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The Guthi System of Nepal

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The *Guthi* System of Nepal

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to understand the role of the *guthi* system in Nepali society, the relationship of the *guthi* land tenure system with Newari *guthi*, and the effect of modern society and technology on the ability of the *guthi* system to maintain and preserve tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Nepal. This research took place in three different sections of Kathmandu. The methodology behind this research was a combination of historical analysis of the traditional role of the *guthi* system in Nepal along with three case studies of *guthi* organizations with different assigned functions. These case studies consisted of interviews with key informants and observations of social phenomena organized by each respective *guthi*. The outcomes and scope of this research is limited by the number of *guthi* organizations researched, language barriers, the amount of time spent in the field researching, and my limited understanding of this incredibly vast system. The literature review in this research will provide the historical analysis of the *guthi* system and contextualize the information provided in the findings. The research findings will consist of the three case studies of the three distinct *guthi*: the *raj guthi* of Pashupatinath Temple, the Seto and Rato Matsyendranath, and a funeral *guthi*. The analysis will combine the historical analysis and case studies to answer the research questions of this study. This research concludes that the *guthi* system has been modified due to a changing Nepali society and that its traditional role in cultural heritage maintenance is threatened.

Keywords: *cultural heritage, social change, technology*

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Introduction

Nepal has a rich history of culture and religion. The *Guthi* system was established partly to maintain sites with significant cultural and religious heritage and to continue intangible heritage practices such as festivals and funeral rites. Nepal is the only nation that has the *Guthi* system. This system describes both community trusts traditionally backed by a special type of land tenure and Newari social units. In the past, this land under *guthi* tenure would be cultivated and the profits would go to site maintenance and provided income for those in charge of the *Guthi*. There are many types of Newari *guthi* and each play their significant roles in Newari social life. In the recent history of Nepal, both types of these organizations have undergone many changes due to a changing Nepali society that have modified the ability of this unique form of heritage maintenance. This research will use several case studies of sites and events around Kathmandu and compare *guthi* based off land tenure and Newari *guthi*. The purpose of this research is to better understand the relationship between the land tenure system and the Newari social system and to see how both are faring in the face of a changing world.

Literature Review

History of Nepali Culture

There is a long history of religion, tradition, and culture in Nepal. Many of these cultures and traditions were initially developed during the Licchavi reign from the fifth century to the eighth century of the common era, as these rulers set the groundwork for tangible cultures such as art and architecture and intangible cultures such as social norms, ritual practices, and customs (Amatya, S., 19). During this period, Siddhartha Gautama was born in Lumbini and marked the start of the influence of Buddhism on Nepali society and culture. The Licchavi rulers united the ethnically, linguistically, and culturally distinct regions of Nepal into a peaceful and singular unit. After their reign ended and nearly five centuries passed, the Malla dynasty impacted these cultural and religious practices and designed palaces, temples, and monasteries with ornate and intricate architecture (Amatya, S., 20-21). During this era, Malla rulers oversaw a revival of Hinduism and created a flourishing environment for artists, craftsmen, and poets. This rapid development of culture was brought about by the division of the kingdom into three separate areas, which spurred competition in the arts. Many festivals known as “jewels or the backbone” of cultural heritage in Nepal were established during this period. This division provided an impetus for Nepali culture, but foretold the downfall of the Malla era.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, King Prithivi Narayan Shah of the Gorkha Kingdom united Nepal under the banner of the Shah dynasty

(Amatya, S., 22). After the unification of Nepal, the Shah dynasty repeatedly attempted to unify the different regions within the nation through the establishment of a national identity. Hinduism provided the underlying foundation of this national culture, with Prithivi Narayan Shah even proclaiming that Nepal was a true “Hindustan” (Amatya, S., 18). This identity included establishing Nepali as the national language, tolerating various religions within the borders of Nepal, and the binding of arts, architecture, social customs, rituals and other aspects of local culture into a singular cultural identity. Nepali culture has altered slightly depending on the political circumstances in which it was established; despite the differences of these initial conditions, the importance of culture to Nepali society has continued from its foundations during the Licchavi era to its unification under the Shah dynasty to modern state of Nepal.

Methods were developed and implemented alongside these long-standing cultural traditions to preserve both the tangible and intangible aspects of Nepali culture. The *guthi* system of Nepal is the foremost of these methods; this system is only found in Nepal and is as ancient as the Licchavi dynasty (Regmi, 47-48). The word *guthi* originally referred the corporate body charged with the oversight the various functions of each particular trust. The Newari community indigenous to the Kathmandu Valley still refer to the social organizations that outline the responsibilities of each Newari individual to their respective community as *guthi*. There are three main types of *guthi* social organizations: organizations tasked carrying out the upkeep of specific religious sites and celebration of festivals;

funeral associations amongst the Newari community; and organizations that carry on musical traditions and skilled crafting traditions such as woodwork and metalwork (Toffin, 291). In addition to these social organizations, *guthi* also refers to a type of land tenure that finances the functions of some *guthi* organizations.

Guthi Land Tenure

Guthi endowments were given to religious and/or charitable institutions and are granted land in order to maintain temples, religious ceremonies, support populations that cannot financial provide for themselves like ascetics, the elderly and even endangered animal species (Regmi, 48). The mission of each *guthi* endowment depends on the original terms set by the individual or member of the royal family that endowed the land; though these reasons are various in nature, the overarching goal was to promote the social welfare of the Nepali people through maintaining religious and cultural traditions and temples, monuments and/or sites. This type of land tenure is generally not responsible for the financing of *guthi* organizations that deal with funeral rites or the preservation of musical or crafting skills.

The historical context in which this land trust system was established was “to satisfy the religious propensities of both the rulers and the common people” (Regmi, 46). There are two distinct types of land endowments: *raj guthi* and *duniya guthi*. *Duniya/niji guthis* are the endowments donated and managed by private individuals and/or families from their own land that had been granted to them by the state. *Raj guthis* are endowments made by members of the royal

family which were formerly under control of the royal government. *Guthi Sansthan* is the centralized government body that currently operates all *raj guthi*.

Once the Rana regime fell in 1951, individuals had much less of an incentive to render lands as *duniya guthi*. One of the primary incentives behind *duniya guthi* endowment was to ensure generational possession of familial land, as there was a perpetual risk of the state reclaiming state-granted land unless it was explicitly used for religious or charitable purposes (Regmi 53-54). After 1962, the risk of the state would confiscating this type of land ownership was virtually eliminated (Regmi, 44). The same act that created *Guthi Sansthan* in 1964 was quickly amended to allow the cultivators and operators of *duniya guthi* land to swap the title of the land and sell it as an asset (Amatya, M.). These profits were then placed into a trust and used to finance the operations of each *duniya guthi*. This practice financially drained many *duniya guthis* as these trusts became bankrupt and their important work in heritage maintenance halted. Regime change and land-swapping policies have prioritized the accumulation of wealth over the traditional role of the *guthi* system of uplifting social welfare through cultural heritage maintenance.

From the point of view of the state, establishing new *raj guthi* endowments did not fit their newly established objectives. The state viewed *guthi* land-tenure as a less desirable option for land as it could be used for financial development of the Nepali economy (Regmi, 56). The irrevocable nature of *guthi* land has historically been secured by religious means through warnings in the

Vedic texts of punishment in the afterlife for those who confiscate land used for religious purposes (Regmi, 65). According to a land-acquisition law passed in 1961, the Nepali government has the right to eminent domain on any land despite the nature of its tenure. Mahesh Regmi, one of the foremost land economists in the history of Nepal, describes “a progressive depletion” of *guthi* land as “inevitable in the future.”

The current situation for the *guthi* land tenure system is tenuous at best. *Raj guthi* have been weakened through the creation of *Guthi Sansthan*; its managerial approach to oversight and centralized operation is antithetical to their communal nature and hindered cultivators and site managers by exacting their autonomy (Sydney, 17). *Guthi Sansthan* is much more interested in leveraging these unique sites for financial gain through maintenance of tangible heritage without regard for intangible heritage. The International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IHCAP) has called *Guthi Sansthan* “a major setback to the indigenous community” of Nepal and has diagnosed rapid modernization as the primary reason for the disappearance and bankruptcy of many *raj guthi* and *duniya guthi* (IHCAP). Instead of utilizing the *guthi system*, Nepali communities are more likely to resort to subscription money for establishing public infrastructure and temples (Sydney, 20). IHCAP has stated that *guthi* system is not formally recognized or respected in the realm of heritage conservation, and that it is in danger of extinction.

This research will consist of three case studies on different types of *guthi* organizations. The first of these cases will be the *raj guthi* of Pashupatinath Temple. The below passages will detail the history of the Pashupatinath *raj guthi* and its importance to the site.

Pashupatinath: Modern Management of an Ancient Site

Pashupatinath is located in Kathmandu and is one of the holiest sites in all of Hinduism (Amatya, S., 117). It is the principal deity in all of Nepal. This site has one of the most ancient *guthi* systems in all of Nepal; in fact, the first known usage of the Sanskrit term for *guthi* is found in an inscription on the grounds of Pashupatinath (Regmi, 47). Pashupatinath is the main pilgrimage site for Hindus during Shivaratri, one of the largest annual festivals for the religion.

As an ancient site, it has undergone many restorations throughout its history. The temple was most likely built prior to the rule of Licchavi king Man Dev I from 494 - 505 C.E. (Amatya, S., 27). In 1360 C.E., it was restored by Jay Simha Ram Vardhan around a decade after an iconoclastic attack on the Kathmandu Valley by the Shamsuddin Ilias. The Malla dynasty developed Nepali preservation traditions deeply during their reign; Kings Jyortir Malla, Bhupalendra Malla, and Pratap Malla restored Pashupatinath three times from the beginning of the 15th century to the 17th century (Amatya, S., 28). The *guthi* also was responsible for taking care of the wildlife in the temple complex; in 1916 C.E., 36 *ropanis* of land endowed as *guthi* for the purpose of growing corn to feed to the monkey population of Pashupatinath (Regmi, 52). Pashupatinath's *guthi* in

tandem with the Nepali rulers have traditionally been in control of maintaining the tangible and intangible heritage of Pashupatinath.

Currently, the Pashupatinath temple complex is operated by a *raj Guthi* in partnership with *Guthi Sansthan* and Pashupati Area Development Trust (Amatya, S., 117). It was listed in 1979 as one of the seven World Heritage sites in Kathmandu Valley, signifying its importance to history and culture (Amatya, S., 114). The temple complex is protected by the Ancient Monument Preservation Act of 1953. In Pashupatinath, there are around 550 monuments of various size and 23 monument complexes. The Department of Archaeology is responsible for the physical maintenance and restoration of the monuments within the temple complex.

Newari Guthi

Newari *guthi* are incredibly important to the structure of society and maintenance of cultural heritage in the Kathmandu Valley (Toffin, 292). They organize and regulate many social, religious and cultural aspects of the Newari lifestyle. There are many of these *guthi* throughout the Kathmandu Valley and many Newari people belong to a variety of *guthi*. These organizations are diverse in their nature; some are mono-caste while others a multi-caste, some are compulsory while others are optional, and some are inherited while others are purely voluntary. These organizations are related to kinship, caste, and most importantly, locality as they define a Newari man's responsibilities and relationships to his various communities.

There exists a continuity in between Newari *guthi* and *guthi* land tenure even though many Newari *guthi* function without endowed land that finances their operations (Toffin, 291). Some researchers such as Prayag Raj Sharma view Newari *guthi* as a continuation of the *guthi* recorded in ancient Licchavi inscriptions. One of the goals of this research is to understand the link between the land tenure system and the Newari social system as it exists in modern Nepali society. The two Newari *guthi* that will provide the complement to the *raj guthi* of Pashupatinath in this research are two Matsyendranath chariot races and a Newari funeral society. Each of these *guthi* have distinct social functions and methods of funding. They serve different populations which benefit from the maintenance of their respective traditions and cultural heritage but do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. The below passages will detail the history of these two *guthi* and their importance to cultural preservation.

Matsyendranath Jatra: Chariot Festival

One of the events of Nepali heritage supported by various *guthi* is the annual building and celebration around the pulling of a chariot carrying the deity Matsyendranath; this event is known as a jatra. There are three of these festivals each year: one in Kathmandu, one in Lalitpur, and one in Bhaktapur. The Kathmandu chariot festival is known as Seto Matsyendranath and the Lalitpur chariot festival is known as Rato Matsyendranath. Seto Matsyendranath is revered as the major Buddhist deity of Kathmandu (Toffin, 109). Rato Matsyendranath is

revered by Jyapu farmers in Lalitpur as the bringer of rain and the initial bearer of rice to the Kathmandu valley (Toffin, 165).

The Seto Matsyendranath statue placed in the chariot each year is said to have been discovered by a Newari farmer from Jamo. Farmers from this area are heavily involved in the Seto Matsyendranath jatra, leading the procession and playing music all over the city (Toffin, 114-115). During the jatra, members of a *dhimay guthi* take their traditional Newari musical instruments such as *dhimay* drums, *bhusyah* cymbals, and *dhuniya* poles out of the special storehouse called the *akhah che* and follow the procession and play the instruments (Toffin, 86). Sometime between March and April of every year, the Chitrakar caste of painters paints the eyes of Bhairava on the wheel of the chariot before the jatra (Toffin, 24). Information on the construction of the chariot and the involvement of a *guthi* could not be found.

The Rato Matsyendranath chariot festival is held in Lalitpur. Like the Seto Matsyendranath, the Chitrakar caste paints the eyes of Bhairava on the wheels of the chariot and a skilled subgroup of Chitrakar painters known as the Nyekhu paint the statue of Rato Matsyendranath in April or May of every year before the night of the jatra (Toffin, 22). The construction of the Rato Matsyendranath is largely coordinated by Jyapu farmers due to the deity's importance to local agriculture (Toffin, 188). Jyapu carpenters supply the wood for the chariot and provide expertise on its assembly. The Yamwa use ropes, leaves, and other natural materials to stabilize the chariot, which rises over 20 meters. The Ghahkhu are

brakesmen are responsible during the jatra for stopping the wheels of the chariot in case they threaten to trample members of the crowd. The Jamgal Tane pull the chariot from Pulchowk around Lalitpur and the Suwa prepare the offerings of food to the diety. The *dhimay guthi* provides music; it has been noted that during this jatra, women have started to play *dhimay* drums and *bhusyah* cymbals in a display that some *guthi* organizations have begun to open up to women (Toffin, 403).

Si Guthi: Funeral Society

Of the Newari *guthi*, the *si guthi* which literally translate to ‘death *guthi*’ is the most important (Toffin, 200). One Newari male per family must belong to their respective *si guthi* or else be excluded from their caste and lineage. This type of *guthi* is marked by three distinct characteristics: it is a compulsory social organization; membership is patrilineal, passed down to sons from their fathers; membership is determined by proximity, as is necessary for the functions of each *si guthi* in the case of the death of one of the *si guthi* members. Membership in one of these *guthi* is usually based on common kinship and locality. Each member of the *guthi* is known as a *guthiyar* and have responsibilities according to the current leadership formation within the group.

The principal function of each *si guthi* is to coordinate and carry out the funerals of each member of the *guthi* (Toffin, 201). These responsibilities include transferring the body from either the home or other agreed upon location to the funeral pyre, carrying out funeral rites and the cremation itself, and proper

disposal of the ashes. Traditionally, all members of the *si guthi* must be a part of the funeral procession from the house of the deceased member to the cremation ground. The women affiliated with the men in the *guthi* accompany the *guthiyars* during the procession but go back to their respective houses after the procession reaches the cremation grounds.

The members of each *si guthi* meet once a year to have a feast and coordinate the responsibilities of each member for the coming year (Toffin, 202). The Jyapu community that Gerald Toffin studied for this information held this festival for four days, but that number fluctuates depending on the traditions and circumstances for each *si guthi*. Outsiders and women are not permitted to partake in the activities of this annual meeting, including various rituals for the deity of the funeral association *Sidyah* and special meals that carry heavy religious and cultural significance.

Methodology

My research has two parts: first, I wish to understand the similarities and differences of *guthi* backed by the land tenure system and Newari *guthi*; second, I wish to understand the effects of modernization and outside influences on *guthi* system and how those changes have affected the ability of the *guthi* system to preserve tangible and intangible cultures. To obtain this data, I will first conduct a case study of Pashupatinath Temple. I will visit the site during Shivaratri to better understand both the event itself along with the functions of the *guthi*. I will have in-depth interviews with key informants for the site, such as a member of Pashupati Area Development Trust, a member of the *raj guthi*, and the corresponding architect at *Guthi Sansthan* for Pashupatinath. I will use these interviews and observations to understand the current role of the *raj guthi* in maintaining cultural and religious functions while promoting social welfare. I will then compare the modern role of the *raj guthi* with the traditional role as understood through historical analysis.

I will then conduct a case study on the Seto Matsyendranath chariot race and the Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi*. I will attend the Seto Matsyendranath jatra to better understand the event's role for the people of Kathmandu. I will then visit the construction site of the Rato Matsyendranath chariot and have in-depth interviews with the Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi*. These interviews will help me better understand the importance of the festival to the *guthiyars* that construct the

chariot and the logistics around the tradition including its source of funding and how it has changed over time.

I will finally conduct a case study on a Newari *si guthi*. I will attend a traditional Newari cremation to understand the role that the *si guthi* plays in this social event. I will then interview key informants, members of the *guthi*, involved in the event to have a better understanding to back my observations. I will ask other interviewees of Newari descent about their *si guthi* during interviews to gauge the importance of that community in their own lives.

This multi-part method will enable me to triangulate my data and strengthen the validity of my work. The historical analysis conducted through the literature review will allow for an understanding of the traditional role for each of these *guthi*. The observation data from Shivaratri, Seto Matsyendranath jatra, and the Newari funeral in addition with the information collected from interviews with key informants will strengthen the research. All of this data combined will allow for a comparison between traditional *guthi* and their modern counterpart. The inclusion of a *guthi* that was traditionally financed through land cultivation and two Newari *guthi* will allow for a comparison between the two entities. These two comparisons allow for the answering of the two fundamental questions that drive this research and give it purpose.

Research Instrument

1. How does this *guthi* function?
 - A. How many members are in this *guthi*?
 - B. What do those members do?

- C. Who is in charge of the finances for this *guthi*?
 - D. Who is in charge of cultural preservation for this *guthi*?
 - E. Who is in charge for social benefits for this *guthi*?
2. What changes in the operation of this *guthi* have you noted over time?
- A. Have other organizations started working with you on cultural preservation efforts?
 - B. Do you have autonomy over how to preserve the culture of your site?
 - C. What is your biggest struggle in cultural preservation?
 - D. How has the management of this site changed over time?

Limitations

I will have a limited window of time, four weeks, to study and understand two research questions with vast implications. There is not enough time to fully understand the relationship between *guthi* land tenure and Newari *guthi*. The three *guthi* chosen to be case studies for this research are different in purpose, organization, funding, and communities served. This will weaken the comparative analysis between Newari *guthi* and *guthi* land tenure due to uncontrolled outside factors and the results of this research should not be generalized. The historical analysis will be limited due to the general lack of research conducted on the *guthi* system. The effects of modern society and technology as understood through these three cases should not be generalized as well given the small sample size.

The *guthi* system is a system that was unknown to me before I first came to Nepal and I will not understand all of its intricacies. I have biases that will affect the way in which I understand this research. I believe that technology and modern society can act as a double-edged sword that can bring about convenience

but hinder the continuation of important cultural traditions. This belief may skew my presentation of facts in this paper to represent what I wish to believe around the *guthi* system, rather than a presentation of facts more in line with reality. I cannot eliminate these biases, but my acknowledgement of them will hopefully mitigate their effect on this study.

Statement of Ethics

During the course of this research, I will abide by IRB/LRB guidelines with regards to informing participants of the nature of their consent and ask them to consent along those guidelines. I will inform participants of the purpose of this study to the best of my ability. I will ask for consent for recording the audio of these interviews. I will inform the participants that their inclusion is voluntary and that they may cease participation in this study any time during or after the conclusion of the interview. I will inform participants that there are no anticipated benefits from this study and ask if they wish to receive a digital copy of the finished research.

My first priority will be to the lives and culture of those who I will study. I will do everything in my power to respect their dignity and safeguard their privacy. I will protect the right of each of my interviewees to choose anonymity or recognition in this research. I will make sure that each of my interviewees know that I will respect and carry out their decision to the best of my abilities but warn them of potential compromise of anonymity and lack of recognition. I will inform my participants of the possible consequences of this study. I will take into account

my own biases and make them clearly known to the participants of this study. I will not plagiarize from sources in the field. I will be responsible to those that host me, such as the School of International Training and Vanderbilt University.

Findings

Pashupatinath

Since Pashupatinath Temple became an official UNESCO World Heritage site in 1977, UNESCO assumed the role with the most power to steer the direction of tangible and intangible cultural heritage conservation for the sacred complex. There are many entities involved in the day-to-day maintenance and operation of the site, including Pashupati Area Development Trust, the *raj Guthi*, over 200 *niji Guthi*, the *Guthi Sansthan*, the Department of Archaeology, the Timber Corporation, and the Civil Aviation Department. UNESCO does not share any of the development or maintenance costs, but they provide a strict set of guidelines for maintaining the site's status as a World Heritage site. The Department of Archaeology creates a list of actionable steps for adhering to these guidelines, though these are usually not comprehensive. This group of organizations is creating a Master Plan to be finished in the coming year that will outline the next 50 years of conservation and maintenance of the World Heritage site in order to maintain its status with UNESCO and preserve the heritage of this significant temple complex.

Pashupati Area Development Trust was created by King Birendra in 1986 after he was exposed to western style of management for significant cultural heritage sites and wished to develop the same for sites such as Pashupatinath Temple. At the time of its inception, the Queen was the Chairperson of the Trust, but it now has a more democratic management system. After the implementation

of democracy in Nepal, the Board for PADT restructured to mainly include representatives from the aforementioned parties involved in the day-to-day operation of the site. PADT works to maintain the existing structures and improve the facilities within the temple complex by importing monuments, upgrading the lighting systems, renovating the passages for pilgrimage, and building rooms for local peoples who utilize Pashupatinath as a cremation grounds. These local peoples are given 13 days of facilities at Pashupatinath and there are 42 rooms with the sole purpose of accommodating this population, but these accommodations are insufficient relative to their demand. Since the earthquake of 2015, PADT in conjunction with the Department of Archaeology have continually worked on repairing damaged monuments and are still in a period of reconstruction. The organization borrowed money from the Nepali government to pay for the renovation costs.

The *raj guthi* at Pashupatinath is involved in the operation of religious ceremonies and maintenance of intangible cultures at the Pashupatinath Temple complex. It is a small team of six people and is responsible for important ritual ceremonies such as Mahasnan and Shivaratri. Mahasnan is a type of religious ceremony in which the ritual bathing of the statue of Shiva in the main temple of Pashupati is completed. The *raj guthi* must procure 84 different types of foods in which Shiva must be bathed in, including cow milk, honey, and curd. This ritual bathing can only be carried out by Indian gurus from Karnataka called vartas; the *raj guthi* simply acts as a procurement organization for Mahasnan. After the

bathing is complete, they then decorate the statue of Shiva with flowers and tantric celebrations are carried out.

Shivaratri is an annual festival and one of the most important in all of Hinduism. Many babas/sadhus come to Pashupatinath to celebrate Shivaratri from India and other locations. The babas are representative of Shiva and are treated well on this night as it is Shiva's night. The *raj Guthi* gives wood and materials to create fires, food, and money to the babas to ensure that they can eat, stay warm and get back safely for their return journey. There are different categories of babas; depending on a baba's status, different amounts of food and money are given by the *raj Guthi*. During my observation of the Shivaratri festival at Pashupatinath, babas acted as the focal points of the crowd. The attention of the crowd was focused on the babas in part due to their elaborate body paintings from ash and other natural powders. Babas also had access to marijuana for Shivaratri, undoubtedly contributing to their status as the focal points of the event. While I was led to believe that the *raj Guthi* was responsible for the supply of marijuana to the babas, I was not able to confirm this with anyone from the *raj Guthi*.

The relationship between Pashupati Area Development Trust, the *raj Guthi*, and *Guthi Sansthan* is quite complex. PADT is in the culture ministry of the Nepali government and *Guthi Sansthan* is in the land ministry. The chairperson of *Guthi Sansthan* has a reserved spot on the board of PADT. *Guthi Sansthan* manages the *raj Guthi* and the *raj Guthi* must coordinate with *Guthi Sansthan* in order to carry out their activities. PADT finances the activities of the *raj Guthi*

through internal resources such as fees collected from tourists and other visitors and revenue and interest on *guthi* lands endowed on behalf of Pashupatinath. The *raj guthi* is given around 200 lakhs every year to fund its operations; it is an expenditure-only organization.

Matsyendranath Jatra

The Seto Matsyendrabal *guthi* and the Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi* are responsible for building each respective chariot for both of the annual jatra. These chariots have traditionally been built from only wood sourced by each *guthi* from jungles around Kathmandu. The chariot takes around 15 to 20 days to construct. Dozens of different types of wood are used in the construction of the chariot and the knowledge about which woods to harvest is passed down through the generations of the *guthi*. The methods in which the wooden joints are bound to each other is important to the stability of the chariot. Each joint is loosely fitted with around a millimeter of space in between the two wooden pieces; this is important as it allows the structure to dissipate energy throughout the structure. As the chariot is pulled through narrow streets and turned on tight axes, this stability is essential as the statue of the deity and some members of the *guthi* ride atop the chariot for the jatra. In addition to the religious and cultural implications of the Matsyendranath jatra, these chariots also display ancient construction practices; the chariots serve as an example of how to build homes that can endure the earthquakes common to the Kathmandu Valley.

There are 35 to 40 members in the Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi*. This organization is patrilineal, and sons will take their fathers' place in the *guthi* and become a *yuwaa*. A *yuwaa* is any member of the *guthi* who takes part in the construction of the chariot and is permitted to ride atop the chariot during the event. The *Guthi Sansthan* provides the funds for the construction of the chariot, financing the transportation to the jungle to collect supplies. The Rato Matsyendranath statue must remain in place for three days after the chariot is completed, and the festival must take place on a Wednesday. The chariot is constructed in Pulchowk in Lalitpur, and it is pulled from there to Patan Durbar Square to Sundhara to Lagankhel and finally to Jawalakhel. Anyone can pull on the chariot, and the festival shuts down the roads as it is a massive gathering.

The Rato Matsyendranath jatra has been going on for 1,500 years and it has many religious implications for the Kathmandu Valley. Rato Matsyendranath is the deity of rain and food and resides in India for the majority of the year. This jatra is put on to attract the deity to the Kathmandu Valley and bring rain and subsequent agricultural prosperity with them. The members of the *guthi* are inclined to make the jatra a popular and festive event in order to attract Rato Matsyendranath. The Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi* plays a vital role in maintaining this religious and cultural tradition, as well as providing a means to preserve ancient earthquake-resistant technologies.

Si Guthi

There are around 75 members of the *si guthi* with which I observed and interacted; this number is not exact as the membership changes each time the organization gathers. Within the *guthi*, there are five groups of 15 members that rotate the responsibilities for the year. Every member of the *guthi* is called a *guthiyar* and each family traditionally in this *guthi* must have at least one male member of their family as a *guthiyar*. These responsibilities include organizing and carrying out the funeral procession, cremating the body, procuring the necessary items for the cremation, hiring a guruju or tantric priest to perform the final rites, and taking attendance. This particular *guthi* no longer identifies as a *si guthi* but rather as a *bicha guthi*, which translates to a ‘condolence’ *guthi*.

Once a year, this *guthi* meets to have a feast, calculate fines for the previous year, and go over the logistics of the coming year. This particular *guthi* meets every December during the full moon for this event. Traditionally, this feast lasts for a full week. In recent times, this annual meeting has been shortened to two days due to the difficulty of finding 7 free days and rising costs. This event marks the changing of the group of 15 members that are responsible for carrying out the cremations for the coming year. These various assignments are listed in an Excel spreadsheet, which are to be kept as one member’s responsibility. This spreadsheet is consulted during the feast for the previous year and fees are tabulated depending on attendance and assigned roles. Each role carries a specific assigned fee value; the lowest fee is assigned to any *guthiyars* who simply is not present for the cremation and the highest fee is assigned to any *guthiyars* that are

assigned to funeral procession duty but fail to show up. After previous year's fees are calculated, the membership fee for the coming year is then calculated.

There are many benefits associated with this *si guthi*. The most immediate and important of these is to the family of the deceased; the son of the deceased is tasked only with the offering of water around the pyre as the last drink of this Earth and the initial lighting of the pyre. After the completion of these two tasks, he is free to leave the cremation grounds to go home. This frees the immediate family members to grieve from their own home and start other important rituals while the assigned members of the *guthi* carry out the full cremation. The assigned members also benefit from the cremation, as it allots several hours for them to consider mortality and creates a sense of community within the *guthi*.

Traditionally, the *guthiyar* in charge of coordinating that year's assigned members of the *si guthi* would have to knock on the doors and gather all of the members in a matter of hours. Now, they use a Viber group chat for the responsibility of alerting the members of a death. The procession used to always be from the deceased's home, but now most processions take place from a shed across the Bagmati river that was built for hospitals to drop off corpses to be stored until cremation. At the cremation grounds, there were two different pyres. One was a traditional pyre, a simple metal platform where wood would be piled for the cremation. The other was a modern pyre with a hood; this pyre requires a fraction of the wood that the traditional pyre needs and cuts the cremation time down from six hours to four hours.

Analysis

Community Empowerment

Throughout all of the *guthi* that I interacted with, the common theme was a sense of community empowerment. One of the main questions driving this research was to find the relationship between the *guthi* land tenure system and Newari *guthi* through the *raj guthi* of Pashupatinath and the *bicha guthi* and the Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi*. Each of these organizations strengthens the community which they serve: for the *raj guthi*, the Hindu community is served through the continuation of important religious events such as Shivaratri and Mahasnan; for the *bicha guthi*, the local community of common descent cares for each other in times of emotional turmoil and great need; for the Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi*, the people of Lalitpur come together to convince a deity to leave India and bring prosperity to the Kathmandu Valley through great festivities. Each of these *guthi* serve a different community and play different roles within that community. There are many more *guthi* and these three provide a slight peek into the importance of this system in Nepali society. This role is changing rapidly due to pace in which Nepali society itself is undergoing changes.

Impact of Technology and a Changing Nepali Society

Technology has had a profound impact on the functioning of each of the *guthi* that I studied during this research. The Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi* has been the least affected by emerging technologies as they maintain the construction techniques passed down from their ancestors and only use the natural materials.

The members of the *guthi* that source the different woods from the jungle do so by vehicle which expedites the process, which is the only way in which the process has been modified by technology.

The *bicha guthi* has been much more affected by new technologies than the Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi*. This *guthi* has expedited the communication between members for when a death occurs; instead of the yearly coordinator going to each house frantically, they use a Viber group chat to let every member know instantly. After the initial lighting of the pyre, each member gathers for attendance to be taken. This is done on a notebook and after it is the responsibility of one *guthiyar* to transfer the attendance data to an Excel spreadsheet. At the yearly feast, this spreadsheet allows for a quick sum of each member's fees for the year. Technologies that allow for tasks such as these to be completed more quickly than before only serve to strengthen these *guthi*.

Though these technologies benefit individual members of this *bicha guthi*, there is a point at which it may begin to hamper the community that the *guthi* strives to create. For example, the new funeral pyre is seen as a positive innovation as it decreases the amount of wood that the *guthi* has to purchase, requires less wood which is beneficial to the environment, and the cremations are quicker than when using a traditional pyre. These all seem to be positive features, and the members of the *bicha guthi* agree. However, Pashupatinath Temple, a site famous as a cremation ground, has recently installed an electric crematorium (Wei). This innovative technology uses no wood and is more environmentally-

friendly than the modern pyre used by the *bicha guthi* and costs less than a traditional Nepali funeral. This modern practice eliminates many of the ritual aspects maintained by the *bicha guthi*. This emerging technology threatens the heritage and communal aspect from *guthi* around Nepali funerals. Electric cremations are not popular in Nepal yet due to the lack of these crematoriums compared to traditional pyres, but soon this convenience may overcome tradition. The influence of modern Nepali society can already be seen in the annual feast of this *bicha guthi*; the event has been shortened from a full week to 2 days as members have found that they cannot allocate a full week for the feast and rising costs prohibits the continuation of the traditional duration of the event.

Changes in Nepali society are also seen in the management of Pashupati and the role of the *raj guthi* in its maintenance and operation. Throughout the vast majority of the site's history, the *raj guthi* has held the most authority in these practices. Now, UNESCO owns that role as it is the organization that endows it with the label of a World Heritage site. The overall direction of the site's management is under the control of an organization that does not deal with the day-to-day operation of the site. Even within the organizations that do deal more directly with the operation of the site, the *raj guthi* does not hold the autonomous position it once did. Pashupati Area Development Trust and the *Guthi Sansthan* both have more power than the *raj guthi* in this regard. PADT finances the operations of the *raj guthi* which has now become an expenditure-only organization. The *Guthi Sansthan* must approve all of the actions of the *raj guthi*.

The *raj guthi* has been subjected to centralized bureaucracy and western styles of management and now only performs a fraction of its historic duty. The traditional form of tangible and intangible cultural heritage maintenance of the *raj guthi* has been disempowered and had its autonomy stripped through the social changes that accompanied them.

Changing Gender Roles

The *guthi* system has traditionally only allowed men to be part of the group. This tradition has maintained in the two Newari *guthi* that I interacted with, the Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi* and the *bicha guthi*. During the construction of the Rato Matsyendranath chariot, many of the members of the *guthi* expressed the need to have sons so that they could continue on in the tradition of their ancestors. When asked if women would ever be able to participate in the construction, they answered that women would not be able to construct the chariot; it was unclear whether this belief was due to traditional gender roles or perceived capacity to construct a chariot, or perhaps a combination of the two.

In the *bicha guthi*, only men were present at the inner section of the crematorium where the pyres were located. There were a few women standing at the outside of the door, but they did not come into the inner area before the initial fire was lit. After the initial flame was lit, the *guthiyars* went to a faucet to wash their faces; at this time, the women came through the door to splash water on their faces. These women must have viewed the ritual cleansing of the water to be more important than the strict tradition of gender segregation at the cremation grounds.

The men around them did not seem to mind, though I do not know if this was due to the relationship of these women to the deceased or other factors. There is a special case within this *bicha guthi* of a woman, a widow of a former member of the *guthi*, holding a special membership. She must pay dues and attend the annual meeting and this *bicha guthi* will carry out her funeral. This tradition is uncommon, but it is not new; the circumstance is called *darun*.

The *raj guthi* at Pashupatinath Temple is unlike the two Newari *guthi* with regards to women in that a woman was in charge of the organization. There are multiple reasons for this different dynamic. The woman in charge had worked her way up through the hierarchy of *Guthi Sansthan* before taking charge of the *raj guthi* after proving her worth as a competent member of the organization.

Whereas Newari *guthi* function as patrilineal organizations, *raj guthi* are managed by *Guthi Sansthan* and positions are awarded based off merit and ability rather than bloodline. The role of women highlights some of the greatest distinctions in *raj guthi* land tenure and Newari *guthi* given the method of selection for the body of members. Only in special circumstances are women allowed in Newari *guthi*, but the meritocracy of *raj guthi* allows for the inclusion of women.

Guthi Sansthan

While *Guthi Sansthan* has done well incorporating gender diversity in the corporate structure of *raj guthi*, many of my interviewees stressed their lack of faith and even outright disdain for the Corporation. The organization clearly does some good for the preservation of Nepali culture as seen through the financing of

the Matsyendranath jattras and their role in important cultural events such as Shivaratri at Pashupatinath. However, these actions do not provide a full picture of *Guthi Sansthan's* effect on the *guthi system* and the preservation of Nepali culture. The *guthi system* is traditionally based on the uplifting of social welfare for the Nepali people; as a corporate body, the organization's underlying goal is to increase the amount of wealth. These goals often conflict with each other.

For instance, *Guthi Sansthan* partially owns a historic building in Kathmandu Durbar Square that has operated as a spice trading store for the past five centuries. The Corporation now wishes to raze this site and construct a mall on its grounds under the assumption that the mall would bring about more revenue to fund its various operations. These funds would go towards preserving Nepali culture through various venues; *Guthi Sansthan* needs avenues to raise funds for events such as the Matsyendranath jattras and maintenance of sites of cultural heritage. Traditionally, the revenue from the cultivation of these lands covered these expenses. Currently, this revenue does not cover these expenditures due to the falling price of grain. *Guthi Sansthan* is left with the difficult decision of prioritizing different facets of Nepali culture in the face of this financial dilemma; this means that historic sites may be destroyed for the greater good of preserving "more important" aspects of cultural heritage. Cultural preservation activists often disagree with these decisions, and believe that *Guthi Sansthan* should not have the power to prioritize which aspects of culture matter the most.

Conclusion

The *guthi* system has undergone many changes since the fall of the Rana regime in 1951. The land tenure system is in unfavorable conditions due to the policies of *Guthi Sansthan*, the diminishing value of agricultural products, and loss of autonomy through the adoption of Western bureaucracy. Newari *guthi* have remained more true to its traditional form than its counterpart of the same name, but have had to modify its practices in the face of a rapidly modernizing society. The *guthi* system remains an influential component of Nepali social life and continues to play an important role in cultural heritage maintenance and the empowerment of communities in Nepal. This system has endured many centuries as a backbone of Nepali culture and community; despite the vast influence these changes have had on the system, I believe that it will find a place in the future of Nepali society though perhaps a less influential role than what it has known in the past.

Glossary

baba/sadhu: Hindu holy men

bicha: condolence

Guthi Sansthan: *Guthi* Corporation

jatra: chariot festival

Matsyendranath: Hindu deity of rain and initial bringer of rice to Kathmandu

Newar: indigenous people of Kathmandu Valley

si: death

yuwaa: a member of the Seto/Rato Matsyendrabal *guthi*

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