

# Power politics and the contested meaning of heritage

Historically embedded beliefs can be reproduced or contested through art, rituals, myths, structures, people and sacrifices – and employed by different interest groups, in the context of war – to build up status, goodwill and power. The concept ‘heritage’ is an interesting entry point for recognising authority structures and power politics, whereby one must also explore and understand the ways in which ‘heritage’ is conceptualised, theorised and applied in today’s globalised and rapidly changing world. Here the focus is on South Asia – Nepal in particular – and how heritage played a role in the quest for power before, during and after Nepal’s civil war (1996-2006).

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TO COMPREHEND THE ROLE that cultural and natural heritage played in the context of Nepal’s civil war, it is important to take note of the historical relationship between power distribution at the micro and macro levels of the physical world and the allocation of power in the supernatural world. Nepal’s ontology has traditionally been one of a cosmological order in which power is distributed by Hindu gods and deities. Natural heritage was assigned accordingly, and rituals and sacrifices reproduced and fortified the cosmological order of the Nepalese society. Religion stands in close relation to Nepal’s politics and at a number of points in history this form of cultural heritage has been capitalised upon by power seekers and power holders.

Before, during and after Nepal’s civil war, the United Communist Party Nepal-the Maoists (UCPN-M)<sup>1</sup> engaged in rituals to negotiate their position of power. So too did the other warfare actors: the Monarchy (including the army), the Nepali Congress (NC) Party, the Communist Party of Nepal-the United Marxists-Leninists (CPN-UML), and others.

– *People of a political party other than the UCPN-M were not allowed to stay in the village. The Maoists compelled the Damais [Dalits] to play the drums, which they traditionally only played at funerals. The Maoists meant to say to us: if you do not leave the village immediately, we will make sure that it will not take long before a burial will happen. If you do not obey our commands, we will come to kill you and your family.*

In the quote above, an Internally Displaced Person (IDP) from a village in the Rukum District explained how the UCPN-M had made use of the symbolic power of ritual services to demand obedience and establish a firm position of authority at a local level.<sup>2</sup>

## Nepal’s rich cultural and natural heritage

Nepal has a rich and diverse cultural and natural heritage. The UNESCO World Heritage List records 830 properties with outstanding universal value. Nepal was originally a Buddhist society, with a Mongoloid population from Tibet. Around 2000 A.D. the Licchavis (Indo-Aryans) invaded from the north of India and spread Hinduism throughout Nepal. In general, Nepal’s long history of immigration from the north and the south has produced an ethnic and cultural diversity. The abundance of memorial sites, ritual places, temples, monasteries, shrines monuments, festivals, and 92 languages spoken as a mother tongue, are a good illustration of this. However, the ethnic and cultural differences not only indicate diversity, but have historically also led to struggles for social, political, and land tenancy survival and predominance.

Generally, the Nepali people’s deep belief in Hindu, animist, and related traditions, is easily discounted by Westerners, who see them as merely superstitions, or quaintly interesting, yet restricted to religious areas of life. But rituals, myths, and sacrifices play an important role in the *everyday* lives of Nepalis, not only within their religious lives. These forms of cultural heritage determine the rhythm of the day, divide the year into seasons, and structure the society into different castes and status groups. Even amidst the political turmoil of the civil war, “religious rituals at the Agnimatha, the Vedic fire temple in Patan, continue to be carried out, modestly and silently, with the idea that they guarantee the continuation of the cycle of the sun and the moon and thereby secure human existence on earth” (Shrestha & van Willigenbrug 2006). Families with barely a morsel to spare will offer the best they have to a particular deity (e.g. spirits of the woods and rivers), or Goddess(es) such as Shiva (of fertility and life). The evident importance of these rituals for the Nepalese has been strategically engaged in times of conflict to attain political power.

## Power and governance in Nepal’s history

The geographical area that is now known as Nepal was a collection of small states until the 18th century, and ruled by Hindu kings. According to Nepalese folklore, the god/saint Goraknath commanded Drabya Shaha to conquer the Kathmandu Valley (then known as Nepal), and two centuries later, between 1743 and 1775, Prithivi Narayan Shah completed the unification of the states into one Nepal. This 16th century legend is not an exception; there are many more examples indicating the strong connection between religion and governance in Nepal.

According to the Puranas, the mythologies of the (Hindu) Vedic literature, the kings of Nepal are the incarnations of the protagonist God Vishnupurana (Lord Vishnu). Based on these scriptures, the actions and legitimacy of the (Shah) kings were in many cases excluded from critique, at least until the fall of Nepal as a Hindu state (May 2008). Natural heritage, such as ritual places, temples, natural sites, were not only dedicated to a supernatural entity, but also to the kings of Nepal, because they themselves were seen as a reincarnated deity.

The French anthropologist Lecomte-Tilouine in fact refers to the old kings of Nepal as ‘Hindu Warrior Kings’, since traditionally every Hindu king was a member of the Kshatriya or warrior caste. In the process of determining which warfare strategies to use and to legitimise the violent means exercised to secure the power position of the kings of Nepal, the interaction between the supernatural world and the natural world has been significant. Three Warrior Kingship rules can be identified based on the religious beliefs and traditions of Nepal’s past. It was, firstly, the obligation of the Hindu kings to enact blood sacrifices, by offering an animal and by initiating war “the sacrificial function of the king’s sword revives his sovereignty: at regular intervals the king is required to carry out blood sacrifice, [...] [this] blood regenerates his power” (2004:15). Secondly, much emphasis was put on people’s individual responsibility to take part in the warfare. When the king declared war – after the gods had instructed him to do so – every household had to provide one man to fight. And thirdly, war was placed outside the Hindu law, and the country was plunged into temporarily lawlessness. This meant that all rules of the caste hierarchy were allowed to be broken in times of mortal danger, including the murder of a Brahmin, a woman, a child, or a cow. Warfare also altered the usual norms of purity and impurity, whereby the slaughter of an enemy did not lead to impurity for the belligerent, and neither did *bali dan* (self-sacrifice) for the relatives of the warrior who died as a martyr.

However, there have always been fractions that take another view on the effects of religious beliefs and practices on governance patterns in Nepal. Some, for instance, indicate that the Hindu scriptures never literally identified the kings as gods, but that it has been merely a political manoeuvre right from the start. Another point of critique is that the elite has consistently refused to accept all religious Vedic literary works, focussing instead on the content that would justify their rightful claim to power, according to the cosmological order outlined in the Puranas.

## The Monarchy, heritage and its claim to power

The question of a godly-determined sovereignty was a significant one in the collision between the Monarchy, the main political parties and the UCPN-M throughout the civil war. “Gyanendra, considered by loyalists to be a reincarnation of a Hindu god, ascended to the throne in 2001 after most of the royal family were slain by a drugged, drunk, lovelorn and suicidal prince. But the new king failed to win the support of the public, many of whom believed conspiracy theories linking him to the killing.”<sup>3</sup>

– *Steeped in the sea of blood which was the occasion for his [King Gyanendra] accession to the throne, and the father of a prince infamous as the alleged perpetrator of hit-and-run man-slaughter offences, the king is described by the Maoists with sanguinary imagery: ‘As if to fulfil a predetermined quota of human sacrifice every day, on an average more than two dozen persons per day have been brutally massacred by the security forces.’ (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004:19)*

Gyanendra made no attempts to disassociate himself from this bloodthirsty image; in fact he embraced it. At his first *Dasain* as king,<sup>4</sup> he performed a pilgrimage to worship and sacrifice at all the temples of the Nepalese territory (such as Lasargha, Gorkha, Nuwakot, Dasain). With this sacrifice Gyanendra intended to reaffirm his sovereign position as a godly installed king, a legitimate ruler, and as a chief in command of the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA).

On 29 May 2008, ‘Mail & Guardian Online’ reported that “The flag of Nepal’s 240-year-old Shah dynasty was taken down from the main palace in Kathmandu on Thursday after legislators abolished the world’s last Hindu monarchy ... The royal flag was replaced by Nepal’s national flag inside the palace on Thursday morning ... The king has been given 15 days to vacate the sprawling pink palace at the heart of Kathmandu, which will now be turned into a national museum.”<sup>5</sup> The symbolic meaning of flags makes them a common and fundamental tool in the quest for power between different fractions.

Anti-monarchism was not limited to the UCPN-M. Individuals frequently expressed their doubts about the royalty in general, and about Gyanendra in particular, often indicating their suspicion of Gyanendra’s involvement in the Royal Massacre. The situation was aggravated by widespread disillusionment in his unfulfilled promises to end corruption and to bring about development. Anti-monarchy civilians, whether UCPN-M members or not, began to cover up the word ‘royal’ on signboards (i.e. property, national parks, forests, army territories, temples and museums) – hereby declaring: ‘away with the king and royal property legislation’ and ‘equality to all, we do not longer want the central power to be in the hand of the Monarchy’. The king, previously regarded as an incarnation of Vishnupura, and thereby a legitimate ruler, was no longer spared from critique.

## The UCPN-M, heritage and its claim to power

After the Royal Massacre, the UCPN-M set about to unhinge the cultural construction of the king as the sovereign ruler, representing Lord Vishnu on earth. The status quo could only be overthrown, so the UCPN-M argued, if people identified themselves with the party and supported their call to take up arms and start a revolution. The legitimisation of their rule of law and the violence used to install it, was set in motion by reviving the Warrior Kingship rules.

## Revival of the Warrior Kingship rules

Until the 18th century ‘bravery and war related sacrifices’ were associated with a confirmation or promotion of one’s position in the cosmological order (concerning the king) and possibly also in terms of social stratification (for the rest of the Nepali people), such as a shift from lower to higher caste. The UCPN-M strategically played upon the first and third Warrior Kingship rules: every king had the right and duty to wage war and enact blood sacrifices, and to thereby plunge his kingdom periodically into a state of temporary lawlessness.

The UCPN-M reasoned that their act of bravery (the initiation of war in 1996) placed them in the same position of sovereignty as the Shah Hindu kings. The UCPN-M leaders, as modern incarnation of the Warrior Kings, explained that they had no other choice then to start an armed conflict to ‘cleanse the country from within’ of all forms of exploitation.<sup>6</sup>

Bravery and war-related sacrifice, until the 18th century, had led to a higher status within the caste validation system – now it would lead to promotion within the UCPN-M hierarchy. Anyone killed by government forces was recognised as a martyr. If a UCPN-M combatant killed (‘sacrificed’) an enemy, it was believed to create a direct connection, without interference of the Brahmin priests, between the combatant and the Hindu gods. The highest offer one could bring was a *bali dan*: “by offering themselves in sacrifice through their commitment, Maoist soldiers became living dead, martyrs-to-be” (Lecomte-Tilouine 2004:17). Every UCPN-M combatant is thus both pre- pared to make a sacrifice and a willing sacrificial victim. Like the Tamil Tigers who flaunted a cyanide capsule pendant, the UCPN-M forces, and nowadays the Youth Communist League, wore the sign of their imminent demise on their foreheads: a mourning headband (*kaphan*) or a red star, which is said to indicate that they are willing to accept their own death.

# Nepal's civil war (1996-2006)



1.

The second Warrior Kingship rule commands that every man is a potential warrior and thus expected to contribute to the war. The UCPN-M capitalised on the traditional rule to justify their involuntarily manners of recruiting people. In fact, they extended it to include women and children, so that at least one member of each household could take part in the UCPN-M meetings, forced labour and armed conflict.

## Contesting national and supernatural heritage

Before, during and after the civil war the UCPN-M damaged and destroyed national and supernatural heritage to contest the authority structures they symbolised. State representations (such as flags and signs) were removed or destroyed by the Maoist forces; government buildings, police offices, government schools and any buildings embodying the Royal House and the state were demolished or raided and used for UCPN-M purposes such as stockpiling of weapons or housing UCPN-M leaders. Murals, red painted messages on walls of houses, public buildings, buildings of historical value, and so forth, would exhibit rules and regulations, and broadcast threats to anyone who dared disobey them. Using murals to strengthen support for a political claim is a warfare strategy more often applied; during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) Red Guards knocked down old buildings, burned Buddhist images, and destroyed old Buddhist texts, replacing them with red painted slogans such as Long Live Chairman Mao.

UCPN-M's anti-monarchism had consequences for Nepal's intellectual heritage. The government's sphere of influence was relinquished in schooling programmes, this included a ban on singing the national anthem and teaching Sanskrit. Instead, teachers were pressured to educate pupils in the Maoist Leninist Maoists-the Prachanda (MLM-P) ideology.



2.

UCPN-M's aim to install an all-encompassing governance structure, included coming to terms with the power holders of the supernatural realm. Hence, the local faith healers and mediums (*dhami-jhankris*)<sup>7</sup> were prohibited from doing their work. In addition, the UCPN-M did not appreciate the healers' expressions of worship to Hindu gods and local spirits as they were a source of power that conflicted with the UCPN-M plans of total governance. The party propagated development and progress for the rural population, and opposed the animist and shamanist beliefs of the healers and spiritual leaders considering them backward. These kind of shamanist practices enhanced social inequality because the *dhamis* (Brahmin upper caste) functioned as (paid) brokers between ordinary people and the Hindu gods. Here, the UCPN-M strategically called upon the third Warrior Kingship rule, whereby caste hierarchy should be broken in times of mortal danger (wartime).

## Cultural beliefs, social practices, rituals, sacrifices and memorial sites

Cultural beliefs and social practices, which underlined the existing inequalities in Nepal's social stratification, were curtailed by the UCPN-M. As a consequence, any cultural practice that would confirm caste differences, gender inequality, or differences between poor and rich or educated and non-educated, were challenged and brought in line with the MLM-P ideology. The latter emphasised the importance of social equality and the inclusion of all. This did not happen without the use of verbal, physical and psychological violence. For example, armed UCPN-M members were known to threaten higher caste people with force into permitting lower caste people into their homes, and to then cook for them. Furthermore, wealthy households were coerced into giving up part of their land or salaries. Just like the sovereign rulers of

the past, the UCPN-M leaders started to raise taxes on land, property, natural resources, usage of infrastructure, and loans. People were forced to turn in donations: a portion of their food, livestock, and land. If they refused, they were beaten, kidnapped or sent to a labour camp.

In terms of gender equality, the UCPN-M reasoned that women should also be given a citizenship card, perform the same tasks as men, join community meetings and groups, and marry late so that they too could finish their education. Young girls and women were involuntarily recruited for the party and the PLA, with the argument that women needed to break away from any cultural tradition that subordinated them.

In some cases the UCPN-M did not contest local tradition (religious beliefs, social practices, rites, etc), but purposefully employed them to suit their needs, as was the case when forcing the Damai to play their drums. They would punish thieves publicly by painting their faces black, shaving their heads, adorning them with garlands of slippers and parading them around the village, accompanied by armed UCPN-M members. The shaving of the head is a Hindu rite of purification; a garland of flowers honours a person; one of slippers does the opposite.

In the past, resting platforms and paths were built in memory of the dead. Among the Kham Magars it is believed that the spirit of the dead will ensure prosperity in the locality where its memorial has been built and where it receives regular worship. In line with this local belief, the UCPN-M memorialised their dead by constructing platforms, paths, gates, and gardens. In addition, natural areas such as forests or rivers, and public services (like water taps), originally named after the deity or God who reigned over the resource, were renamed for Maoist martyrs. It was not only about commemorating the dead; it was also establishing a shift in authority.

## Conclusion

Heritage is neither a thing, a movement or a project, nor does it exist by itself. Heritage is about the process by which people use the past; a discursive construction with material consequences (Harvey 2008:19). At different points in Nepal's history the Monarchy, the UCPN-M and its opposition parties, called on their shared cultural heritage, in particular by reviving the ancient Warrior Kingship rules, to legitimate the use of violence to impose their authority on the local population. Ramirez writes [Nepal accommodates] a society where religion does not constitute an autonomous domain [and] the practice of Nepalese Maoism is hardly a secular affair (Gellner 2007:350). Different fractions have purposefully and opportunistically ascribed their own meaning to existing heritage, thereby invoking among the population the shared beliefs necessary to attain their respective goals. Whether through embrace or destruction depending on which group was gearing up to take power the significant meaning of heritage was contested.

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## Notes

- The UCPN-M was established in January 2009 when the Communist Party of Nepal-the Maoists (CPN-M) united with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre-Masal).
- For security reasons the VDC and village name are not identified.
- [http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jQhDpbHPipVypRDJAorPRS9RvWjg;\\_accessed=4+October+2011](http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jQhDpbHPipVypRDJAorPRS9RvWjg;_accessed=4+October+2011).
- Dasain* is the great warrior festival, one of the most important annual festivals.
- <http://mg.co.za/article/2008-05-29-royal-ag-lowered-as-nepal-monarchy-abolished>; accessed 4 October 2011.
- Interview with UCPN-M Chairman Prachanda, 28 May 2001, *A World to Win*, No.27, 2001.
- Dhami-jhankris* act as mediators between the material and spiritual worlds.

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