

The Microcosm of the Social: Domestication of Kumari

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Abstract

Kumari or Dyah Meiju (in Newari), also known as the living or virgin goddess, has been worshipped in Nepal as an incarnation of the most powerful Hindu goddess Taleju. She is a pre-pubescent Buddhist girl of the Newar community of Nepal and is selected on the basis of the physical perfection of thirty two lakshans (characteristics) and an auspicious horoscope. Considered to be the embodiment of an extraordinary body she is worshipped as a goddess until she attains puberty, either physiologically or undergoes a symbolic experience of the same. This paper tries to look beyond the fierce powerful image of Kumari and put forward the idea of domestication and surveillance which itself is patriarchal and exhibits a strong sense of gender disempowerment. It intends to question the very nature of domestication and try to comprehend the social structure which reflects the microcosmic layers of gender hierarchy.

Keywords: Kumari, Domestication, surveillance, gender hierarchy, disempowerment.

Introduction

Her eyes flashed up as she watched me enter. She was no more than six years old. Her hair was combed tightly into a bun and tied with a ribbon on top of her head. Thick lines of colyrium exaggerated her eyes and elongated them to her temples. A clot of reddened rice from the morning's puja clung to the centre of her forehead. Hanging around her neck over a scarlet jersey, was a

silver amulet box-the yantra mala of Taleju.

Her bare feet protruding beneath a scarlet skirt of satin brocade, rested expectantly in an offering tray. She was clutching the sides of her throne like the commander of a starship; her expression, despite the freshness of her face and the adorable plumpness of her cheeks, deadly serious. I found myself smiling impulsively at her as I entered the room but-just like the Kumari in

Kathmandu- the gorgeous eyes, recalling me to respectfulness, returned an uncompromising glare (Tree, 2014:142).

Kumari or Dyah Meiju (in Newari), also known as the living or virgin goddess, has been worshipped in Nepal as an incarnation of the most powerful Hindu goddess Taleju. She is a pre-pubescent Buddhist girl of the Newar community of Nepal and is selected on the basis of the physical perfection of thirty two lakshans (characteristics) and an auspicious horoscope. Considered to be the embodiment of an extraordinary body she is worshipped as a goddess until she attains puberty, either physiologically or undergoes a symbolic experience of the same. In this study, I have included the present three Kumaris and some former Kumaris of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapurⁱ. Kumari is a pre-pubescent girl, of which the Kathmandu and Bhaktapur Kumaris belong to the Buddhist Shakyaⁱⁱ caste and the Patan Kumari is selected from the Vajracharya

caste of the Newar community of Nepal. The Shakya and the Vajracharya caste do not practice celibacyⁱⁱⁱ but the young boys of both the castes go through an initiation ceremony called *bare chuegu* in order to become monks for four days and thus become a member of a *baha*^{iv}. The Kumaris are selected from one of the *bahas* and there should not be any inter-caste marriage in the family. She is considered as an incarnation of Taleju the tutelary Hindu deity of the Malla (1201-1768) and the Shah dynasty (1768-2008). From the Malla dynasty to the present rule, the public performance of Kumari worship continues unabated. The power of Kumari ritual can be understood with this fact that the Maoist, who dared to challenge and overthrow the monarchy, could not dare to challenge the royal institution of Kumari. Throughout her reign as Kumari, her foot does not touch the ground outside the Kumari *Chen* (Kumari palace) and she can make only thirteen

public appearances in a year (Shakya, 2012:34). The presence of Kumari transcends the religious space and appears to have figured strongly in the socio-political dynamics of the State. She is worshipped, carried out in palanquin and chariots, revered and feared by all. She is believed to be the supreme commander— an embodiment of beauty, wrath and kindness. Even the King and the President has to bow in front of her, beg her approval to rule and her decisions cannot be questioned nor can they be ridiculed.

Mobilizing Kumari to *Chen*

The Kumari worship has been an important aspect of Newar life much before it derived enormous attention from the later kings. Kumari, as we now know her, was known as *ajima* (ancestral mother and ruler of the valley) or Vajrayogini to the Newar Buddhists and it was in the *baha* the worship used to take place (Mellowship, 2007:63). In the context of Newar community, she was

more of an agrarian deity who would provide timely rain for crops, protect the valley from evils and so on. However, it is not surprising that she got included as a part of Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses through the legitimation of sacred geography. In her autobiography, former Kumari of Kathmandu Rashmilya Shakya mentions that the institution of Royal Kumari was prevalent even before kumaris were being worshipped as the incarnation of Taleju. She writes, “No one knows how old it is. Some say it goes back to the 13th century, but this was nearly two hundred years before the arrival of goddess Taleju herself” (Shakya, 2012:13). It is only with the adoption of Taleju as their deity and her association with Kumari that the Malla rule gained immense support from the people of the Valley, Hindus and Buddhists alike. During the rule, another interesting twist happened when the last Malla king of Kathmandu Jaya Prakasha Malla constructed

a palace for the then Kumari in 1757(Tree, 2014:302,159). He brought her from the comfort of her community and established a palace Kumari *Chen* for her inside the Royal Palace compound, giving access to the Hindu monarchs whenever they wanted (Tree, 2014:165). Kumari became a symbol of protection for Malla and the future kings. But apart from the symbol of protection the *Chen* signifies, Tree has noted the existence of the religious contestation between Hindus and Buddhists when it came to its structure. The temple had a distinct Hindu iconography and was constructed to perform royal Hindu worship. It was only four years later many Buddhist features were incorporated as the Gorkha^v threat increased when-
the pressure of Buddhist taboo reasserted itself, compelling the Hindu king to bow, once more to the prescriptions of Vajrayana and provide accommodation for full Tantric Buddhist worship of the royal Kumari now

living at the Kumari *Chen*(Tree, 2014:161).

The purpose of constructing the *Chen* for Kumari was not only to gain political support from the unemployed Newari artisans (Mellowship, 2007:102), but it was also a last resort to save his dying kingdom from the animosity of his brothers and Prithvinarayan Shah's invasion. It not only showed his obeisance to Taleju and Kumari, but more of an external symbolic gesture of becoming favorable to both. The arrival of Kumari into the palace can be seen by both the religious groups in different manner. The fact that Newars worship Kumari not as Taleju, but as Vajrayogini or Bodhisattva^{vi} says a lot about the inner differences. Kumari might have come out of her community but her community identity still remains. Kumari's journey from the interior of a *baha* to the interior of *Chen* marks her transformation from an agrarian community deity to an incarnation of a Hindu fierce

goddess.

Taming of the Fierce

In an essay on Kalighat temple of Calcutta, Sanjukta Gupta (2005) mentions how a specific Halidar

family's Vaishnavite tradition influences the Tantric cult of Daksinakáli so much so that even the deity's physical attributes get 'toned down' to a beautiful goddess in place of a fierce-looking one, in order to match with a certain class's religious sensitivities which she prefers to call it 'domestication of a Goddess' (p.61). I see a similar set of traits in the case of Kumari in which there has been an attempt to tone down her earlier identity. This has been carried out through the politics of patronage.

Kumari makes only thirteen public appearances in a year and lives inside the Kumari *Chen* for the rest of the year. If we look at the occasions when she appears in public, apart from two Buddhist events, the rest of them are Hindu festivals.^{vii} Although

Kathmandu and Patan Kumari have tutors at the Kumari *Chen* itself, some of the rules are bended for the Bhaktapur, Kumari. For instance, she is allowed to go to school, but when she is dressed as Kumari the rules are almost the same. The reason of these limited appearances is never met with an explanation, although a certain section of the society (mostly non-Newari) does criticize this custom of denying the basic human rights to the small girls, but they obviously fall on deaf ears. This idea of appearance and disappearance cannot be overlooked and needs a thorough analysis. It is regarded as a good omen to catch a glimpse of Kumari in her regalia when she is considered to be powerful. But that happens very rarely, only if one goes to her palace and waits to see her outside the golden-latticed window, where she generally presents herself for the sake of the tourists once in a day, preferably late afternoon (Shakya, 2012:27-28). Other than this, it is only during festivals like Indra

Jatra, Rato Machhindranath Jatra, Seto Machhindranath Jatra and so on that she makes her appearance in public. Kumari's physical appearance works wonders as she comes out of her palace in all her regalia with a strikingly red-painted forehead, bordering with yellow paste, a thick kohl lined up to her temple, with a third eye stuck on her forehead, and her hair tied in a topknot sitting uptight balancing the cosmic order of the world, along with the *naga mala* (serpent necklace embellished with nine different gems). While the act of seeing gives pleasure to the spectator, it also intensifies and supposedly brings a transforms the wearer (Ibid.37-38). Kumari's appearance becomes one of the important features of the worship as it ushers magnificent affect amongst the participants. On the other hand, are we missing out on the need for these 'limited or controlled appearances'?^{viii} There have been two views regarding Kumari's appearance:

i) it is done to please the Kumari who might want to see the world outside her palace. ii) it is her duty as a goddess to attend the festivals (Mellowship, 2007:112).

Presenting the Absence

Phelan analyses a work of French-born artist Sophie Calle who exhibited the description of stolen artworks by interviewing visitors, museum staff who had seen those paintings before they were being stolen in the galleries of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in the year 1990 (Phelan, 2005:146). So Calle replaced those absent paintings with their descriptions, presenting their presence albeit in a texted manner. Phelan argues that "the more dramatic the appearance, the more disturbing the disappearance" (p.148). It is the disappearance of those paintings which ensues presence of myriad characteristics which must not have crossed onlooker's attention. The absence/disappearance in here can be equally responsible for presenting the

presence elsewhere; the absence of the paintings provides a space for the memory of the witnesses to bring the paintings into the scenario thus presenting the presence. Every presentation of the presence of a performance is counted because no two performances are the same regardless of the same content or same performer for that matter. The presence of the subject speaks a new language with each and every appearance as well as disappearance. Phelan argues that even the repetition of same performance is also deemed different; making reproduction impossible to achieve. The relationship between the performer and the spectator is never equally symmetrical, there is always a room for the possibility of asymmetrical power. The performer or the subject may be at the mercy and control of the spectator's gaze. It is a theatrical exchange between both that gives rise to a third space of power dissemination where the appearance or disappearance of the

performer moves the spectators to a different direction of physical, philosophical and psychological enhancements or degradation.

While Phelan discusses about presence through disappearance, J. Thompson brings presence through affect it generates from its appearance. He discusses about the presence as another departure from meaning making process. To illustrate his point he talks about how the face of a person functions as affect producing device and also a reminder to the onlooker (I am assuming both performer/spectator) how the face can always generate an impartial knowledge. It is this limitation in perceiving fuller understanding which 'operates at the level of affect' (Thompson, 2009:162) in one level and also the awareness of the presence of body in a specific shared space. He argues that the performance performs the role of "creating an intense 'metapolitical' moment that prepares people for recognizing the face of the other as an appeal that they

cannot refuse” (p.171). The movement of recognizable energies between bodies produces a distinct reaction in the form of a theatrical encounter. This engagement of awareness, affect and response leads to an aesthetic content of Kumari and the audience. In the appearance and disappearance of Kumari, there is a sense of loss, a vigorous attempt to get immersed in her presence, and a renewal of creating that moment of shared affect that happens with every non-reproductive performance.

Caldwell in her study asks why the goddesses are kept hidden and displayed at certain intervals. According to her, it is important because the women are ‘the metaphorical centers’ be it the home, the womb or the temple (2005:264-265). This can be one of the philosophical explanation, but, however I differ from it. In case of Kumari, her appearances are limited to festivals that pull a great crowd. If the number of appearances are not put in check,

then she might not generate as much excitement and curiosity amongst the audience as she does now. Her image of a powerful goddess does expect her to remain secret and hidden from the public eye; an image that is meant for short displays to continue the alluring mystical component in every possible way. In an interview, an former Kumari Amita Shakya’s (1991-2001) uncle Bhuwan Man Shakya says that Kumaris should get pensions after they retire from the post because it is her appearance which generates income for the government in terms of tourism, hotel and so on (Journeyman Pictures, 2015).

Surveillance and Mystification of Kumari

The story of Kumari has always been met with fear and gory responses for her association with a ferocious Taleju who hunts down demons, pleases herself with the blood of the sacrificed animals and the frightening initiation at the dead of night

(Shakya, 2012:55, Tree, 2014:6). However, Rashmila Shakya has refuted these claims and termed them as rumors. The initiation is not false totally, but the reports are exaggerated in order to generate interest and curiosity. The image of Taleju and hence Kumari is aggravated to an extent that Taleju's demon-slaughtering image overshadows the Bodhisattva image of Kumari; the former's fierce side is heightened when incorporated in the latter. It is the opposite of what has happened in the case of Kálí in Kálíghát temple. It is the powerful and enigmatic appearance of eighteen-armed Taleju, yielding deadly weapons that is exhibited through Kumari; an appearance who cannot be ridiculed on any ground. It is the Kumari's stern and controlled passive expression that contains the ritualized possession of Taleju restricting it to her body, not allowing it to manifest it outside, for instance in the form of blood.

Kumari's expression reveals some of

the intricate performative meanings. Kumari's face appears stern and she is required to maintain that composure with her silent and unsmiling face. Kumari thinks it to her 'duty' to follow these codes when she appears to the outside world be it the ruling heads, devotees, tourists or spectators (Shakya, 2012:28). The question is who choreographs these expressions and categorizes her duties: the patrons, the caretakers living in the palace who keep a watch on Kumari all day long or the Kumari herself? Preeti Shakya (2001-2008) have been little different from the rest of the previous Kumaris as far as her behavior as a goddess was concerned. She was seen smiling at her devotees during her public appearances. In the *Indra Jatra* festival on the very first day of her appearance, she had fallen asleep in her chariot amidst so much of crowd and noise of the other performers. According to her caretakers, it was the first time in the history of the festival anything of

that sort had happened. On the next two days, she did not sleep but she did smile and made faces at the spectators which was also very unlikely of a Kumari to do so and it was seen as ‘indecorous’ (Tree, 2014:229-230). It was an unlikely behavior because it did not go along the same line of how a Kumari is supposed to behave or what her duty asks of her. Her behavior was of course taken as a bad omen for the days to come as Nepal’s monarchical lifeline was beginning to decay. And it was in the year 2008 she had to step down when Maoist government took charge and replaced her with 3 years old Matina Shakya even before Preeti’s term was over. In another incident where the government authorities stripped a Kumari of her title happened in 2007 when Bhaktapur Kumari Sajani Shakya went to the US while serving as Kumari to promote a British documentary film on living goddesses. The Chief of the government trust Jai Prasad Regmi said that it is forbidden for a Kumari

to leave her country and go to another country while holding the post (The New York Times, 2007). This brings us to a much required question: what does power signify and who exercises it? Is it the external authority that has the power to decide whether Taleju resides in Kumari or not? Or, is it the internal resonating empowered presence of a goddess that changes the rules to be an exception? These incidents throw some light on the unseen hands that actually perform the thread-holding acts.

Conclusion

In 2005, Kumari was again in the news, not because of her public appearances but because of her confined life. Human Rights lawyer Pun Devi Maharjan, who had filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of Nepal against the Kumari tradition as a disguised form of child labour. However, it subsequently failed to abolish it altogether and the litigation was criticized by both the Newar and non-Newar

communities. In its decision, the Supreme Court in 2008 did not abolish the cult but suggested some amendments such as making education compulsory, medical care and so on. Many regimes have passed and the President has replaced the King, but

outside the *Kumari Chen*, you will still find people, eager to catch a glimpse of her, through her beautifully crafted wooden lattice window, awaiting her performance from within her confinement.

List of Figures



Fig. 1 Kathmandu Kumari Matina Shakya. Source: Travelomat.



Fig. 2 Icon of Taleju. Source: The Longest way Home.



Fig. 3 Kumari *Chen* or Kumari *Ghar*. Source: Wikipedia.

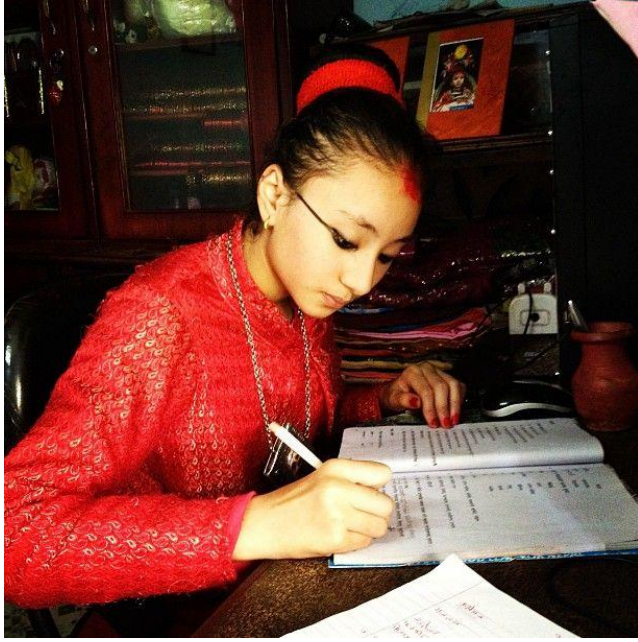


Fig. 4 Former Patan Kumari Samita Bajracharya studying inside Kumari *Ghar* during her tenure.

Source: Pinterest.



Fig. 5 Former Bhaktapur Kumari Sajani Shakya in school during her tenure. Source: Getty Images.



Fig. 6 Former Kathmandu Kumari Preeti Shakya outside the Kumari *Chen*. Source: Getty Images.

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ⁱ Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur are three adjoining towns falling under Kirtipur, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur districts. They were Malla kingdoms till 18th century.

ⁱⁱ The Shakyas claim to be the descendant of Shakyamuni Buddha's family of Kapilavastu. In the Newar community, the caste is associated with goldsmith occupation who also perform the role of tantric Buddhist priestly affairs along with the Vajracharya caste. In the Hindu caste hierarchy, the goldsmith caste is considered as a polluting caste because of the occupation of separating gold from other metal. But in the context of Newar community, it is not seen in that light and is given much respect as opposed to its Hindu counterpart of goldsmith.

ⁱⁱⁱ The celibate monks did exist in the Kathmandu Valley however their number dwindled as against the married Vajrayana priests during the middle of the Malla period towards the 12th century (Gellner, 2001:109; Allen, 2000:166).

^{iv} *Baha* is the Newar Buddhist Monastery for the Sanskrit term *Vihar*.

^v Prithvinarayan Shah's kingdom before he invaded the Kathmandu Valley in 1768.

^{vi} Bodhisattva is another form of Buddha.

^{vii} Kathmandu Kumari visits to Tham Bahi in the month of July/Aug and a Buddhist festival Samyak Dan in the month of Sep/Oct that happens every twelve years (Mellowship, 2007:204-206).

^{viii} Allen has mentioned that the veneration and worship of young girls on the basis of purity is 'the most effective and invidious form of control' of one human on another (Allen, 1990:6).