

Theatre of Emotion: A Nepalese Dramatic Art Form

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Life is always the death of someone.

(Antonin Artaud, *Le th atre et son double*, 1938)

The theatre of the rural and village communities of the Indian and Nepalese world is still cruelly short of accurate monographic studies to record and analyse its essence. Granted, there are some useful publications, of which certain are quite recent, which discuss the great traditions of the regions of India, but the ethnography of many popular dramatic forms (*lok natya*) that are specific to these regions still remains to be undertaken. The prejudices of groups of urban dwellers towards such theatrical forms of expression, which are often regarded as rustic, unrefined and licentious – and furthermore on the way to disappearing in some authors' opinions – explain in part this lack of interest. The renewed interest of contemporary artists for primitive forms that are close to tradition struggles to reverse this way of thinking.

Two main categories can be distinguished. Some rural theatres are the domain of groups of itinerant performers who are more or less specialized in the performing arts. Others are organized and presented on a purely local level through the unassisted effort and initiative of indigenous communities. In both cases, the theatrical genres represented vary widely. They range from major religious ceremonies closely associated with a particular temple and celebrated principally in honour of a deity (but which nevertheless include stage and theatrical effects) to more secular performances drawing their inspiration from various literary themes and sources, in particular of course from the two great Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, but also occasionally from lesser-known Rajput heroic ballads, from love stories, or from contemporary events. Comic plays and sketches are associated with all these types, whether as inserted interludes, or as the main event. Dance, music, and singing are always part of such performances, following the model of Sanskrit literary theatre.

The focus here will be on a Nepalese popular theatre which I recently observed, the *katti pyakhan* theatre of Pharping, on the edge of the Kathmandu valley. This theatre is that of a group of people devoted to a quite different form of activity, woodcutting, but who chose, or were chosen at a certain moment in their history, to provide dramatic performances at certain fixed dates in the

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religious calendar. It is clearly a very ancient theatrical tradition which has up until now never been studied in any detail. Its interest lies in how it combines religious plays involving phenomena of divine possession along with a royal tradition, that is a court theatre close to the canonical forms of Sanskrit theatre, and as well, burlesque sequences. Curiously, the juxtaposition of these three genres gives the performances a modern, even post-modern, feel if one thinks of Western avant-garde theatres which foster heterogeneity, collage, and a melange of theatrical codes. The totality of the *katti pyakhan* nevertheless forms a coherent whole which is continuous, tied in together and ordered hierarchically in the manner mentioned above. It impresses through its richness and profusion, which is all the more noteworthy in that the social group in question, the Balamis, has always lived in precarious conditions, connected with the wild world of the jungle and the outer edges of the great urban centres of civilization. In sum, it is a population that until very recently was illiterate, and which had never, or only very marginally, been linked to the royal courts of the past.

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Pharping, the little town to which my research has regularly brought me in recent years, is one of a number of localities in the Kathmandu valley, along with Chapagaon and Panauti, two places where I have previously lived. It is a world of small shops and businesses incessantly buzzing with activity, a place of exchange and contrast, reflecting the interethnic and inter-caste connections of the area. Roughly divided into seven social quarters, the town space is devoid of any memorable monuments and has no general architectural coherence. First impressions here are of shops crammed in together, of ochre brick houses eroded by the monsoons, and of the constant hustle and bustle in the alleyways despite the motorcycles parked higgledy-piggledy which block the way. There is no sense of any life devoted to the arts and letters nor any other cultural refinement behind those scarcely hospitable-looking facades. Life seems dominated by the humdrum routine of commercial enterprise. Bent under the weight of the large wicker baskets they carry on their backs, people from outlying villages come to the town to sell their fruit, their vegetables and a few hand-made articles, notably wickerwork and weaving. Pharping is only around thirty kilometres from the capital, but it takes a good hour to reach it by car or motorcycle, given the multiple bends and potholes that are found along the winding road clinging to the hillsides.

In the Malla era, Pharping was the capital of a quasi-independent principality. Today it is little more than an influential chief village controlling the access to certain trade routes, whether for foot or road traffic, leading towards the south. During the Maoist insurrection of 1996–2006, military posts, prominently defended by machine guns, protected the town. The locality is one of no particular charm apart from some pleasant views over nearby rice-fields and broad tracts of forest that have recently been brought under state protection. Yet the atmosphere here is quite different from the urbanized and polluted environment of the Kathmandu valley; the air is purer, the days are not as burdensome and the lifestyle of the hills is closer at hand. You feel that you are in the country. The surrounding villages are known for their delicate-tasting pears and their *lapsi* plums.

I had already arrived in the town at the beginning of November, clinging on to the pillion of Anuj Rimal's motorbike. Anuj is the nephew of Krishna, my former travelling companion who was my right hand man on several of my Himalayan research forays, but who decided several years ago to emigrate to Virginia in the United States. Along with his retired wife, he settled there in the home of his son, who found a job as waiter in a restaurant. He had therefore passed me on to his nephew, in accordance with the true Nepalese customs of transmission within families. But one problem remained: unlike his uncle who had been brought up from a young age in the Newar environment, Anuj did not speak the Newari language. So with him, the research had to be conducted through Nepali. But I could use it only for certain things, and not for others which required the use of that language. The way Anuj rode the bike through the now hair-raising traffic jams of the valley, snaking between vehicles, swerving around obstacles at the very last second and accelerating

sharply was also quite enough give me a few shakes. But there are some fears that you manage to overcome – by shutting your eyes!

I remember that we arrived there during the Tihar festival. Once we had reached the bazaar and my motorcycle terrors had subsided, we went in search of Ganesh Manandhar, the organizer and chief financial supporter of the dances of the month of Kartik. I had heard of these dances several years previously without ever having had the opportunity to witness them. As a result they piqued my curiosity enormously. Ganesh, unfortunately, turned out to be a completely deaf old man, seemingly unable to communicate. We were therefore led through a chain of persons towards Vishnu Balami, who was the master, or guru, of these dances. We found him in the centre of the town on a broad stage set up opposite the temple of the goddess Jankhesvari. In his early forties, both reserved and yet jovial, unmissably dressed in a tracksuit top with sleeves marked out by broad blue and yellow stripes, Vishnu welcomed us with a broad smile. At that very moment a prize-giving was taking place, solidly accompanied by the playing of traditional music, by speeches and multi-coloured banners to mark the Newar New Year. Our guru had just received an honorary award for his devotion and efforts in support of the retention of this form of popular theatre. The vitality of the Newar culture within the present climate of change, the interest that is being taken in the slightest of its manifestations and the strong will to preserve it have fascinated me for a long time. They give the lie to over-hasty conclusions about the claimed cultural globalization which will leave nothing of local cultures to survive. What is happening is quite the opposite!

Vishnu Balami provided me with details about the month-long programme of dances, and told me straight off the story that was to be represented through them for that year, 2010. I am repeating it here in its full version such as I was able to clarify it over the following days thanks to additional information gleaned from him by telephone (research methods change with time ...) in the shop of my assistant Shova:

A very long time ago there was a king named Narpal Raja who ruled over the kingdom of Udaipur. His son and heir, prince Dharmapal Raj Kumar, was married to a princess named Dharmavati. One day, the king set off to go hunting in the jungle with his beaters and his professional huntsmen, the *sikari*. They shot a few deer, *cala*, then stopped to rest. They looked for water to drink but could not find the slightest drop anywhere. Thereupon the king decided to create a spring, *kuva* in Nepali, *bumga* in Newari, on that spot. He consulted his chief astrologer, *gyotis*, and his priests. They ordained that he should firstly proceed to a human sacrifice. But how was he to choose the victim? That person would have to have on the body thirty-two signs of beauty, *battis lakshana*, he was told. But there were only three persons in the whole kingdom who bore such a set of marks: the king himself, his eldest son and the latter's wife, Raj Kumari. When they heard of this opinion, the prince and his wife hurriedly fled from Udaipur.

They walked through the jungle and finally came to a palace owned by a most fearsome ogre named Champasur Rakshas. The prince and the *rakshas* engaged in a fierce fight. In the end, Raj Kumar won out and locked the terrible creature in one of the palace rooms. One day when he had gone off hunting as usual, the prince forgot to take the key to the chamber in which he held the *rakshas* prisoner. Overcome with curiosity, his wife picked it up and opened the door to the prison. Champasur seized her immediately and held her under his power. He decided to use the wife as a way of getting rid of the husband. Three times he tried to do this.

On the first occasion, the princess pretended to have a stomach ache. 'Only the milk of a tigress, she said, will be able to cure me.' Raj Kumar set out to find that milk. After a long journey he came across two tiger cubs under a tree, left there by their mother while she went hunting. He told them his plan and climbed to the top of the tree to await the tigress's return. She came back and gave suck to her cubs. A little milk dropped into a leaf folded into the shape of a little cup that the prince had previously placed there, with the consent of the cubs. Once the tigress had gone off again, Raj Kumar eagerly grasped the leaf-cup full of milk and returned to Champasur's palace, followed at a distance by the tiger cubs who were curious to

know who this mysterious prince was and what the strange story was about. Raj Kumar gave the milk to his wife who instantly got better.

On the second occasion, the princess again pretended to have a stomach ache. She beseeched her husband to procure a little powder obtained from the canine tooth of a terrible ogre named Dantasur Rakshas, who lived in the region of Udhancal Parvat, in eastern Nepal. Once more, the prince acceded to her desire. He set off and finally found the *rakshas*. He set about fighting him and, as before, he defeated the nasty creature. He did so by a cunning stratagem. He taunted the ogre, and managed to hide in the creature's long trailing mane, from where he goaded him with his sabre, jabbing him here and there on his sides and on his rump, until the ogre had had enough and gave in. 'Ask of me what thou wilt and I will give it thee; but I beg of thee, do not poke me anymore, it is too much for me.' The prince got what he wanted, some enamel from the enormous canine tooth of the ogre; he ground up this shard, reducing it to powder which he hastened to carry back to the princess. Once again, she got better straight away.

That was too much for Champasur who foamed with rage. He decided to take things in hand himself and to get rid of his rival without any further delay. He ordered Raj Kumari to slip poison into her husband's food. She submissively carried out the order. Raj Kumar was on the point of death. He had just the time to say to his princess: 'Listen, you have acted evilly, you have betrayed me. If you want to repent, do what I tell you. The ogre will ask you to eat my heart and my liver. Do not obey him. Hide them and cast them into the river Ganges.' With that, he died. Raj Kumari burst out sobbing and followed to the letter the instructions of her unfortunate husband.

The story then continues in another nearby kingdom called Kanchapur, ruled by a king known as Mahipal Raja. Every morning, the princess of the kingdom, Subarna Kesari Maiya, used to take her bath in the nearby river Ganges and made her devotions to the sun god, Surya. One day as she was conducting her morning ablutions, she noticed the heart and liver of Raj Kumar floating in the river. The previous night she had had a dream which instructed her to draw the organs from the river and to mix them with sand taken from the riverbank so as to shape them into a statue. She hastened to follow these instructions. Suddenly, prince Raj Kumar was restored to life and stepped out from the statue. The two young people immediately fell in love with each other and were shortly thereafter married by Mahipal Raja. Raj Kumar decided then to seek his revenge, and set out to look for Champasur Rakshas. He came across him in the company of his first wife and slew them both with a sabre thrust (Champasur *vadha*). The pair fell to earth. At that very moment, the spring that the father of the prince had wanted to dedicate in the previous episode began to flow. Amazed by such a prodigy, the kingdom's subjects gathered and gave thanks for the royal couple.

Every year, Vishnu Balami assured us, a new story is staged. The plots differ, but from one year to another the characters remain fairly similar. The court theatre genre, consisting of a text centred around a Hindu king and his Kshatriya warrior ideals, a hunt, and a weeping princess named Raj Kumari are maintained. Does he have a written script? 'The original text was eaten by mice', he replied with a really sorrowful look. 'All I have today is a text recopied in devanagari characters in a school exercise book. In total we have twelve stories. In principle we start again every twelve years to go through the same episodes.'

One month later I was back in Pharping to attend to theatrical performance. It takes place only once, or more exactly twice, a year but in two different neighbourhoods of the town, during the ten days immediately following the full moon of the month of Kartik (October–November). Shova and I installed ourselves in a little hotel whose main attraction derived from its fine top-storey balcony which provided a superb view over the rice-fields and the wooded hills all around. You can take in the whole magnificent panorama in a single glance; the mountains of the Mahabharat Range in the distance, their ridges capped by a few clouds, form a mass of dark-green, which gives a feeling of grandeur to the landscape, over which the winter sun casts a bright raw light. What clarity! On a

more prosaic level, we were only ten minutes by foot from the venue for the performance, which for a return in the very middle of the night through empty streets presented a certain advantage, especially with regard to the packs of wandering dogs, which are always a menace after dark.

We began by paying a visit to the temple of the goddess Vajra Yogini, standing a little way to the south on a wooded escarpment that you have to clamber up and which overlooks a rounded depression filled with rice-fields. It is a relatively important temple, known as far away as Kathmandu and Patan. The wife of the local Buddhist priest, who was a Newar Vajracharya from Patan, conducted our visit to the sanctuary on the first floor of the building. I noticed the remains of blood sacrifices. We shook the bell to announce our presence to the goddess and placed our offering in the offertory box. A diffuse light was filtering through the shutters made of rough-hewn wooden slats. Outside, the evening shadows were already engulfing the valley. The nearby city was quietly slipping away into the darkness. A little further on, behind a clump of evergreen trees was the opening to a cave in which Padmasambhava, the famous Tibetan preacher, is said to have meditated. He is thought to have attained an elevated level of spirituality there, according to tradition. Since that event, Pharping has become a pilgrimage site for Tibetan Buddhism. Several monasteries associated with that branch of the faith have been founded in the surrounding district over the course of recent decades. They stand out from all points of view through their size, their giltwork, their paintings, their treasures, as well as for their giant prayer wheels, nearly four metres high by five in diameter, which diffuse their lilting sounds to the four corners of the universe when they are spun. A few Western monks have come to spend time in these places of retreat in search of a lost inner peace.

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The play was due to begin around 8.30 pm. But a power cut caught everybody out, and the preparations were interrupted. An auxiliary generator was set up to provide electricity for the amplifiers and the strings of light-bulbs hung up all around the stone and brick stage, *dabu*. All that took some time. The procession of actor-dancers formed up a little later in front of a nearby Balami house where for a number of years a first-floor room had been made available to the troupe for rehearsals. An altar dedicated to the god of music, theatre and dance, Nasahdyah, a manifestation of Shiva as a dancer, had been set up there. That room, whose floor was spread with mats, is off limits to women, as Nasahdyah is considered dangerous to females: they may neither touch nor approach the god.

At the head of the procession came a man whose face was unmasked and who represented Mahadev, the Hindu 'great god' Shiva. He wore a circlet of silver around his face, embellished with broad lotus petals fashioned out of the same metal, and in his right hand he shook a small hourglass-shaped drum, *damaru*. He was followed by two boys, also without masks, representing Ganga, the sacred river Ganges, and Parvati, Shiva's consort, two goddesses closely associated with Mahadev. Thereafter came seven masked characters taking the roles of the principal goddesses of the Newar pantheon, among whom are Kumari, Mahalaksmi and Dakshinkali, the divinity of the famous sanctuary situated near Pharping. Behind them came another group made up of royal characters. They wore necklaces and crowns set with long feathers and plumes, period costumes (or supposedly so), with puffed trousers or long brightly coloured skirts. As part of the troupe there were also actors representing princesses draped in red costumes and with garishly painted mouths. All the actors were male and all wore thick make-up as the theatrical tradition required. Most were bare-foot, though some had sacrificed tradition to comfort by wearing socks against the cold. The actors were escorted by vaguely military-looking guards wearing cowboy hats or present-day Nepalese police caps, which looked rather anachronistic for the type of play being presented. The performers proceeded in single file down the street, appearing very slight in the dim light of the Petromax lamps, essaying little dance steps in time to the rhythm of the drums and the clashing of the cymbals that accompanied the procession. They leapt to right then to left, thrusting out their hips as they did so. Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, led the procession in his benevolently beaming white mask.

All the performers belong to the Balami ethnic group, which forms an integral part of the Newar culture and ethnicity. The Balamis speak a dialect that is particular to them and they live on the edges of the Kathmandu valley, in contact with the Tamangs, another people speaking a Tibeto-Burman language who are present in large numbers in the district. The Balamis were formerly wood-cutters selling their wood in the towns and cities. But as the forests are now protected, most have had to abandon that form of activity and have turned towards agriculture. They generally live in rural areas, dwelling in humble houses of stone and brick, which are today roofed with corrugated iron. I have been interested in this group for many years, since 1976 in fact, when I spent some time in Homdu, a village near Pharping, and when I undertook an initial reconnaissance on foot in the Chitlang valley, which has a high density of Balami residents. That was when Sarkiman, a porter and cook from the nearby village of Dhulikhel and who over time became a close friend, was accompanying me on my Nepalese excursions. I have always suspected that there was a close relationship between the members of this group and the inhabitants of my first fieldwork village, Pyangaon. This very ancient link, the awareness of which had been lost, or almost so, now appears obvious to me.

The form of theatre I am most interested in, that of the lunar month of Kartik, belongs to the Balamis and forms a distinctive feature of their culture. It is performed in almost all of their villages, even though these are situated at some distance one from another and which maintain few if any links between each other. The key roles, those of the masked gods, as well as the functions of the dancing, singing and music masters in particular are reserved to them. Other groups today take part in the production and staging of the plays, but in subsidiary roles or ones associated with providing the music. The essence of the performance remains exclusive to the Balamis.

The procession progressed slowly towards the stage, showered by handfuls of rice tossed by the crowds massed along the route. The performers then went on to the square stage area and proceeded around it, stopping at each of the corners to perform each time the same dance movements. The masked gods effected a form of trance in which their arms, their hands wielding daggers and sabres, their whole bodies shook mightily to convey their status to the spectators. On their fingers they wore flattened silver rings. Their waists were encircled with heavy metal belts. Around their necks they wore garlands of flowers and they were clad in long coloured skirts that came down to their ankles and that they made swirl as they whirled round. These god-men seemed to have come from another world, an unreal world of the imagination. Their stately circular progress seemed derived from the divine forces that these human performers were imagined to be representing. No one outside of the members of the troupe is permitted to touch them nor speak to them during the divine ritual.

Whether they were representing gods or humans, the characters all venerated the omnipresent god Nasahdyah, the divinity who gave them the power to dance to the rhythm of the music. On this source depends the graceful artistry which must necessarily accompany the performance if it is to be successful. Prior to the proceedings, the stage area had been closed off and hushed by the dance and music masters. This would ensure that it was safe from intrusion by any evil spirits out to disrupt the solemn event during the night. From that moment on, the spectators were forbidden to walk across the theatre space. That space belonged entirely to the gods and those representing them. The actors had taken over the nearby temple of Jhankesvari and the main room of the building attached to it. In these they set up their dressing-rooms with all their make-up materials and the costumes ready for swift changes between scenes. This sanctuary, which had a grilled opening in the back wall, belonged to them for the night.

The musicians, seated in their formal attire on the step of a nearby raised platform, play a few preliminary musical pieces, accompanied by traditional Newar instruments among which were *bansuri* (a type of recorder) and *pvamga*, sorts of long horns, so long in fact that they needed

bamboo stands to support them so they could be played, and which produce a characteristic nasal sound, modulated only by the breathing of the musician.

Under the light of the stage illuminations, the musicians chanted hymns to the rhythm of their cymbals and drums. Then the troop of royal characters took the stage. There was a king, a queen, the crown prince, his princess, a minister, all with serious fixed expressions, followed by guards and soldiers. With their necklaces and their crowns they looked like characters out of a fairy story. Their eyes were heavily outlined with kohl; their costumes, embellished with paste jewellery, little coloured mirrors and sparkling strips of metal, flashed radiantly. They danced slowly in each of the four corners of the stage, repeating their gestures and their steps toward each side of the performance space. The thickset bodies and wrinkled hands contrasted with the graceful faces of the characters represented. The postures were all formalized, with the hands tracing gestures in the air called *mudra*, literally meaning a royal seal, well known in Indian dances and classic Sanskrit theatre: hands opened out like wings with the palms facing each other, fingers curved or straight up, thumb and index finger touching together over the heart, rounded movements outwards, etc. There is no improvisation in these figures, everything is prescribed and regulated, including the emotions to be expressed. Nevertheless the unscripted yawns of some of the younger actors, weary from several sleepless nights in a row, tended to disturb the fine harmony of the whole, adding an involuntary comic touch to the scene represented. In between each scene, two men momentarily drew out a large cloth in the middle of the stage to serve as a curtain, on which were the painted images of three gods: Nasahdyah once again (in fact in the form of a many-armed Shiva with a cobra around his neck, dancing on his bull) along with two supporting gods, Nandi and Brindi. This divine grouping centred upon Shiva clearly demonstrated the troupe's religious inspiration and revived for me past encounters through my reading of the manifold tales and plays of North India that were placed under the tutelage of Shiva and conceived of as conversations between that god and his wife Parvati.

The dialogues exchanged between the royal characters are of some note. They were a mixture of the Maithili language, of rough and patchy Hindi, and of Nepalese. Maithili is today spoken only in the neighbouring Indian state of Bihar as well as in part of the middle plains of the Terai region of Nepal. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was one of the chosen languages of the royal Malla dynasty, whether in Kathmandu, Patan or Bhaktapur. Several plays dating from that period were composed in that language. However, in Pharping as in the various Balami or Newar localities, audiences are unable to follow these exchanges. My assistant Shova, who had worked for a German development agency in the east of the Nepalese Terai, could pick up a few words. They were delivered in a monotone during the rare interludes between the dancing and musical accompaniment. At the start of each scene, a Balami man, seated in the middle of the orchestra, took charge of summarizing the action in Newari, using that language which everyone present could understand, to clarify the sequence of events. Such a person is referred to by the Sanskrit term *sutradhar*, meaning 'narrator', a function derived from the practice of classical Indian theatre. Despite these off-stage commentaries, it was the scenic effects and physical action that took precedence over the speeches, which no one really paid much attention to. The microphones hung up here and there proved to be of little utility.

The various episodes of the royal tale of Dharmapal Raj Kumar were played out one after another. Each scene is entitled after the entry, *prabesh*, of the character who plays the main part in it. The hunt sequence in the middle of the jungle took up a considerable part of the play. The hunters had their particular dances, sometimes with their shoulder poles (carried by two actors) by means of which they carried away the captured animals, and sometimes with their beaters' spears. They watched out for jungle creatures, they shared bits of information about the animals' tracks, they conversed with each other and generally fooled around. For their part, the royal characters

hunted with bows. The whole troupe came across various denizens of the jungle: deer, panthers and tigers. The tempo was very slow and seemed infinitely extendible and many of the dances were repetitive. I may fairly be accused of ethnocentrism, but it was a fact: these dance sequences, which held up the action, seemed to me as a Western spectator rather fastidious. It is not certain that they are not seen that way as well, or may very soon be, by the Nepalis in the audience. To ensure that these forms of drama survive, it may well be that, sooner or later, their champions consent to some readjustments. Otherwise, their collapse risks being both swift and total.

Burlesque interludes occurred in between the historical scenes. Facetious creatures, *khyah*, and skeletons, *kavan*, which are basic features of Newar comic theatre, provided amusement for the audience. They leapt around the stage, showing their backsides and making lewd gestures and directing suggestive jokes towards the young girls. As is often the case with theatrical traditions from all parts of the world, the comic dimension fitted easily alongside the more dramatic aspects. There were various kinds of animals: dogs made as if they were urinating on the spectators, two tigers prowled across the stage, deer bounded all about. The young actors playing these animals got thoroughly involved with their parts, to the great delight of the audience. The main story of Raja Dharmapal was also interrupted by various sketches and folk tableaux, of which one notable example was the Poda fishers' dance. The Poda make up one of the lowest castes of Newar society and are allocated some of the meanest of functions, particularly the collection of garbage. The fishermen cast their conical nets into rivers or pools, with baskets hooked onto their hips. On their heads they wore tall pointed hats and they conversed with each other in a language peculiar to them.

The performance concluded around three in the morning. However, the play itself had not ended as, for the whole story to be played out, two consecutive evenings are required. On the next evening, 26 November 2010, we again took our places around the stage, more warmly clad this time than the previous night to resist the biting cold. For the occasion I brought along my Newar friend Prasant, from the city of Panauti, and one of his close friends, Shitu, who was a student at the Bhaktapur Engineering College. So we now were effectively a little team! The Balami people were delighted at the interest we were showing in them. Often, though, I had to stand up because of cramp in my legs, and to walk around the square on the lookout for certain features or to stare into shadows in the night.

The episode in which the princess weeps profusely took place during this second part. It is one of the play's key moments. The person playing the part of the princess has a thoroughly particular status. Just like the dance and music masters, the actor of this role must remain distanced from various sources of impurity during the days leading up to the performance. Any food consumed must not be touched by the hands. Furthermore, the boy acting this part must go to worship a specific divinity, Kholcadyah, shortly before taking the stage. It is this god, whose name I came across for the first time there in Pharping, who gives the actor the power to weep on command and especially allows him to dry his tears once the scene is over.

I must admit my surprise that night at the extent of the lamentations that accompanied the death of the prince. In reality, the princess uttered a long-drawn-out shrill howl which was thoroughly unlike sobbing. However, the audience was in no way put out by that. Apparently that is what is traditionally expected of Raj Kumari. During all this time, the director of the play stood at the actor's side, ready to intervene if necessary. Once the sequence was over, he began to breathe on the princess's chest, softly intoning certain formulas known to him alone. The wailing stopped immediately. But this stifling was not a mere formality: the loud weeping indicates a sort of possession of the actor by the god Kholcadyah. If the god is displeased, he will mark this irritation by abandoning the actor to his sobs, which become uncontrollable. Once again, how can one avoid observing how far the simplest actions of the actor, the very way he plays the part, are permeated with religious ideas. They are governed by obscure and dangerous forces, beyond the domain of

human consciousness. One may, perhaps one even should, see in these shrieks a thoroughly local way of representing the violence of human passions raised to their paroxysm and their irrationality with respect to social norms. To express suffering and despair, words are insufficient. You have to go beyond the shoal of language.

On the first evening, there were only a few spectators – around thirty or forty at most. Admittedly, the play had already been put on a few days earlier in a higher part of the town on another raised stage which was next to the ruined sanctuary of the goddess Mahalakshmi, the guardian of the troupe and one of the principal divinities of the Balamis. On the second evening, the audience was larger: it was the last night of the performance and, of course, the episode featuring the weeping of Raj Kumari formed part of it. There were women, children and a few adult males, all sitting on mats in an orderly manner. Roughly slung lengths of rope separated them from the actors, stopping them from setting foot upon the stage area. The cold became even more intense as the night advanced. Wrapped from head to foot in long traditional coloured shawls, the spectators huddled together to keep warm. To pass the time while waiting, they nibbled on peanuts sold by a peanut-seller moving through the crowd. What were their expectations? They were not there to take part in a sacred ritual, at least, not entirely. They clearly took great pleasure in the performance itself. Between the spectators and the spectated, one felt there was a profound sense of communion, a mutual recognition, the affirmation of shared values, aspects that were very far distant from those of the modern theatre of the West.

The epilogue on the second day was particularly gripping. It was already nearly four o'clock in the morning when the seven masked gods came on to the stage as on the first evening, in single file and trembling violently in all their limbs. They swayed dangerously as they moved, perhaps under the influence of the large quantities of rice beer and alcohol that they had been partaking of. Some had only just woken up from a long nap. They executed their habitual dance of offering and homage with slow application. Then came the animal sacrifices. That night in Pharping a young goat was slaughtered. The animal was grasped by the goddess Kumari who cut its throat with her sabre. Kumari then presented the slit throat of the dying kid to the god Dakshinkali, who lifted his mask and drank the blood directly from its hacked open throat. The six other living gods also partook in turn of this sacrificial blood. The play's guardian, *pyakhan guru*, was also on the stage, for every year it was his duty to incarnate the goddess Mahalakshmi. This supreme role fell to him by right. The terrible apotheosis by which the two-night performance was concluded took place before a mere smattering of spectators.

The boundaries between a sacrificial rite and a theatrical representation had in this case become completely blurred. The dramatic, theatrical aspect of the sacrifice as an offering to the gods was intentionally staged for the benefit of the audience, which, though limited by that time, observed the scene with a mixture of fright and fascination. In the neighbouring Chitlang valley, during the same ritualized dramatic celebration of the month of Kartik, it was a buffalo that was sacrificed, and the seven Balami living gods stripped off their masks completely to drink the consecrated blood. They feverishly rushed upon the dying animal to suck the blood directly from its throat. Each one had to be forcefully dragged away from the severed artery to leave room for the others. Some of the actors would confide to me later that they believed this blood would give them great inner strength and protect them from all illness for the next six months.

The supernatural atmosphere generated by these bloody scenes calls to mind the *mysterium tremendum*, the source of terror, one of the two faces of the sacred distinguished by Rudolf Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, published in German in 1917. Otto identified the other face as the *mysterium fascinans*, which is characterized by its irresistible force of attraction. This duality is particularly applicable to Newar religious theatre, differing only by the fact that, in Nepal as in other places, these two aspects are never totally distinct one from the other. The violence of the

animal sacrifice both fascinates and induces a sense of terror. Such on-stage sacrifices in which a group of masked gods drink the blood of the slain animal are in effect an emblematic characteristic of Newar religion. They are organized at important moments, when for example the ritual offerings made to the gods are the object of a *mise-en-scène* to which music and dance lend rhythm and substance. I have attended several of these events in different situations. They always brought me to the edge of nausea, and I had to avert my eyes at the most unbearable moments. However, the Newar people do not seem to feel the same discomfort, even the children, whom I also saw coming in large numbers to witness the animal sacrifices. Such events are still very popular and continue to be enacted. But perhaps not for very much longer, as a new degree of sensitivity is starting to be observed: sections of Nepalese society, particular outside of the Newar ethnic group, are now becoming disturbed by the violence of these scenes and the suffering of the animals. Petitions have been circulating calling for mass animal sacrifices to be prohibited. Yet it must be recognized that there is no gratuitous infliction of physical suffering or torture. The ceremonies are not a matter of absolute, sadistic cruelty, but first and foremost concern offerings appropriate to gods who demand blood. Gods who must be propitiated as much as entertained.

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This form of popular village theatre seems to have derived directly from the classical Newar theatre of the Malla era, which flourished up until the conquest of the Kathmandu valley by the Indo-Nepalese Parbatiya castes at the end of the eighteenth century and the unification of Nepal that followed. The royal sequences, which are rare in other forms of Newar theatrical expression, are clearly drawn from that tradition, an impression reinforced by the use of the Maithili language in the dialogues. The overall performance equally relates back to classical Sanskrit theatre, about which the great French orientalist Sylvain Lévi reminded us how much it was associated with the royal courts and represented on stage characters linked to that monarchical universe. In the Indian world, theatre has often served as an *instrumentum regni*.

The consequent challenge for present-day researchers is therefore to reconstitute the threads which tie the ancient court plays of the Malla era, the flower of the medieval Newar culture, to this now marginal village theatre. What links are there between the theatrical spectacles performed in earlier times in the precincts of the royal palaces at Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, and these shows for ordinary people staged far from the capitals and their palaces? Clearly there has been an appropriation and reuse of the themes of royal literature in the local folk tales and in the traditions that are particular to the Balami people. This is borne out by the comic and folkloric episodes. Over the centuries, changes must also have taken place in the manner in which the episodes are staged and in the costumes, which would therefore nuance to some extent the idea of an unchanged tradition. Unfortunately, it is not possible to perceive how such changes may have come about. If local traditions are to be credited, the Balami theatre, in every case, seems to have been a local royal creation, and one of the most ancient of such, dating in fact from the fifteenth century when it was purportedly founded by a former king of Pharping of the Sulki Vamshi dynasty. A precise date is even given for this: the year 1473 of the common era.

But why should it have been the Balami who maintained this tradition? By taking up such royal stories, this ethno-social group has made them a central element of its religious and cultural life and an essential ingredient of its identity. Such phenomena are known elsewhere in South Asia (in Rajasthan, southern India, Assam and in the Himalayan region). But how is it that this tiny human community numbering no more than a few thousand people finds itself today, much more than others, the depository of such an ancient cultural heritage? Should one look for the explanation in its relatively isolated geographic location, at a remove from the wider turbulence and upheavals that have affected the whole region over a number of decades now? Might we conclude that peripheral areas have been better protected than other zones from these events? Yet up until the 1950s, the

Balamis lived along one of the most important commercial arteries for people travelling on foot linking the Kathmandu valley with the Indo-Gangetic basin. With such traffic flows, outside influences must have been a permanent feature of their life.

Could receiving public financial support have helped to explain it? Perhaps, but such support never seems to have been very great. Much less, in fact, than that received by the major Newar theatre troupes of the Kathmandu valley that are attached to more highly reputed temples. Here in the Balami area, year after year personal and local resources have been tapped into to cover the expenses. Subsidies from governments cannot therefore explain why and how this polymorphous theatre has persisted over a period of some five hundred years. Further research will perhaps shed light upon these questions which for the moment remain without answer. Whatever it may be, the ethnographic materials derived from my fieldwork documents, notebooks and photos, together with the still vivid memories I retain of those evening performances, are sufficient to remind us that pre-modern expressions of theatre, just like oral literature in general, are not the exclusive domain of the scholarly world. As long as it continues to take place outside of an enclosed and covered space especially reserved for its performances, and while it remains a spectacle that may be viewed for free, theatre, whether it be of the East or West, will continue to be borne along by elements drawn from the people themselves, who bring to it their own strengths, their culture and their determination. But without these elements, it will surely fall rapidly into decay.

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