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Himalayan Metal of Death: Heavy Metal and Middle Class Social Identity in Kathmandu

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Himalayan Metal of Death: Heavy Metal and Middle Class Social Identity in Kathmandu

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Abstract

The notion of a middle class is a recent phenomenon in the Kathmandu valley. With it comes the new category of adolescence, a period between basic education and marriage that now exists within Kathmandu’s social landscape. This new social category is defined by a moral struggle between modern and “traditional” values. The purpose of this research is to investigate how social identity is realized for members of Kathmandu’s heavy metal scene, a distinctly middle class adolescent phenomenon. Through interviews, quantitative surveys and participant observation this research deals with how “metal heads” define themselves as a social group that both stands apart from and intersects the malleable notion of “Nepali” culture.
**Acknowledgements**

I could not have done this research without the overwhelming kindness and encouragement I received from the people I met in Kathmandu’s metal scene. In particular I would like to thank Iman for orienting me in the scene and allowing me to sit in on several music classes at Nepal Music Center. Special thanks goes to my homestay brother Sandip who originally introduced me to the concept of Nepali metal and arranged my first interview. I would also like to thank each and every band member and organizer I interviewed and/or surveyed – thank you for your flexibility, generosity and fun!
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Introduction

Although the majority of the participants in Kathmandu’s 2012 international tattoo convention appear to be here, well, for the tattoos, something exciting is about to happen on the performance stage at the front of the convention hall inside Durbar Marg’s Yak and Yeti Hotel. As the crowd thins itself of foreign tattoo enthusiast sporting the typical white Nepali tourist look (dreadlocks, loose fitting clothes and the stench of patchouli oil) to contain young male Nepalis wearing black band t-shirts, expectation in the air rises simultaneously with smart phones equipped with cameras. Lakhey, Nepal’s first ethnic/metal fusion band is about to take the stage clad in Newari masks and bearing ceremonial Newari drums and flutes (along with a seven-string guitar built for death metal riffs). Conceptions of tradition and modernity are about to clash, loudly, in front of a small anticipatory crowd of die-hard Nepali metal heads.

In the past twenty years, Kathmandu’s metal scene has matured from school kids discovering Metallica tapes to a full-fledged music scene that is poised to make its mark on the global metal community. The intent of this research is twofold: to define the social boundaries of Kathmandu’s metal scene and to study how this rapidly changing social group reflects the construction of social identity for middle class adolescent Nepalis on both a local and global scale. I hypothesize that Kathmandu’s metal scene is a result of its emerging middle class and the attempt for adolescents within this middle class to establish a delicate balance between ambivalent cultural futures and disillusioning cultural pasts.
Literature Review: Theoretical Basis

The theoretical germ and starting point for this research is a critique of Durkheim’s theories of organic and mechanical societies and the “cult of the individual”. According to Durkheim, as society modernizes shared morality shifts from that of an “mechanical” society rooted in a singular religious moral base to that of a “organic” society rooted in the worship of the individual. Additionally, Durkheim states that shared morality weakens as societies become organic and the “cult of the individual” fails to replace the traditional moral values in a singular religious base (1893).

I argue that this is not entirely the case: although organic societies elevate the individual as the basis for morality in their rhetoric, individuals in organic societies are actually members of multiple social spheres, each with their own shared moralities, the sum of which serves the same regulatory function as a traditional “mechanical” form of shared morality. These new social spheres establish inclusion and exclusion through what Goffman identifies as “ceremonial rules” or “means of communication by which the individual expresses his character or conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation” (1967, 54). Social spheres are also defined through group rituals that operate within even the most specific social spheres to establish shared morality (Kertzer 1988). To conceptualize the boundaries of Kathmandu’s metal scene my goal is to recognize the scene’s unique ceremonial rules and rituals.

Put simply, Emile’s theory of two societies finds the modernization of Kathmandu to go hand in hand with the weakening of shared morality. The heavy metal scene would represent to Durkheim a symptom of this weakening, as adolescents in the Kathmandu valley are rejecting traditional customs and
lessening the importance of a singular religious moral base in favor of a rhetoric of individualism. This approach goes hand in hand with the abundance of social research done on western heavy metal scenes that ultimately critiques heavy metal as encouraging youths to perform illegal activities, commit suicide and/or disregard authority (see Scheel 1999). These studies have the tendency to equate correlation with causality and fail to look beyond irrelevant statistics to find the root of the social phenomenon of metal itself.

Rather than viewing the metal scene as inherently encouraging immorality, the aim of this research is to discover how Kathmanudu’s metal scene reflects its rapidly shifting social structure along with the specification and encouragement of new moralities and ways of being. My study follows an approach similar to Rafalovich and Schnieder’s (2001) study of metal as the politics of youth culture. Ragalovich and Schnieder recognize that a power of a medium is dependant upon a “contract” that the medium will reflect people’s lives. Using this as a base, Ragalovich and Schnieder identify dialogues in western metal that operate on a deeper level than pure taboo and, in actuality, function as an expression of the “advocacy of the conditions of youth” (2001, 20). In Kathmandu, “youth” or “adolescence” as a period between childhood and marriage is a fairly recent idea and results from the emergence of a middle class.

Paul D. Greene, professor of Anthropology at Penn State Brandywine, is the sole researcher to have published scholarly articles directly concerning Kathmandu’s metal scene. Greene’s first published article on the scene found that “heavy metal in Nepal is a music of the upper and middle classes, it is rarely heard as an aggressive sound, and it is almost never heard as a transgressive or 'dangerous' sound” (2001, 177); I have found this to overwhelmingly be the case.
However, Greene’s publications have two major drawbacks in regard to the current metal scene. First, his studies were conducted in the early 2000’s at which point the scene was still being created and looked substantially different than in does today. Second, in Greene’s two pieces following his initial piece published in 2001, he shifts his focus almost to the point of contradiction, concentrating instead on how Kathmandu’s metal music is an outlet for cultural transgression and political criticism.

While metal may be a form of cultural transgression on a personal level for metal heads worldwide my research looks at the scene from a different angle. Greene states that metal in Kathmandu was created as an outlet for youths to “rage” against traditional cultural practices (2011a) while I argue that metal was created as a result of new cultural practices, particularly those of the new middle class. I also argue that Greene’s focus on Kathmandu’s metal scene as a political expression (2011b) is misguided, particularly in today’s metal scene in a more peaceful Kathmandu, where metal listeners are generally unconcerned with Nepal’s political situation and metal music’s potential impact. This is perhaps because politics do not have the same direct impact on listeners’ daily lives now as they did at the time of Greene’s research.

**Literature Review: Kathmandu’s Middle Class**

It is important for the purposes of this study to be familiar with the roots of Kathmandu’s middle class before discussing the history of Nepali metal; like many other “western” style commodities both physical and social in urban Nepal, heavy metal is one of many social fruits ripening on the tree of Kathmandu’s growing middle class.
Followed by the disestablishment of Rana rule and the creation of an “open door” trade policy by the Nepali government in 1951, a significant shift in occupational structures occurred in Kathmandu. Prior to 1951, agriculture and craft production were the dominant occupational groups in the valley; following the “opening” of Nepal, Kathmandu’s economy underwent a dramatic shift preferring tertiary labor, such as service, professional, technical and administrative work over productive labor (Leitchy 2003). Although Nepal is considered economically poor by most measures, these new occupational groups in Kathmandu have received an influx of cash in the past twenty years. In his book Suitably Modern (2003) Leitchy recognizes four primary sources of cash flow for the valley: international development aid, tourism, large-scale carpet manufacturing and remittance economies. This recent cash-flow phenomenon and the shift from productive labor to tertiary labor created the basis for the valley’s emerging middle class.

With changes in occupation and an influx of capital comes two important social shifts in Kathmandu that are relevant to this research: 1) a new consumer culture based on the ownership of goods considered “fashionable” or “in” and 2) a new adolescent period of life between childhood and marriage (2003). Members of the middle class in Kathmandu are simultaneously creating and being pressured to keep up with current cultural trends, widely available and increasingly more affordable, to represent their social status. As a result, middle class culture is becoming “far more diverse and conspicuous” (2003, 144). At the center of this shift are Kathmandu’s adolescents: largely composed of middle class students in their teens and mid-twenties, adolescents are caught between old values and ways of life, representing “traditional” Nepal, and the new consumer
culture representing modern Kathmandu. In this cultural limbo, adolescent Nepalis must define themselves as both young modern consumers as well as Nepali people (an already socially malleable category in itself).

**Methodology**

Most of my research for this study is based on semi-structured and occasionally informal interviews with band members, music educators and metal scene organizers, along with informal interviews with metal fans and musicians at metal concerts. These interviews lasted anywhere from 10 minutes at the shortest to several hours at the longest. I sat in on band practices and interviewed four bands I will classify as “armature bands” – bands that do not have professional recordings or play gigs outside of school competitions. Three of these bands I found through Kaleidoscope Music School in Kathmandu, an invaluable resource for my project. I conducted eight separate interviews with musicians in bands I will classify as “scene bands” or bands that have the support of metal organizations, play shows outside of competitions and have recordings. I generally set up these interviews through friends, acquaintances and other band members I met along the way. I interviewed three “scene” organizers who work for the non-profit group KTMRocks including the founder, Umes Shrestha. In addition, I also conducted five interviews with music educators from three different schools, one of which was a professor of classical Nepali music and four of which taught western styles of music. Through interviews with amateur bands, “scene” bands, fans and educators I tried to get a comprehensive view of the metal scene – concentrating on only one of these categories would not have been sufficient.
These interviews were supplemented with my quantitative demographic survey, which I conducted on paper at a metal concert as well as participant observations of four metal concerts in the Kathmandu area. The goal of the survey was to simply obtain a basic quantitative understanding of a concert’s demographic while the concert observations were conducted to deduce the “ceremonial rules” of metal concerts in Kathmandu.

Ethical protection of my subjects was not a concern as my research did not put my subjects in any present danger. I got oral approval from my subjects to use their interviews in my research knowing that the research was to be made public. In the cases of “scene” bands I received oral approval to use the names of their bands and in some cases their actual names. My survey was anonymous and did not put my subjects at risk – I simply made sure they were 18 years of age or older and answered any questions they had about the survey or my intentions.

My biases include the that fact that I enjoy metal music and have attended metal concerts in the states. However, I have never considered myself a “metal head” and my metal listening habits and knowledge of western metal paled in comparison to almost everyone I interviewed. However, I feel as though I have a fairly complete (yet rudimentary) understanding of metal’s musical history and am familiar with terminology used in the scene.

**Research Findings: A Brief History of Nepali Heavy Metal**

Suggesting that music as a whole had not previously undergone changes prior to the introduction of radio and tapes to Kathmandu is preposterous; I do not try to make this claim. Nepal’s “traditional” and “ethnic” music have always been in a constant state of evolution and western influence existed before the middle class ever did (for example: the westernization of military bands in the
1910’s) (Tingey 1994). However, the availability of western and Hindi music to Nepal in the 1950’s and the demand for specific musical commodities as a result of the more recent birth of the middle class dramatically influenced how the country interacted with music. “Traditional” music lost funding, complexity, educational tools and social status, particularly among young musicians following the end of Rana rule (1994). Based on my findings, the metal scene in Kathmandu is strongly rooted within Kathmandu’s adolescent consumer class. The birth of the metal scene depended largely on Nepal’s open-door policy following the disestablishment of Rana rule and the increasing availability and demand for western media as a result of the creation of a middle class.

In the late 80’s music in Kathmandu was commodified and diversified in a new way as tapes, often copied and ordered from Thailand, Singapore or brought to Nepal from Darjeeling, introduced the emerging adolescent class of Kathmandu to a wide range of western music, previously unavailable. One “veteran” of the metal scene, the sole original member of one of Nepal’s oldest active metal bands X-Mantra, recalled how he acquired Metallica tapes prior to the formation of X-Mantra:

Rojesh: At that time we didn’t have internet. We used to give money to the music stores… I would want, say, the “Kill ‘Em All” album [Metallica’s debut album] and we would collect a hundred dollars. And they used to go to… Singapore and bring us [the tape]. We bought the Metallica album for 300 Rupees. We used to collect ten or fifteen boys and collect the money…

Kyle: So you would share it, pass it around?

Rojesh: Yeah, yeah. (2012)
Metal magazines like “R.I.P. Magazine” and “Metal Hammer” also found their way into Kathmandu around this time, as well as the “Rock Solid BBC” shortwave radio station and Kantipur FM, both of which played heavy music. The late 80’s saw teenagers in Kathmandu forming the first metal bands in the city, mostly playing covers of NWBHM1 bands like Iron Maiden and Judas Priest at school competitions. Although some heavy rock bands like Cobweb formed in the 90’s, the birth of the metal scene is largely attributed to thrash bands X-Mantra and Ugra Karma in the early 2000’s and the founding of the influential promotional organization KTMRocks in 2001 (Shah 2012; Shrestha 2012).

Based heavily on tapes like Rojesh’s Metallica tapes and the other “big four” thrash-metal bands, X-Mantra and Ugra Karma were two of the first metal bands in Kathmandu to write original songs and cut records using professional (for Kathmandu’s standards at the time) equipment. While America’s “big four” of thrash – the highly influential and, at the time, “heaviest” bands in the world: Metallica, Slayer, Megadeath and Antrax- hit their peak of influence in the late 80’s, X-Mantra and Ugra Karma, an equivalent “big two” of Nepali thrash metal, played similar (albeit heavier) music and had a similar impact on Kathmandu’s scene in the early 2000’s, in that they inspired a generation of metal music in their own scene (Shah 2012; DEFINE Mental members 2012; Pravin & Prateek 2012; Rojesh 2012).

Despite a late start in comparison to western scenes, the metal scene in Kathmandu quickly caught up to current trends in the west, which exponentially increased as the internet became more widely available (and trips to Singapore

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1 New Wave of British Heavy Metal
were no longer needed to acquire the latest metal albums). Black metal, characterized by anti-Christian imagery, “blast-beats” and ethereal guitar riffs, started a trend with the formation of bands like Antim Grahan (Last Eclipse) in 2003, still one of the most well known metal bands today in the valley. Bands like Kalodin (Black Day), an entirely Nepali black metal band based in Singapore, are even known to don “corpse paint”, the black and white face paint made famous by Norwegian black metal bands like Immortal. Black metal was followed by a divergence in the mid 2000’s between technical death metal – a genre typified by guttural vocals, physically demanding double-bass drum patterns and complex guitar work – and metalcore – a genre typified by catchy guitar melodies, screaming vocals and “breakdowns”, essentially a rhythmically satisfying version of a bridge in pop music or a “drop” in electronic music (Shrestha 2012; Dhital 2012).

There are exceptions to the rule, including technical grind/death band Binaash, hardcore band Jugaa, classic heavy metal band White and the continued success of black metal outfit Antim Grahan, but metalcore is considered the dominant genre of today’s metal scene in Kathmandu. Originally performed in Kathmandu during the late 2000’s by bands like Lost Oblivion, metalcore is a full-on musical trend amongst young middle class males in the Kathmandu valley. According to Iman Shah, principle of Nepal Music Center and a metal musician playing in Kathmandu since the 80s, there are more metal bands now in Kathmandu than there are of any other genre (2012). Of these bands, around 70 to 80 of them are in the metalcore genre (Black Sins Immortal member 2012; Dhital 2012). Metalcore band Underside, generally recognized as the most
popular band in the scene returned in April of 2012 from a tour that included
dates in Europe, a stamp of success for any Nepali musical act (Underside, 2012).

Although increasing exposure to western metal through the internet has
resulted in metal music’s exponential growth in popularity within the valley,
organizations like Silence Festival, Rock Fever and perhaps most importantly,
KTMRocks have had a role in establishing a metal scene consisting of local
bands performing and recording original music. Umes Shrestha, founder of
KTMRocks in 2001, recounted to me the birth of KTMRocks along with X-
Mantra and Ugra Karma:

Shrestha: We were young and we just wanted to have some fun, organize
conserts. We used to see VHS tapes of Metallica, Vader, Napalm Death
and thought… why can’t we do that here? It used to be all outdoor pop
conserts but that’s not the music we’re into. (2012)

From the start, KTMRocks had the goal of creating a metal “scene”, a
scene that has radically changed since 2001. Concerts organized by KTMRocks
in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s mostly consisted of small bar gigs with
minimal equipment, typically for the small constituency of metal fans in the
valley at that time:

Sunil (Ugra Karma): We used to know every guy in town that listened to
metal.

Prateek (Ugra Karma/Binaash): We used to borrow guitars from our
brothers and friends. We had to pull resources to fund our first gigs.
When we started, we didn’t even have drumsticks. We would find
whatever pieces of wood we could find on the ground and use that! (2012)
The early scene in Kathmandu was truly a grassroots movement, organized through social groups and funded without sponsors or profit – even today, Umes hesitates to define members of the KTMRocks team as “members” and instead calls them a “group of friends”, as they are not an official organization (Shrestha 2012). But today, the scene has made a 180-degree turn from the original Ugra Karma shows described above. Inter-college band competitions, which typically consist almost entirely of student metal bands, now occur on a regular basis in Kathmandu. Large-scale outdoor concerts like KTMRock’s “Ides of March” and Silence Entertainment’s “Silence Festival” now have sponsors and the ability to pull international metal acts, boast musical equipment to rival mid-level music festivals in the west and turn out crowds in the thousands. Vader and Napalm Death, two internationally recognized western bands, have recently played shows in Kathmandu and world-famous Brazilian metal band Sepultra will make an appearance in the valley in October of 2012. On the surface, this phenomenal growth is a result of both internet exposure and the relentless promotion and support of music organizations in the valley (Shrestha 2012; Rojesh 2012).

But why is metal so attractive to adolescent males in Kathmandu? Why has the quality of western musical equipment increased? Why are there so many amateur bands in the scene? While labeling metal music as “angry music” appealing to the anxiety of Leitchy’s middle class adolescent is an easy explanation, I have not found it to be entirely true or fully explanatory. Instead, I find it useful to begin at the social root of the cause: consumer culture’s pursuit of globally recognized cultural capital, which occurs both within the family and within adolescent social groups.
Research Findings: The Trouble of Defining a “Scene”

My initial operating definition for a metal head, or a member of Kathmandu’s metal scene, was any person who listens to metal music. Almost immediately I found that not only was this definition too broad, but also defining clear social boundaries of a music scene is an almost impossible task.

I’ll begin this section with survey data I collected at LA Music Festival, a battle of the bands school competition right outside of Kathmandu in Godawari on April 14, 2012. The competition mostly consisted of metal bands. I asked concertgoers over the age of 18 basic demographic questions in order to get an idea of the metal scene’s demographics and received 59 responses regarding gender, caste/ethnicity, student life and marital status. Of the 59, 54 (%92) were male and 5 (%8) were female. 57 (%97) were unmarried and 2 (%3) were married. 53 (%90) lived with their family and 6 (%10) lived on their own. 46 (%78) either studied abroad or were planning on studying abroad. 41 (%69) studied or planned on studying in a western country. I also found that most of those surveyed were either business or management majors and that there was a wide variety of caste and ethnic groups present at the concert.

Table 1 – Respondents by Major

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Business/Mgmt</th>
<th>Art/Music</th>
<th>Computer</th>
<th>Hard Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36 (%61.02)</td>
<td>4 (%6.78)</td>
<td>4 (%6.78)</td>
<td>3 (%5.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Econ/Accounting</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Non-Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3 (%5.08)</td>
<td>2 (%3.39)</td>
<td>4 (%6.78)</td>
<td>2 (%3.39)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – Respondents by Caste/Ethnicity
These results, along with my interviews with band members, music teachers and concert organizers, suggest that metal listeners in Kathmandu are largely unmarried students living at home and typically studying business, management or other “practical” vocational subjects as opposed to arts and humanities. Although the majority of my survey and interviews consisted of Newars and Brahmin/Chhetris, the variety of ethnic groups mirrors Leitchy’s conclusion that, while caste and ethnicity remain a factor in Kathmandu’s distribution of wealth, caste and ethnicity do not necessarily determine class status and are becoming less important in middle class groups (2003).

The metal scene in Kathmandu is also clearly dominated by males, as shown in my survey and interviewed subjects. However, I conducted my survey early in the concert during which the amateur competing bands performed. The subjects I surveyed were often members of the bands themselves waiting for their turn on stage or people supporting their friends on the stage. Later in the concert hired guest bands performed, the last of which was a famous Nepali pop band. As the time for the pop band’s performance neared the crowd grew from an estimated two to three hundred to around four or five hundred and the demographics clearly shifted. Girls in school uniforms and dresses started to show up at the concert; one metal fan commented “I don’t know why so many of these ‘cute girls’ are here” (Fan 2 2012). He told me if I wanted to see some real
die-hard metal fans I needed to go to a smaller concert with an older, respected Nepali band. I realized that there was no absolutely certain way to tell if the people I surveyed were a member of this group of “die-hard” music fans and I was not exactly sure where that group began and ended.

Along with this comment, my participant observations at concerts suggested the typical code of dress for a western metal head to define his or herself: black band T-Shirts, long hair, piercings and jeans. The “ceremonial rules” of metal heads include “head banging” and moshing, putting arms around those of the same gender, shouting names of favorite songs, sharing cigarettes, applauding and respecting the musical performers and, unlike my experience in western metal concerts, sustaining from alcohol consumption to the point of inebriation. Typically, females did not participate in moshing. However, these rules are fluid. As I continued to conduct interviews with bands and concert organizers I repeatedly heard about what a “true” metal fan really was in Nepal as opposed to a “newbie” or “poseur”, or someone who is a faker in the scene:

Kyle: So how would you define a poseur?

Define MENTAL member: (smiles) I don’t know. You just know. They wear things, like the corpse paint and things like that. True metal fans know they don’t need to do things like that to prove they are a fan.

(2012)

In this case, member of death metal band Define MENTAL points out a form of dress in the global metal scene, the practice of wearing black and white makeup in the style of Norwegian black-metal bands as going too far to prove a

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2 “Moshing” is the typical crowd reaction expected during western metal performances: crowd members jump up and down and aggressively push each other.
metal head status. Poseurs were continually defined to me as metal fans who over-compensated for their lack of experience in the scene by proclaiming their metal head status through an overuse of ceremonial rules. I found that metal listeners in Kathmandu enjoy posting their favorite metal songs, both western and Nepali, on forums and social media sites. The overuse of this practice, however, can risk defining you as a poseur:

KTMRocks Journalist: You want to know who is a poseur? Just look at the KTMRocks forum on our website! People will post things like ‘METAL FOREVER!!!’ like they are trying to prove how big of a fan they are. (2012)

Aside from the proper use of ceremonial rules, true metal fans were often defined to me as those who could truly appreciate metal musician on an intimate level and also have a respect for other genres. For example, one metal band member told me that someone who is not a metal fan may listen to technical death metal and be distracted by the gutteral vocals and only pay attention to that, while a metal fan would understand and emotionally experience (of “get”) the complexity and difficulty of the music and rhythms (Black Sins Immortal member 2012). Metal fans in Kathmandu were described to me as going through a “newbie” phase including a limited knowledge of the metal genre and a surface-level appreciation for the music; the same journalist quoted above admitted to me that she too went through a “newbie” phase and agreed that everyone in the scene does to an extent (KTM Rocks Journalist 2012)

The recent introduction of metalcore music and its exploding popularity was often an issue that was brought up in my interviews in regards to the boundaries of the scene. Metalcore was often described as being overly
simplistic and trendy. Anil Dhital, guitarist of metalcore band E.Quals, told me the story of the band’s formation, a story that highlights how metalcore can be used for means that may be considered by metal fans to be inauthentic.

Dhital (E.Quals/White/Lakhey): First I was in a death metal band called Vhumi but we changed our name to E.Quals and changed our style [to metalcore] for a band competition.

Kyle: So how did you decide to change your style?

Dhital: It was for the competition, we knew what would win the competition - death metal had no chance of winning. And after doing that and winning we got to go to London. (2012)

Anil admitted that metalcore is not his favorite genre and it does not inspire him, partly the reason why E.Quals is now on hiatus despite their success in the scene. But Anil did not see metalcore as a bad thing; this was another running theme in my research. Death metal fans did not enjoy listening to metalcore and sometimes considered it a ploy for musicians to attract fans and get girls, who are viewed as being more attracted to metalcore due to its catchy nature (KTM Rocks member 2012; Amateur Band 3 2012). Metalcore, in the west and in Nepal, also consists of a slightly different dress code from the typical scene member, including tighter clothes and manicured hairstyles which violate metal’s dress code to an extent. However, because metalcore has caused the scene to grow, metal band members and concert organizers generally considered it a good thing (Rojesh 2012; Dhital 2012; Shrestha 2012). Generally, the sentiment amongst my interview subjects was that metalcore was a “lower” form of metal and would die out as a trend and be replaced by another trend in the scene, but as long as it supported growth in the scene it was a positive thing.
Although not originally a central focus of my research, it became apparent that the metal scene in Kathmandu also defined itself through gender interactions. As many young metal fans in Nepal are unmarried, I ended up talking to a lot of eligible male bachelors. Although my unmarried interviewers occasionally talked about their interest in girls (particularly white western girls), metal was not seen as a means to finding a wife or girlfriend and was usually considered a hindrance. This was seen as a form of “scene cred”: the bands’ ability to put off females with their music and image.

Kyle: How would you point out a “poseur” like, “this is a poseur”.

Amateur Band 3 Member 1: Emos. Punks.

Kyle: So how would you tell a emo kid from a metal kid?

Amateur Band 3 Member 2: Poseurs do stuffs that girls like. True metal heads do stuff that they like. Like you know, I have this beard and I wear this [points to band t-shirt] and girls don’t like it. I think that explains it.

(2012)

Heavy metal music is notorious for containing misogynistic themes: “[heavy metal] lyrics, artwork, language, bodily practices and dress generally valorise hegemonic masculinity and denigrate women and gay men” (Leigh & Kim 2000). However, I found that the reason for Kathmandu’s predominantly male scene has more to do with socialization and gender attitudes already present in Nepali culture rather than with misogynistic themes being adopted from metal songs and imagery. First, although this is changing as traditional values are challenged by today’s youth, I observed that even the most “modernized” Nepali males tended to only “hang out” with other males, and vice versa for females. Social interaction with the opposite gender were generally reserved for dating.
Second, I found that gender separation in the scene is partially a result of consumer trends transferring from the west in which metal is portrayed as something men do and women disapprove of. The female metal journalist I interviewed told me that “boys are given trucks, girls are given dolls” when they are young and inferred that metal was akin to a musical toy truck in this situation: gendered consumerism in a new consumer class (KTM Rocks Journalist 2012). Because metal is such a social activity, unmarried Nepalis socialize primarily within gender and metal has been gendered as a male consumer product, it makes sense that the scene is comprised primarily of males. Third, Nepal is a highly patriarchal society and men are given more leniency when it comes to taking risks socially and occupationally, even in the more “progressive” middle class.

KTM Rocks Journalist: It’s easier for a guy to just want to pick up a guitar and say “ok, I want to play music”. It’s not as easy as it is for girls… it’s not encouraged in the same way. (2012)

However, the scene is not totally closed to females and is generally accepting of those who wish to follow the ceremonial rules of the scene. Nepali technical death metal band Tamishra is famous in the scene for having a female vocalist who imitates death metal growls in the vein of Cannibal Corpse:

Define MENTAL member: When we first saw this band [Tamishra] everyone started laughing at this girl on the stage. She was standing on the stage with her hair down over her face… and then they started playing and she was doing the Cannibal Corpse vocals. Everyone went silent. After they were done with that first song everyone was so surprised and started clapping. (2012)
Stating that the metal scene in Nepal is a consumer product for an adolescent consumer class is not necessarily false. However, it is important to recognize that the scene is more than simply buying a band t-shirt, attending a concert or growing your hair long. The scene means different things to different people and is in a constant state of re-drawing its social boundaries in order to maintain a form of cultural capital that remains authentic and meaningful for the scene members involved. Without these boundaries, metal heads could be reduced to a simple musical preference, as I initially attempted (and failed) to do in my research.

**Research Findings: Attitudes Towards Music Education & Abroad Studies**

As Kathmandu’s metal scene has rapidly grown, so has the value middle class parents place on music and arts education grown along with the subsequent creation of several western style music schools in the Kathmandu valley. This is no coincidence: the two go hand in hand. I want to start this section by relating an anecdote from a Nepali ex-rocker from a Nepali village in Darjeeling; this is an extreme example of the “traditional” view of western music education and hobbies:

Aashish: When I was growing up in Darjeeling there was one man in our village who owned a guitar. He used to play music for everyone in the village, people would gather around and listen. Music was his passion. But his family didn’t approve of the time he spent learning and playing guitar. One day, his grandma broke his guitar, smashed it, and it broke the man’s heart. He actually ended up killing himself afterwards and that was one of the reasons it happened. (2012)
Today, the attitude is different amongst those in the middle class: middle class parents in Kathmandu buy guitars for their children and lessons to go along with them. They are often hesitant to do so; many band members, particularly amateur band members, told me they had to beg their parents relentlessly for guitars and drums. But ultimately, as metal and prospective metal musicians are overwhelmingly unemployed students, they rely on their parents to supply them with instruments and money for other social activities.

Why spend money on your children learning music, particularly when most metal musicians are studying subjects like business and management?

From interviews with music educators and musicians, I found that parents in the middle class are beginning to participate in a practice similar to Lereau’s concept of “concerted cultivation” in which western middle class parents enroll their children in structured after school activities. These activities, while on the surface seem like they merely support hobbies, actually give students “institutional advantages” later in life (Lereau 2003). For example, a student that learns guitar instead once a week will learn how to interact one on one with a teacher and motivate his/herself to learn a practical skill on a scheduled basis. Buying your child a guitar and lessons is not only a symbol of a “modernized” family but will in turn help teach the student how to be a successful middle class citizen. One guitar teacher at Nepal Music Center[^3] put it in simple terms:

Guitar Teacher: My students usually learn guitar before they study abroad. Families now see things like guitar lessons as a form of personal

[^3]: While most music schools in Kathmandu are run as private businesses, Nepal Music Center is different in that it has approval from the government as a public educational institution.
growth for their kids. They’re not pursuing careers in music. They’re not stupid!” (laughs) (2012)

The motivation for learning music varied between parent and student. For metal musicians in Kathmandu, motivation for advancement in music was consistently described in terms of “passion” and a strong personal desire out of love for the music they were learning, and although their parents bought instruments and lessons, families typically do not typically support metal music as a form of art (Amateur Bands 1, 2, 3 & 4 2012). Parents’ reactions to metal were described to my in a range of adjectives, from anger, confusion to pure neutrality (Parent 2012; Amateur Band 3 2012; Shrestha 2012). Several interview subjects laughed and told me that their parents couldn’t possibly have an opinion on metal music as they have no idea what it is (Dhital 2012; Shrestha 2012). Whatever the case, while middle class families do not typically support metal music as a concept and do not encourage their children to pursue music as a career, the metal scene in Kathmandu ultimately would not exist without the financial support of parents for music as an extra-curricular whether or not they understand (or “get”) the music. In the end, metal music actually achieves Laure’s concerted cultivation as it provides students with a specific knowledge of a western cultural tradition that will potentially benefit them when they study in western countries.

Similar to Laure’s concerted cultivation in the west, musical extra curricular education in Kathmandu is viewed by parents as supplementary to formal education. In Kathmandu’s middle class, this usually means “practical” education in business, management, medicine, law etc. Typically these practical majors were chosen to please metal heads’ parents, while metal heads expressed
an ideal career in music (while recognizing that it was not a particularly realistic goal):

Amateur Band 4 Member: We are all quite busy. We have to take the music with our studies too, because our families expect something from us.

Kyle: What do you think you will be doing after you graduate college?
Amateur Band 4 Member: Let’s see. Music? I’m studying tourism business because I cannot convince my family… I cannot even dare to ask my family that I want to study music. I’m not very interested in tourism but what can I do. (2012)

Part of this formal education for metal heads typically includes studies abroad. So many metal musicians end up studying abroad that it has had an impact on the metal scene itself, as it is rare for bands to last longer than a year due to lineup changes as a result of musicians leaving the country. Bands like X-Mantra and Antim Grahan that have survived for around ten years do so through name and style: both bands have changed almost every original member as their original members studied, and now live, in western countries. While formally the intention of these studies is to receive a western education in a practical major, metal heads often viewed this period of their lives primarily as an opportunity to live a glorified, individualistic western college-kid lifestyle that they do not consider possible in Kathmandu.

Black Sins Immortal member: Our parents lie to themselves about it [studying abroad], you know. Like they don’t want to admit that “my son is going to study abroad just to go to concerts” or “my son is studying abroad [to party]”. They know it, but they don’t want to admit it! (2012)
Research Findings: Politics, Religion and Individualism

After my initial interviews I began to question how relevant Greene’s previous study of metal in Kathmandu as transgressing cultural traditions (2011a) and politics (2011b) remains in today’s scene. It is true that Nepali metal music often contains lyrics that protest religion and comment on specific political situations in Nepal (Nepali hardcore band Sangharsha even plays a recording of a controversial speech from Maoist leader Prachanda that revealed corruption in the Maoist party in their song “Bidroh”). Metal musicians and fans I interviewed made vague comments about political disillusion and the lyrics in metal protest songs certainly highlight this frustration. However, metal musicians tend to benefit (compared to less well-off families) from the current political and social structure in Kathmandu. Songs that protest politics and religion were equated with “showing off” by older metal musicians:

Shrestha: Most of the metal bands and metal fans and all these young kids and people like us, uh we really don’t know what the politics are all about. We don’t have a good reason to be angry about politics. The country is in a really poor state but we people, we have somehow managed to have some sort of good life. If someone is angry about the politics, the system, the country… there is no reason to. We are lucky to live in the city area and afford… expensive drums and guitars… we have nothing to be grumpy about. (2012)

Greene found several specific voiced oppositions to religious practice in the metal scene and viewed metal as transgressing religious practice. The opposition I found was much more vague. It was clear that the members of the scene I interviewed wished to distance themselves from being viewed as
extremely religious people: when asked to identify their castes, one band got
defensive and repeated that “our parents are Hindu” (Amateur Band 3 2012). On
one occasion I discussed changing attitudes towards beef eating: one musician
commented on how much he missed Burger King from the states4. However, I
observed metal fans participating in Hindu rituals and holidays on several
occasions. Much of the religious “transgression” found in Nepali metal is, in
fact, anti-Christian imagery reminiscent of Norwayian black metal bands.
Nepali black metal bands like Antim Grahn retread black metal tropes of upside-
down crosses and pen songs with titles like “I, Lucifer”. I did not meet a single
metal fan in Nepal from a Christian background and it is clear to me that this type
of “religious transgression” is simply a part of performing the black metal genre.

Nepal 11 radio recently began broadcasting a talk show called “Mero 2
Paisa” which concerns middle class youth and heavy metal with metal fan and
former American student Ashish Adhikari. His comments on religion speak
volumes about current conflicting attitudes regarding religion in the scene:

Adhikari: “Kids are getting sick and tired of this shit… that’s how I
picked [death metal] up when I was a kid. It really clicked in my head,
this is exactly what is happening in my country… but we must put our
culture first, because this is our identity. The way we live our life as
Nepalese, we have our family ties… it’s embedded in our religion. (2012)

Religious and political angst present in the metal scene is ultimately a
result of metal heads’ desire for individuality: in essence, a pursuit of Durkheim’s
cult of the individual. My research shows that this desire for individualism is at
the core of the scene itself. Almost every metal fan and musician I interviewed

\[4\] I am not citing this information as it is too culturally sensitive.
either had a desire to study abroad or had studied abroad in the past (Fan 1 2012; Amateur Bands 1, 2, 3 &4 2012; Rojesh 2012; Black Sins Immortal Member 2012) and my survey data supports this. A reason often given for this was a desire for western neo-liberal ideals and a “do it yourself” attitudes and metal heads were often impressed with my own level of independence.

Pravin (Binaash): So are you here by yourself? No friends or girlfriend?

Kyle: I came alone, yeah.

Pravin: “Really? That’s great, man. Nepalis, we need our families, our girlfriends, for support. We are not as independent. (2012)

This perceived lack of independence was generally viewed as a negative thing.

Prateek (Ugra Karma/Binaash): Here in Nepal, I would say eighty or ninety percent of people are not doing what they want to do. It’s because they live with their family all of the time, they’re dependent on them and have to do what they say. (2012)

Prateek told me that metal is a way for youth to have some level of independence from this social system and relied on a “do it yourself” attitude, particularly in the early years of the scene when internet and equipment were not readily available and making metal music required a serious dedication to something, at that time, that was totally foreign to Nepali culture. But metal listeners cannot simply abandon their families, even if they are viewed as hindering this desired individualism.

Shrestha: “Unlike in US, we don’t move out of our house. We still rely on the social system of living with a family. So, it’s kind of ridiculous to say we are anti-social, we are D.Y.I. or that sort of thing. Some of my
friends, they are living away from their parents. But still, because of our social system, we don’t want to get separated from our parents. (2012)

**Research Findings: Crafting Nepali Metal on a Global Scale**

On a local level, active members of the metal scene are extremely proud of what they have established over the past ten years. Those people I interviewed who had been active in the scene for several years were always happy to describe how concerts have grown in size and quality and the musical talent in the scene has increased. The success of the metal scene, however, was often equated with the local scene’s ability to interact with the global scene. Nepali metal fans are proud of bands like Antim Grahan, Jugaa, E.Quals and Underside’s ability to tour in the west and India, even if they were not fans of the particular bands themselves (Black Sins Immortal member 2012). Each amateur band I interviewed gave touring India or the west as their ideal goal (Amateur bands 1, 2, 3 & 4 2012). The ability of Nepal to pull western metal bands like Vader, Napalm Death and Sepultura was also constantly demonstrated as a litmus test for the scene’s success (KTM Rocks Journalist 2012, Shrestha 2012, Rojesh 2012).

Nepal’s metal scene has entered a cultural exchange with the global metal scene that now goes in both directions where previously it only traveled from west to east. Within this exchange, the smaller nature of Kathmandu’s local metal scene was not always considered a bad thing in my interviews. For one, the scene has a strong support base: as long as bands are Nepali and have the ability to perform original songs on the level of an average western band they have access the support of music competitions like Silence Festival and websites like Nepal Underground and KTM Rocks. While being “world famous” is not
realistic for most Nepali metal bands, being “Kathmandu famous” is both within reach and a rewarding experience. It is telling that international Nepali bands like Sanghararsha, a hardcore band based in the U.S. and yet entirely comprised of Nepalis, keep close contact with the scene and promote their music through Nepali media and Facebook.

Black Sins Immortal member: The prime reason why I want to stay in Kathmandu is the scene. Western cities are better, hands down. But the scene is just developing and you want to help it in any way you can… I want my band to be one of those bands that has helped to cultivate the scene. (2012)

So now that Nepal’s metal scene has more or less achieved in reproducing western styles of metal both in concert, on recordings and in some cases in music videos, Nepali metal is faced with the task of defining itself as a unique metal scene. Ashish of Mero 2 Paisa described this on a recent episode of his metal/culture radio show:

Mero 2 Paisa episode 1: We grew up in a culture where speaking English was good and Western culture [we imitate a lot]. My point is, that’s not wrong but we have to understand where we come from. Just imitation is not the solution… we should be able to implement the good things in our life. (2012)

On a base level even simply identifying as Nepali goes a certain distance in defining a distinctly Nepali metal scene; Underside’s European tour was successful partially because westerners were simply interested in a band from Nepal playing metal music. Nepali metal bands have also been writing songs in Nepali language since the beginning of the scene with X-Mantra, and bands like
X-Mantra, Anachrids and Binaash have printed lyrics in the devanagari script. X-Mantra often writes songs about distinctly Nepali subjects, including “Kaurav”, a play on a part of the Mahabharata, a holy Hindu scripture. Binaash is also making an interesting mark on the scene through lyrics; lyricist Praatek recently coined the genre “ramailo death” or “fun death” metal which differentiates itself through humorous lyrics in the vein of fictional death metal band Dethklok from the cult TV serious “Metalocalypse”.

Praatek (Binaash/Ugra Karma): We were just tired of all the macho imagery in death metal so we decided to start writing funny songs. We have this song where there is a hunter chasing a bird, like Elemen Fudd and Tweety. And we have the song “Mancheko Mo Mo” [momos made of people]. Sometimes we play with our image on stage - one time we wore all business suits like we had just come from the office. (2012)

By far the most visible band to take a uniquely Nepali approach to their image and music is the recently formed Lakhey, a Newari ethnic and metal fusion band founded by prominent scene member and guitarist Anil Dhital. Lakhey’s live performance is a spectacle: the lineup includes several Newari percussion instruments, a Newari flute, Anil on guitar and a dancer wearing traditional Newari festival dress. Anil’s reason for creating Lakhey is a result of the scene’s growing desire to differentiate itself on a global scale. In an interview with KTMRocks, Anil stated that he was tired of Nepali bands copying western bands; his own band E.Quals is often compared to American metalcore band Parkway Drive (Dhital, interview with KTMRocks 2012).

Dhital: With Lakhey we are trying to create an organic metal. When we make music with all of these western instruments, it sounds like other

Smucker   29
bands. If we listen to Metallica, it sounds like Metallica. We want to create a new thing with our own traditional instruments.

Kyle: Do you think it’s important for Nepali bands to make themselves unique?

Dhital: Yeah, yeah… to know Nepal, you have to try these instruments.

(2012)

When I asked metal fans what they thought of traditional music, I received a range of responses from “it sucks” to “there’s no creativity” to “of course I love it!” (Amatuer Band 3 2012; Black Sins Immortal 2012; Fan 3 2012). While metal listeners always preferred metal to traditional music, I could not find a significant trend in opinions regarding traditional music. However, when I asked fans about Lakhey they overwhelmingly supported the project on the grounds that it was something new and original. One amateur band I interviewed had similar plans to include Nepali instruments in their music (Amateur Band 4 2012) and black metal band Kalodin in is including elements of eastern classical music on their upcoming EP (Kalodin 2012).

It is also worthwhile to note that while schools that cater to middle class adolescents like Nepal Music Center tend to uphold western faculty and teaching methods as the ideal, they also often offer music classes in traditional Nepali music taught in the same private lesson or small group lesson format. The student demographic for these classes compared to the western instrument classes are virtually the same, while the motivation is slightly different. I interviewed several of these traditional music students and they tended to give similar answers to the question of why they were interested:
Maddal (traditional drum) Student: I want to learn maddal because it’s my culture. It’s Nepali culture. I want to be able to play in festivals.

(2012)

While traditional Nepali music and western heavy metal are sonically on opposite ends of the musical spectrum on the surface, metal students are beginning to adopt a similar attitude. For Nepali metal musicians and listeners Nepali metal is their version of Nepali culture. Now that Nepali metal is entering the global metal community, metal musicians and listeners want the rest of the globe to recognize this.

Discussion/Analysis

The overarching theme of my findings - the ceremonial boundaries of the scene, changing attitudes toward music education, religious and political attitudes, family life, independence and the task of defining Nepali metal on a global scale – is that the metal scene is a reflection of the cultural limbo of Nepal’s middle class youth. In each factor listed above there is a recurring dialogue between “traditional” and “local” Nepali culture with “modern” and “global” consumer culture, although these two cultures are not entirely separate from each other and are in a constant state of transformation and interaction.

It is tempting to label the metal scene as entirely part of the push of western consumer culture as its social boundaries and codes are influenced by western metal culture. My findings show this is not entirely case and demonstrate the difficulty of defining distinct “Nepali” and “global” cultures. It was clear that members of Kathmandu’s metal scene were required a certain level of knowledge involving western metal music, fashion and the proper physical reactions to metal music at metal concerts. However, it was also important for
these same metal fans to be involved in the Nepali scene: to have knowledge of Nepali bands, attend Nepali concerts and socialize with other Nepali metal heads. Even Nepali bands who are based in foreign countries with bigger metal scenes like Sangharsara (New York), Kalodin (Singapore) and Symbol of Orion (London) keep in contact with the scene through various medias for this reason: they have a social investment in Kathmandu’s metal scene. To reap the social benefits of the scene, metal fans in Kathmandu had to live up to the measure of “heaviness” and scene credibility western media provides while also being active members of Kathmandu’s social scene, which by nature intersects with family life, religion, politics, education, caste, ethnicity and class.

The metal scene’s requirement of having one foot in the west and one in Nepal is metaphorical of the social requirements for Kathmandu’s adolescent middle class culture as a whole. One driving force behind this is the pattern of studying abroad in western countries, which was viewed almost as a rite of passage by my interviewed subjects. It is telling that the metal scene is in a constant state of change of personnel with band lineups, even those that have had considerable success, due to the fact that most metal musicians choose to leave the scene to study abroad and often end up living in the west. For many, the metal scene is a waiting period for travels abroad, a period of cultural education that will pay off in western countries. As a result, the scene is in a constant state of flux and has grown at a rapid pace as both the cultural exchange between Nepal and the west and the opportunities for participation in the scene have increased.

The recent trend of western style music education and the encouragement of this style of education from parents is a part of the cultural dialogue, especially
for aspiring metal musicians. Parents saw western music education as an opportunity for “personal growth” and students were interested in learning to play increasingly technical forms of western music they were deeply passionate about. Parents and their children had different motivations for music education: the music students I interviewed were motivated out of passion for music and occasionally considered music as a potential occupation while parents discouraged music as anything outside of a hobby and saw music education as supplementing their children’s “practical” studies, typically business and management (studies that were determined by parents and met with unenthusiastic attitudes by their children). Ultimately, the end result is somewhere in the middle of these motivations: students learned a specifically western set of skills that both contributed to the metal scene on an artistic level and supplied students with social knowledge that encourages assimilation into a global middle class.

It is easy, but incorrect, to separate metal heads and the parents of metal heads into the dialectic that parents encourage tradition and metal heads reject it. It is not this simple. Metal listeners in Kathmandu were financially dependent on their families and usually live with them through college: listeners often expressed disdain for this fact and wished to achieve independence on the level of the typical American college student. However, metal listeners recognized that they depend on their families for their education and expenditures and that they have a strong social bond with their families that they cannot break despite any perceived cultural differences. Families may not “get” metal music but without their financial support there would not be much of a metal scene. Metal listeners also had strong social ties to their families as they are expected to live with them,
and whether or not they are wearing a Dying Fetus t-shirt family members participate in religious rituals and celebrations.

The cultural dialectic encourages Greene’s stance, that metal is simply a mode of cultural transgression: the social codes of the scene seem to be a radical departure from the music and social life of Kathmandu’s past and provide an “escape” for metal listeners. However, metal listeners were proud of being Nepali and wish to define themselves specifically as Nepalis on the global metal scale. While metal listeners wish to distance themselves from being “too religious” they still recognized their caste groups and participated in religious celebrations. Often, the religious transgressions in Nepali metal were simply a way to perform metal according to examples set by western bands. Nepali metal listeners wished to separate themselves as modern, independent, westernized individuals assimilated into a specifically western global social scene and the metal scene was an expression of this. However, metal listeners did not, or could not, abandon the social influence of family life or their cultural inheritance and are actually proud of their nationalities. Heavy metal was not a transgression of old traditions but rather an expression of new traditions intersecting and influenced by the old.

The global metal scene on a smaller scale and the globalization of middle class consumer culture on a larger scale has the tendency to encourage cultural pride amongst adolescents to be based in nationality over caste, ethnicity or religion. I interviewed Nepalis from a wide range of ethnic groups, both Buddhist and Hindu, but I only identified them as such because I specifically asked each interviewed subject for their caste or ethnicity and religious affiliation; otherwise ethnicity would not have come up frequently in
conversation. Nationality, however, was often used as a personal identifier. Additionally, the scene and the pride musicians and listeners had in it was always referred to as “Nepali”. As the middle class enters a global consumer culture and as the metal scene is recognized on a global scale, ethnicity and caste is made less important as social identifiers. Underside is not a “Brahmin/Chhetri” band or a “Hindu” band in the eyes of foreigners who listen to their music, but a “Nepali” band. People who would not have identified with the Nepali nationality or even speak the national language several generations back now identify strongly as “Nepali” as a result of the global consumer culture; this is directly reflected in the scene. Caste and ethnicity are still present and influence social life on a local scale but consumer class and cultural knowledge are gaining importance in how people define themselves, whether means metal or through other social identities.

For metal listeners the distinction between “metal head” vs “poseur” was perceived as more important in their social lives than distinctions between ethnicity and religion.

This emphasis on nationality is encouraging a sense of pride for Nepali metal music amongst Nepali metal listeners and a desire to differentiate Nepali metal from other nationalities. While western music is still considered the cream of the metal crop by Nepali fans, “old school” Nepali metal bands are earning respect and admiration amongst newer metal fans while the exponentially increasing number of bands is creating a competitive musical atmosphere, encouraging higher levels of talent, better equipment and innovation. In a few cases, the social capital of the metal scene can even trump the social capital of living abroad as musicians see Kathmandu’s metal scene as a strong social network with growing opportunities for recognition.
Conclusion

Consumer culture in Kathmandu’s emerging middle class presents a challenge to urban adolescents torn between social duties that seem traditional or outdated and an idealized individualistic modern life. Choosing to identify with the metal scene makes a clear statement of intention: metal fans and musicians in Kathmandu are investing in historically western cultural knowledge and separating themselves as a uniquely modern social circle through the performance of ceremonial rules. Joining the scene is motivated by a desire for an individual social identity and independence and has been viewed as a form of cultural transgression.

However, viewing the metal scene as purely a rejection of and a separation from Nepali culture, religion, politics and the society of older generations is both a generalization and socially impossible. While metal heads wish to separate themselves as “different” they are also proud of being Nepali, an identifier that includes religious traditions and family life. As metal heads in Kathmandu interact with the global metal scene and are identified by their western counterparts as Nepali they have an increasing desire to play up their “Nepaliness”. The Nepali metal head’s quest for individuality presents a seemingly contradictory desire to appear uniquely Nepali on a global scale and uniquely global on a Nepali scale. While the metal scene may have started as an attempt to gain western cultural capital on a global scale, it now has its own set of cultural capital on a local scale, which at this point in time is steadily increasing in scope and value. Bright lights and big noise are no longer purely visions of the west: a fully fledged and uniquely “Nepali” metal scene has found its home in Kathmandu.
Appendix


Photo 2 – Crafting Nepali Metal on a Global Scale: Anil Dhital poses with Lakhey mask (used with permission from Umes Shrestha).
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