters: Musical Apprenticeship among the Newar Farmers. Video by Franck Bernède. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/berne#myGallery-picture\(18\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/berne#myGallery-picture(18))

1	<i>āsana māḥ</i>	“Founding of the sanctuary” posture (also called <i>mandah māḥ</i>)
2	<i>betā māḥ</i>	Posture of <i>betā</i> , vehicle of the god Bhairava
3	<i>sikha māḥ</i>	Posture of the temple tower (<i>sikāra</i>)
4	<i>siṃha māḥ</i>	Posture of the lions, guardians of the sanctuary doors
5	<i>lukkāḥ māḥ</i>	Posture of the temple’s door (<i>lukkāḥ</i>)
6	<i>mū lukkāḥ māḥ</i>	Posture of the temple’s main door
7	<i>degah̄ māḥ</i>	Posture of whole temple
8	<i>nandī/bhindī māḥ</i>	Posture of Nandī and Bhindī, two of Nāsadyaḥ’s assistants
9	<i>tiṃsaḥ māḥ</i>	Posture of Nāsadyaḥ and his two assistants, Singhinī and Vyāghrinī, here followed by a “nameless” virtuoso posture
10	<i>gaju māḥ</i>	Posture of the temple’s summit (<i>gajur</i>)
11	“nameless”	“A Nameless” series of postures created by the students themselves
12	<i>thanegu māḥ</i>	Posture of the raising (<i>thanegu</i>) of the pole
13	<i>koḥthelegu māḥ</i>	Posture of the taking down (<i>koḥthelegu</i>) of the pole
14	<i>dhunyā lhāyegu</i>	Ground posture of projecting the bamboo pole backward after having swirled it around the head. Executed by two participants.
15	<i>kyāk puligu</i>	Posture of Kyāk, one of the children of Nāsadyaḥ. Roulades performed by the youngest students.
16	<i>yākah̄ māḥ</i>	Taking someone on one’s shoulders. The <i>cobināyaḥ</i> , standing on the shoulders of another student, brings back the main <i>dhunyā</i> pole from Nāsadyaḥ’s temple to the House of Letters.
17	<i>pūjā yāyegu</i>	Ritual of offerings, accompanied by an auspicious song (<i>mangalam mye</i>) dedicated to Nṛtyanāth (= Nāsadyaḥ)

Table 3. Inventory of the *māḥ thanegu* postures. Om Bāhāḥ twāḥ.



Fig. 15. Raising of the *dhunyā* pole (*māḥ thanegu*), Om Bāhāḥ twāḥ. Photo by the author, 2011.



Fig. 16. Closing ritual of the *dhimay syanegu*. Consecration of the drums and chanting of an auspicious song (*mangalam mye*). Photo by the author, 2011.

As can be seen through these descriptions, the *dhimay* and *dhunyā* apprenticeships are revelatory in their processes of both the ritual and the martial character of this tradition. It seems worthwhile now to present the analysis of the repertoire as well as the symbolic elements on which it rests. This should allow us to understand the foundations on which the teaching of the masters is built, and the issues concerning the processional genre of which they are the custodians.

Musical and Symbolic Analysis of the Repertoire

The Syllabic Corpus and the Different Types of Strokes

Let me remind the reader that, as with most percussion of the Indian subcontinent, Newar drum playing is founded on a corpus of syllables (*boli*) and stereotypical rhythmic structures (*tāla*). In Kathmandu the mimetic vocabulary of *mū dhimay* is based on five phonemes: two are guttural, *kho* and *ghūñ* (left hand), two are dental, *tā* and *nā* (right hand), and one composed syllable, *dhyāñ* (formed from the syllables *nā* and *ghūñ*), corresponds to the simultaneous playing of both hands. The first of these relates to a stroke to the edge of the membrane and the second to a stroke to the middle of the drum skin. The left-hand skin is struck with the bare hand, while the right is made to vibrate with a bamboo stick whose end is rolled into a spiral.⁵⁰ The timbres that correspond to the dental *tā* and *nā* are highly contrasted in the playing of *mū dhimay*, because the stroke on the edge of the drum engenders a sound that is naturally drier than the one that comes from the center of the skin. However, they tend to merge in the playing of *yalepvaḥ dhimay*, which has less surface for resonance. As for the guttural *kho*, made by pressure of the hand on the edge of the frame, it produces a dull sound, while *ghūñ*, which consists of a rebound of the palm on the skin, promotes resonance. Lastly, the syllable *dhyāñ*, associating *nā* and *ghūñ*, is made by striking simultaneously the center of the two membranes. These syllables, respectively muffled and sonorous, are thought to present a character of analogy with the type of sound the instrument emits. These five phonemes are arranged in a limited number of combinations, each one making up a unit of measure (*mātrā*). Thus fifty or so compound phonemes—comprising two, three, or four syllables—are built from the matricial phonemes.⁵¹

The Organization of Rhythm: the Different Tāl or Rhythmical Cycles

As in the classical Indian tradition, the notions of *mātrā* and *tāla* are the keystones here to the rhythmic system. It will be recalled that the term *mātrā* is derived from the Sanskrit *MĀ-*, which means “to measure,” or more precisely, to “give the measure,” and designates the smallest unit of rhythm or pulsation. *Tāla* (Nep. *tāl*) is the technical name of the rhythmic cycles, which make up the framework of the compositions. In Kathmandu four of these rhythmic cycles are used in *dhimay* playing. They are called *cvoḥ*, *lantā*, *partā*, and *jati*. The first, *cvoḥ tāl*, is common to the repertoires of the two types of drum (*mū* and *yalepvaḥ dhimay*). It comprises four *mātrā*, or measures, that are played with an approximate pulsation of 112/min. The three others, *lantā*, *partā*, and *jati*, are in theory the preserve of the ritual drum.⁵² *Lantā* is played twice as slowly as *cvoḥ*; it comprises eight *mātrā* and is struck at about 55 pulsations/min. The two other *tāl* have alternating rhythms: *partā* and *jati* are composed of seven *mātrā* variously arranged.

⁵⁰ This stick is given a different name in different localities. It is called *khotākathi* for the *mū dhimay* in Kathmandu (*paukathi* for the *yalepvaḥ dhimay*), *dhimay pučā* in Bhaktapur (Wegner 1986:23), and *tāḥkutsa* in Patan, a term that means “snake,” according to Aubert (1988:50).

⁵¹ For a recapitulative table of this type of composed rhythms, see Bernède (1997b, Appendix 1).

⁵² There are, however, a few exceptions, in particular in the repertoire of the *yalepvaḥ dhimay*.

This theoretical classification is borne out everywhere. However, I have only seen *cvoḥ*, *lantā*, and *partā* played all over the capital, while *jati* seems to be the prerogative of the northern neighborhoods.⁵³ I have also noticed a fifth *tāla*, known as *garhā*, which is made up of 14 *mātrā*. It seems to have disappeared from the usual repertoire of Kathmandu, but is still occasionally heard in other localities—notably in Kirtipur, Buṅgamati, and Khokanā—in particular during the sacrifice of the buffalo. The pulsations of the *tāl* are classified as strong (*tāli*) and weak (*khāli*) beats. The latter are marked by idiophones specifically dedicated to each group: the metal *kēpuī* and *ghau* discs accompany the *mū dhimay*; the *bhusyāḥ* cymbals, the *yālepvaḥ dhimay*, and the *tāḥ* jingles (small cymbals) accompany the *khim* drum. As for the drums, specific syllables are associated with these idiophones, distinguishing strong and weak beats, as is shown in the table below.

Idiophones	<i>tāli</i> (strong beats)	<i>khāli</i> (weak beats)
<i>kēpuī</i> or <i>ghau</i> discs	<i>tāinā</i>	<i>ghvāinā</i>
Cymbals <i>bhusyāḥ</i>	<i>chim</i>	<i>chhyā</i>
Small <i>tāḥ</i> cymbals	<i>tin</i>	<i>chhu</i>

Table 4. Correspondences between the idiophones and their respective mimetic syllables.

In this context of performance, binary rhythms appear to be in the majority, which is hardly surprising, in so far as a large part of the *dhimay bājā* repertoire is associated with processions and therefore with the rhythm of walking. The rhythmic cycles that govern this repertoire are relatively homogeneous throughout the urban area. The order of mimetic syllables, on the other hand, varies significantly from neighborhood to neighborhood. It will be recalled that a different stroke corresponds to each syllable, and that every stroke generates a timbre, a sound color of its own. The variations in syllables are thus concomitant on variations of timbre, based on a paradigmatic rhythmic framework, which are a discreet signature marking the identity of each group (or of each locality, which comes to the same thing). Today, however, the reality of the music observed does not always correspond to the theoretical model just described. Recited syllables are often very different from the instrumental performance. Moreover, when there is no teacher able to ensure the apprenticeship, the young musicians are obliged to call in a drummer from another neighborhood, which can undermine the fidelity of transmission. Emphasis is obtained by playing on long or short syllables, on the oppositions between simple and double *mātrā*, which has the effect of creating displacements of accents, giving the compositions their characteristic “groove.”

⁵³ Dev Nārāyan Maharjan did not mention the existence of the *jati tāl* during my *dhimay* apprenticeship in Om Bāhāḥ. When I asked him about it, he replied, “Yes, *jati* does exist, but not here.” This remark shows once again how the town’s neighborhoods appear, from a musical point of view, as distinctly separate entities, even if they are all founded on a unified musical systematics.

The Technical Vocabulary

In contrast to the diversity of rhythms found in the different neighborhoods, the structure of the compositions associated with the *dhimay* drum repertoire shows little variety throughout the city. Each piece is made up of three or four distinct parts, respectively called *nyāḥ*, *gau*, *kolā*, and *twāḥlhāyegu*. This technical vocabulary can, for Kathmandu, be defined thus:

1. *Nyāḥ*, “to move forward in space” (Manandhar 1986:139). This term, which could be compared to the Sanskrit root *NA-* “drive, direct,” expresses the idea of a prelude or overture. This sequence is usually repeated eight to ten times.
2. *Gau*, “change, meet, follow,” designates what we might call the “development.” It is subdivided into two sub-sections of unequal length. The first, in some cases extremely brief (usually three *mātrā*), acts as a bridge between the overture (*nyāḥ*) and the actual development. This second section of the *gau* is repeated twice.
3. *Kolā*, “conclude.” This fragment is a sort of introduction to the final sequence. It would seem that this short composition, optional and rarely played, is the exclusive prerogative of the *mū dhimay*.
4. *Twāḥlhāyegu*, “finish, cover, close, break.” The final part is the only section that is truly fixed in the arrangement of the general structure. It is played to conclude all the compositions. It represents, in a sense, the musical emblem of the city neighborhoods.

The Repertoire of the Mū dhimay

The repertoire of the *dhimay* drums comprises two distinct corpora.⁵⁴ The first, under the generic name of *dyahḥlhāyegu* (*dyahḥ*, “god,” *lhāyegu*, “speak, express”), is made up, in theory, of twelve pieces.⁵⁵ It essentially consists in “sonic offerings” addressed to the gods. The second (without any specific denomination) is associated with the circuits of the processions.

Sound Offerings

The Newari term *dyahḥlhāyegu*, “word of the gods,” glossed by the musicians themselves as “sound offerings,” refers to a cycle of compositions that are invariably played at the beginning of every ceremony. In the eyes of the Jyāpu, the *dyahḥlhāyegu* are essentially, above any aesthetic consideration, ritual acts. As one of them confided to me, these foundational pieces are “a

⁵⁴ The names and the number of pieces are roughly the same in each quarter of the capital. This makes it possible to give a general description, but the names of the pieces correspond to a different musical reality, in so far as it is precisely these pieces that constitute the mark of identity of each quarter.

⁵⁵ The comparative study of the repertoires in the three parts of the city shows, however, that this is not, or is no longer, true.

concentrated sonic form of *pūjā*.” A list of the five *dyahllhāyegu* in use in Om Bāhāh twāh⁵⁶ is given in Table 5.

Title of the piece	Tāl	Site and circumstances of the performance
<i>mūdyah dyahllhāyegu</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i> <i>lantā</i> <i>partā</i>	In the <i>ākhāh chem</i> and the temple of Nāsadyah. Before and after any travelling inside the neighborhood.
<i>lantā dyahllhāyegu</i>	<i>lantā</i>	In the <i>ākhāh chem</i> during the <i>pūjā</i> to Nāsadyah. In front of the other temples to the god of music.
<i>tvācā dyahllhāyegu</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	In front of all the temples, to any deity.
<i>tāñtākho dyahllhāyegu</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i> <i>partā</i>	On arriving at and leaving the temples, interchangeable with the <i>tvācā</i> and the <i>tābhunāntātā</i> .
<i>tābhunāntātā dyahllhāyegu</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	During the procession.

Table 5. The five *dyahllhāyegu* of *mū dhimay*. Om Bāhāh twāh.

Among these five compositions, the *mūdyah dyahllhāyegu* is the cornerstone of the repertoire. It is the only one that consecutively uses the three referential *tāl* (*cvoḥ*, *lantā*, *partā*). Exclusively devoted to Nāsadyah, this piece is a virtual manifestation of the voice of god for every neighborhood. Let us remember that there is a specific *mūdyah dyahllhāyegu* for every one of the 28 neighborhoods, the four others being those of the Kumāh potters who, as I have said, do not have access to the ritual repertoire of the *mū dhimay*. The four other *dyahllhāyegu* are collectively known as *twāhdyah dyahllhāyegu*, a generic term that could be translated as “offerings of the sounds of the neighborhood.” Among these, the second is dedicated in priority to Nāsadyah and to Gaṇedyah (Gaṇeśa), but can, however, be played for other deities. As for the three other pieces, they are played when the instruments are taken outside the limits of the neighborhood. They are named according to the *tāl* that is used or formed from the syllables making up one of the pivotal *mātrā* of the musical composition itself. For example, the names of the two last are formed from the phonemes *tā* and *tākho* for *tañtakho*, and *tāghūnātā* and *tā* for *tābhunāntātā*. The latter, associated with the natural *poṅgā* trumpets, is specific to the festival of the cow (*Sāyāh/Gai jātrā*). Curiously, there is no *dyahllhāyegu* dedicated to Sarasvatī and Hanumān, the two other deities presiding over all teaching.

If we think of the considerable sacralization of the instrument, we will remember that in some areas, in particular in the lower parts of the city (Kvane), the *mū dhimay* is, in theory, played only by the main music master. Great care is taken in moving it from the house of apprenticeship to the temple of Nāsadyah, in particular concerning matters of purity. On this occasion the three first sonic offerings must be interpreted successively: the first inside the house of letters, before the altar of the god of music, the second while leaving the room, and the third and last on stepping over the threshold of the house of apprenticeship. The *dyahllhāyegu* vary not only from neighborhood to neighborhood, but also in the different localities of the valley, which comes to the same thing if we consider that every neighborhood is in many ways a village, and that the whole town is nothing more, in the end, than the accretion of all these localities. An

⁵⁶ Of the twelve original pieces, only five of them are still played today, in conformity with the absolute necessities of the ceremonies. The musicians who still know the seven others describe them as more or less optional today.

example in Appendix 2 shows the notation of the *mūdyah dyahllhāyegu* as it is played in Om Bāhāḥ twāḥ.

The Processional Repertoire

Unlike the *dyahllhāyegu* addressed to the deities, which can be thought of as bridges stretched between the world of men and the world of the gods, the second group of compositions is used to mark the different stages of the processional itinerary (*patha*). Each piece is associated with a particular action (climbing up and down, circumambulations, crossing rivers, and so on.) and claims to be the sonic vehicle enabling the sacralization of the ritual space that is the town in its entirety. Their number and degree of elaboration vary according to the neighborhoods. The table below recapitulates the phases carried out every year for the feast of Guṃlā between the neighborhood of Om Bāhāḥ and the sanctuary of Svayambhūnātha.⁵⁷

Titles	Tāl	Places and circumstances
<i>twāḥdyah tābhunāñtātā</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	In the <i>ākhāḥ chem</i>
<i>lampvah</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	Between the <i>ākhāḥ chem</i> and the first river encountered
<i>dhunyāpvah</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	On crossing a river ⁵⁷
<i>lāpvah</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	On crossing a bridge
<i>dyah thāhā wanegu</i>	<i>lantā</i>	During the ascension towards Svayambhūnāth
<i>tampvah</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	During the ascension
<i>dyah cāhilegu</i>	<i>partā</i>	Arriving in the sanctuary
<i>śāntipūpvah</i>	<i>partā</i>	At the sanctuary of śāntipura
<i>tampvah</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	While climbing
<i>devalīpvah</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	While circumambulating (<i>parikrama</i>) around the <i>stupa</i>
<i>pūjāpvah</i>	<i>lantā</i> <i>partā</i> <i>cvoḥ</i>	During offering rituals
<i>māhpvah</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i> <i>partā</i>	While accompanying acrobatics (<i>māḥ thanegu</i>)
<i>lampvah</i>	<i>partā</i>	Descending towards the <i>ākhāḥ chem</i>
<i>dyah thāsan kvahāvayagu</i>	<i>cvoḥ</i>	On returning to the quarter of origin

Table 6. Repertoire played during the Guṃlā festival on the way to Svayambhūnātha.

This inventory would be incomplete if I did not mention a last piece that presents the particularity of not being taught during the apprenticeship and which, according to the teachers, the students must discover by themselves. It is called *sāyāḥ yāgu* (*sā*, “cow” and *yāgu*, “do” or “make”) and must be played during the festival of the cow, Sāyāḥ (Nep. *Gāi jātrā*). Its existence illustrates well an elementary principle, one that could be qualified as pedagogic: to become a

⁵⁷ Rameshwar Maharjan, in a personal communication, has mentioned the existence of another piece, *tamśipapvah*, which is played by all the Kathmandu groups during their processional circuits towards Svayambhūnāth.

musician one must integrate in an autonomous way, by imitation, a new or unknown piece. Here, the composition must be reconstituted in context from direct observation. This contrasts significantly with the usual model of music teaching.

Final Remarks

Dhimay music rests intrinsically on the phenomenon of articulation, that is to say that it is above all conceived of as a signifying language. It is from the syllable—an indivisible unit of articulation having the quality of primary enunciation—that the seminal sound, the smallest unit of meaning. From these sounds spring the word, which is the smallest unit of musical discourse. Thus, the five phonemes (or “sound seeds”) *tā*, *nā*, *kho*, *ghūñ*, and *dyāñ*, associated with the *dhimay*, are the smallest units of meaning. Over and above their mimetic functions, these “mother-syllables” are the root of the musical discourse, understood in their ritual context as mantra words (*mantra boli*).⁵⁸ These are the basis from which are elaborated their derivatives, made up of two, three, or four syllables. These aggregates are the linguistic units—the words, so to speak—that make up the composition of the musical phrases.

Some clues suggest a possible kinship between these musical syllabaries (*boli*) and the “phonic seeds” (*bījākṣara*) of rituals. Considering the porosity of the two religious forms present (Hinduism and Buddhism) and, more precisely, the influence of the tantric paradigm on these two poles of Newar tradition, a parallel with speculative data concerning the “Science of Formulas” (*mantravīdyā*) does not seem unjustified. Some elements of this sound theology seem to infuse to different degrees in various strata of Newar ritual and artistic life. Such traces are to be found, in particular, in the worship manuals devoted to Nāsadyaḥ, and in use by the high Hindu Newar, but also, implicitly, in the processes associated with the apprenticeship of masked dances (*dyah pyākham*), a field electively maintained by the farmer castes. The limits of this essay do not, unfortunately, permit me to develop this question here. Suffice it to say for the time being that the language of drums (which is similar, by the way, to that of trumpets, and rests on the same principles, but is adapted to the particularities of this class of instrument), far from being purely musical, is the vector of a language considered to be sacred, whose constitutive elements—the syllables—are invested, in the eyes of those concerned, with a form of transcendence. We can get a sense of this if we re-examine the symbolic attributes of the skin of the drum, the site of its sonic expression.

The reader will remember that the phonemes *tā* and *nā* are masculine by nature and that they are expressed on the right-hand skin of the instrument, which is a manifestation of Nāsadyaḥ. As for the syllables *kho* and *ghūñ*, they are of a feminine nature. Lastly, the compound *dyāñ* manifests the alliance of the poles, the union of opposites (*Śiva-Śakti*). While the dentals correspond to the ether, the labials are associated with the earth. The former are wrathful

⁵⁸ Ellingson (1986:327) mentions the existence of a “notation of a Sanskrit syllable, called *mantra boli*,” which, according to him, “is used for playing the *kwotāḥ*, or three-headed drum.” It seems to me that the term *mantra boli* does not refer to a system of notation, but to the “word” attributed to the musical art in this ritualized context (see below). The expression *mantra boli saphu* is sometimes used to refer to the composition handbooks, in particular those dedicated to the repertoire of *poṅgā* trumpets.

(*tāndava*) by nature, while the latter are benign (*lāśya*). The union of the two (*misrā*), represented by the syllable *dyān*, here indicate opposites transcended. These elements should suffice to show the symbolic associations by which musical practice can, in this tradition, potentially attain the status of an interior discipline.

I would add that in order to appreciate the full dimension of these processes, one should place them in the context of a general reflection on the symbolics of language as transmitted by the Newar themselves. Indeed, the elders distinguish three levels of speech. The first, “ordinary speech,” brings together all the components of current language. It is called *nijī bhāsā*, “one’s language.” The second is *mantra boli*, or “speech of mantras.” The third and last level is seen as “soundless/inaudible, and designates the language of the gods” (*dyah boli*). An essential point, as several masters told me, is that musical sound belongs to the second category, *mantra boli*. This means that it is situated on a plane considered to be intermediary between the language of men and the language of the gods. This perspective is without doubt inherited from the Indian world, as reflected by the introductory chapter of the *Saṅgītaratnākara*.⁵⁹ The abundance of handwritten copies of this text is a measure of the popularity that it seems to have once enjoyed in Nepal.

The last point I address is the division between music that is considered “secret, private” and music belonging to the public sphere. Newar instrumental music, like most of the other Newar artistic forms, is divided into two main categories, referred to, respectively, as *āgam* and *nigam*. This terminology, borrowed from the technical vocabulary of the Tantras,⁶⁰ clearly divides artistic behaviors into two distinct bodies. The first is the secret domain (*guyha*) of initiatic practices. *Caryā* songs and dances, for example, in their traditional context of execution, belong to this category. The second term, *nigam*, refers to expressions of public artistic life. This two-fold division brings to light the degree to which, in the field of musical and choreographic activities, it is the teaching that falls under the domain of initiation, while its realization in the public sphere is no more than its most exterior form.

Post Scriptum

Through this exploration of *dhimay* drum apprenticeships, I have sought to illuminate the nature of the relations between the foundations of musical language and those of ritual language. Under the auspices of a collegial education, these apprenticeships derive their ultimate point of reference from knowledge that is thought to be non-human, the purely oral transmission of which is propagated by the authority words of the masters. It would, however, be mistaken to say that a field as subtle as that of ritualized apprenticeships could escape the repeated assaults of a fast-growing modernity, as it can be observed today in Kathmandu Valley. In his pioneering study of the *dhimay bājā* in Bhaktapur, Wegner (1986) expressed concern at the impact of agrarian

⁵⁹ As Ellingson (1980:435) has pointed out, “One needs only to glance at the opening chapter of the *Saṅgītaratnākara* (Śārngadeva n.d.) to notice such typically Tantric concepts as the elaborate symbolic-meditative analysis of the psycho-physiological basis of sound production in the body, or the characteristic distinction between ‘unstruck’ (absolute) and ‘struck’ (phenomenal) sound.”

⁶⁰ In the Indian world, the term *nigam* refers to the Vedic system, while *āgam* corresponds to the sphere of Tantrism.

reforms on the musical life of the farming caste. The loss of land whose income has in the past provided for the need of the musical associations (*bājā guthī*) was at that time one of the main causes of the disappearance of groups and their repertoires. Thirty years later, it is now clear that many other factors were already quietly at work. I will focus here only on the most significant for my intention, and firstly on the topography of the city, the natural framework for processional expression.

We have seen to what extent the music of *dhimay bājā* was inextricably linked to the territorial units of the Jyāpus, and how the latter were essentially dedicated to a sacralization of the urban fabric. To the 32 traditional neighborhoods (*bhatis twāh*) that make up the heart of the old city, 33 new residential units have recently been added. This new configuration, the “65 farmer’s neighborhoods” (*paiṃsāṭhi Jyāpu twāh*), does not seem to have led to the creation of any shrines dedicated to the god of music or traditional houses of apprenticeship. Because the associative activities of the groups always take place in the heart of the original neighborhoods, it has not been deemed necessary to implant these symbolic poles in the new neighborhoods. On the other hand, this extension of the urban territory has, in response to an ever increasing demand for music teaching, seen the birth of countless new structures, such as music schools or private “studios.” In contrast to the traditional *ākāh chem*, these educational spaces exist henceforth as secular and pluri-musical sites of transmission, open to all. Another phenomenon, no less significant, completes this secularization of musical practices: the unification of repertoires. This is particularly the case for the *yalepvaḥ dhimay* repertoire. While many foundational pieces of the processional genre, such as the sound offerings (*dyāḥlhāyegu*), seem to be progressively disappearing from the sonic landscape of the city, the repertoire of this little instrument continues to gain favor among younger generations.

Although created by the Kumāḥ potters as a substitute for the *mū dhimay*, to which they did not have access, it is precisely this repertoire, in former times perceived as peripheral, which is increasingly establishing itself as a major emblem in the world of Newar sound. Interestingly, it is itself subject to restructuring today.⁶¹ This repertoire now includes no more than three *dyāḥlhāyegu*, a dozen compositions, and only one surviving *twāḥlhāyegu*. This is important, because the various neighborhood sound identities manifested by the *twāḥlhāyegu* are here dissolved in favor of a single composition, henceforth symbolizing the entire city. In a way, this budding repertoire seems to be establishing itself as the sonic imprint of the new contemporary urban territory. To those concerned, its implementation serves several objectives: 1) to impose a musical cohesion on the scale of the entire city, eliminating the natural heterophony expressed in the rapid succession of instrumental ensembles during the processions; 2) to encourage mass musical demonstrations in order to support political gatherings and demonstrate Newar unity with regard to other ethnic groups.

The second point to which I would like to bring attention concerns the rules of ritual purity. Many examples bear witness to a growing distancing of the newest generations in the face of the complex apparatus of ancestral religious behaviors. In the musical context that we are examining, this distancing is seen in particular in relation to the musical instruments themselves,

⁶¹ A collective of artistic personalities, including Nhuchhe Dangol and Rameshwar Maharjan, recently started work on this. It is interesting to consult *Nhuchhe Sir*; a documentary film made in 2012 by Samrāt Kharel on Nhucche Dangol, a quasi-mythical personality of Kathmandu’s musical life.

which, as will be remembered, were believed to be a tactile form of the deity. A redirected or (some would say) iconoclastic use of the *dhimay* drums in fusion groups is instructive in this context. Just as significant are the ideas of impurity linked to saliva, which no longer seem to interest anyone in the flute ensembles (*bāmsurī khalah*). The uninhibited use of leather utensils during community feasts is another sign of the abandonment of ancestral rules pertaining to ritual pollution.⁶²

Among the many factors of transformation in the Newar musical landscape, one of the major revolutions of the last twenty years is women's access to the practice of the musical instruments from which recently they were excluded. It is worth mentioning the main stages of this "opening up." Once again we must turn to the *yalepvaḥ dhimay* in order to appreciate the genesis of change in the capital of Nepal. This instrument was, from 1995 on, among the first to be taught to young women, initially in the less conservative neighborhoods (such as Wotu twāḥ), and then rapidly at the Padma Kanyā Campus of Tribhuvan University. Since then, this opening up has continued. With the exception of the *mū dhimay* and the natural trumpets (*poṅgā* and *kāhā*), which remain the exclusive preserve of men, the quasi majority of traditional Newar instruments are also played by young women.⁶³ It should be noted, however, that their apprenticeships, decontextualized from the rituals of the god of music, are carried out inside the new teaching structures, and not in the *ākhāḥ chem*.⁶⁴



Fig. 17. Jyāpuni of Tanani twāḥ playing the *yalepvaḥ dhimay*. Procession to the temple of Pacali Bhairava. Photo by the author, 2011.

⁶² The central committee of the Jyāpus of Kathmandu recently relaxed its rules on the bans associated with feasts, in particular in terms of alimentary restrictions, but also concerning relationships. These assemblies, which were of old strictly reserved for the members of neighborhood associations, are today opening up to the castes that were once excluded such as, for example, the Nāy butchers.

⁶³ I limit my observations here to the context of the traditional Newar instrumentarium. To be complete, it would indeed be necessary to extend these observations to other musical forms, which, like jazz, fusion, or indeed the study of classical European instruments such as the violin or the piano, are today on the rise.

⁶⁴ New rules of purity have been established in order to validate these practices. Among them, the rule stating that female musicians may not take part in the learning, nor even approach the instruments, when they have their periods.

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Appendix 1: *dhunyāpvaḥ* (Om Bāhāḥ twāḥ).

Cvoḥ tāl (4 mātrā)

1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
ghūn -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	ghūn -
ghūn -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	ghūn -
kho -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	ghūn -
ghūn -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	ghūn -
kho -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	ghūn -
kho -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	tāghū	tātā	ghūn -	ghūn -
ghūnghūn	tātā	ghūn -	tātā	ghūnghūn	tātā	kho -	tātā
ghūnghūn	tātā	ghūn -	tātā	ghūnghūn	tātā	kho -	tātā
kho -	tātā	kho -	tātā	kho -	tātā	kho -	tātā
kho -	ghūn -	ghūn -	ghūn -	tākā	ghūn -	ghūn -	tātā
kho -	ghūn -	ghūn -	ghūn -	tākā	ghūn -	ghūn -	tātā
ghūn -	nārā	ghūn -	kho -	tāghū	nārā	ghūn -	kho -
ghūn -	nārā	ghūn -	kho -	tāghū	nārā	ghūn -	kho -
tā -	tākho	tāghū	ghūnā	ghūn -	tākho	tāghū	ghūnā
tā -	tākho	tāghū	ghūnā	ghūn -	tākho	tāghū	ghūnā
tātā	tākho	tāghū	ghūnā	ghūghū	tākho	tāghū	ghūnā
tātā	tākho	tāghū	ghūnā	ghūghū	tākho	tāghū	ghūnā
tātā kho -	tātā kho	tāghū	ghūnā	ghūghū	tātā kho	tāghū	ghūnā
tātā kho -	tātā kho	tāghū	ghūnā	ghūghū	tātā kho	tāghū	ghūnā
tātā kho -	tātā kho	tātā kho	ghūnā	ghūghū	tātā kho	tātā kho	ghūnā
tātā kho	tātā kho	tātā kho	ghūnā	ghūghū	tātā kho	tātā kho	ghūnā
kho -	tākho	tākho	nārā	ghū -	nārā	ghūn -	nārā
khotā	tākho	tākho	nārā	ghūn -	nārā	ghūn -	nārā
khotā	tākho	tā -	ghū -	tā -	- -	tā -	ghūn-
tā -	ghūn-	tā -	tātā	ghūn-			

Appendix 2: *mūdyah dyahllhayegu* (Om Bāhāḥ twāḥ)

A. *Lantāl*. (8 mātrā). Played in the *ākhāḥ chem*, in front of the Nāsadyah altar.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
ghūn -	tātā	khota	tākho	tā -	- -	tā -	tātā
ghūn -	tātā	khota	tākho	tā -	- -	tā	khota
tākho	tātā	khota	tākho	tā -	tā -	tātā	khota
tākho	tātā	khota	tākho	tā -	tā -	ghūn -	nā -
khota	tākho	ghūn -	nā -	khota	tākho	ghūn-	ghūnā
tākho	ghūnā	ghūn -	ghūnā	ghūn -	- -	ghūn -	ghūn -
ghūn -	kho	tā -	ghūn-	kho	tā -	ghūn -	ghūnā
nā -	khota	kho -	kho -	kho -			

B. *Partāl*. (7 mātrā). Played at the door of the *ākhāḥ chem*.

1	2	3	4	1	2	3
ghūn	- -	- -	ghūn	- -	tā	tā
tā	ghūn	- -	ghūn	- -	tā	tā
ghūn	- -	- -	kho	- -	tā	tā
ghūn	tā	tā	kho	- -	ghūn	- -
tā	ghūn	nā	kho	- -	ghūn	- -
ghūn	ghūn	- -	kho	- -	ghūn	- -
tā	kho	tā	ghūn	- -	tā	tā
ghūn	- -	- -	tā	- -	tā	tā
kho	- -	- -	kho	- -	tā	tā

C. *Cvoḥ tāl*. (4 mātrā). Played on the doorstep of the *ākhāḥ chem* and then, everywhere. *Twāḥdyah llāyegu*.

1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
ghūn	tata	khota	tākho	tā -	- -	tā	tātā
ghūn	tata	khota	tākho	tā	- -	tā	khota
tākho	tata	khota	tākho	tā	tā	tata	khota
tākho	tata	khota	tākho	tā	tā	ghūn	nā
khota	tākho	ghūn	nā	khota	tākho	ghūn	ghūnā
tākho	ghūnā	ghūn	ghūnā	ghū	- -	ghūn	ghūn
ghūn	kho	tā	ghūn	kho	tā	Slower	
khota	kho -	kho -	kho -	+ Reprise of the B part, Played outside of the <i>ākhāḥ chem</i>			

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