

Fall 2013

The Social Lives of Pots and Potters in the Kathmandu Valley

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The Social Lives of Pots and Potters in the Kathmandu Valley



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Asia, Nepal, Kathmandu Valley

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Nepal: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples Program SIT Study
Abroad, Fall 2013

Abstract

This paper investigates the changing status of ceramics in Thimi, Nepal. Pottery in the Kathmandu Valley is an ancient tradition, dating as far back as 400 AD. However, the rich craft is currently at a crossroads between extinction and innovation. The author's project is to trace the lives of pots and the potters from the mid 20th century until present as they are imagined, remembered, and enacted by the human and clay inhabitants of Thimi. Rather than focusing on the aesthetic properties of pots, the author instead emphasizes the social relations that both surround and encounter them. This method aims to shed light on how and by whom clay is transformed into a functional and culturally meaningful object. In conclusion, the author addresses potential futures for the disappearing pots and potters of Thimi.

Acknowledgements

My research would not have been possible without the guidance of Nazneen and Hubert Decler, Isabelle Onians, Moira Vincentelli, and the unending aid and generosity of Laxmi, Santa, and Basanti Prajapati.

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Introduction

The Prajapati are potters by caste¹, Newari and thus indigenous to the Kathmandu Valley. No Prajapati with whom I spoke could remember a time when his or her ancestors were not working with clay. In Newar culture, being a potter is more than a profession. It is an inheritance, and today this rich heritage is at risk. Thimi is one of the last standing pottery communities in the Valley. In 1985 the estimated number of potters working there was 600, but in the past 28 years this number has significantly fallen. In this essay I attempt to identify the major changes in the pottery tradition in the past 50 years, and potential reasons for its current status as “disappearing”. My second focus is an investigation into the importance of pots in Newari consecration rites. I conclude with a discussion of potential futures for ceramics in the Kathmandu Valley.

Methodology

Although the majority of my research was conducted in Thimi, I believe my findings can operate as a sample for the situation of pottery in the Kathmandu Valley as a whole. Rather than prioritize the aesthetic qualities of pots, I instead follow Alfred Gell and focus on the social relation that encompass and breathe into them. In doing so, I aim to illuminate the broader social contexts of their creation, which I hope results in a deeper understanding of how, in Kathmandu Valley, clay is transformed into a culturally meaningful pot.

¹ They are part of the Kumale stratum within the Newar Caste system.

² This chapter is informed by a series of interviews dating between 11/6/13 – 11/22/13 with the following individuals: Krishna Bahadeur Prajapati, Kaji Narsingh Prajapati, Ratna Shova

Chapter 1: Life of a Thimi Potter: Then and Now

The streets of Old Thimi hum with the sounds of spinning wheels and the shuffling of terracotta, and there is a distinct scent of ash and mud. The just-thrown planter pots, whose silver bodies mingle with sleeping dogs in the sun, dry in alleys seemingly indifferent to the motorcyclists who carefully dodge by. There is always a bustle of activity in these streets and courtyards, and more often than not it surrounds some process related to pottery. Stacks of pots, dry, wet, or fired, line the streets. Piles of hay and ash wait in courtyards to be sacrificed for the transformation of wet clay into terracotta. Massive chipped water jars sit in dusty corners, bearing witness to their own extinction. In the past 50 years the ceramics industry in Kathmandu Valley has undergone significant change. What was once a booming market demanding a diversity of clay products has since significantly dwindled. Today, one finds few potters making anything besides planter pots, raksi distillers (see Fig. 1), and popcorn bowls (see Fig.2), which betray Thimi's reputation as home to the craftsmen who throw the largest pots in all of Nepal. Traditionally, pottery was part of the yearly agricultural cycle. Potters spent their winters working with clay and their summers cultivating the land. However, this is no longer the case and most potters now work on the wheel year-round. Another new development on which I will expand in this chapter is the entrance of glazed ceramics and exported goods into the pottery industry within the last five decades. One thing that has stubbornly remained the same is the labor division between men and women in ceramics. Despite all that has evolved in the pottery tradition, one is still unable to find any women actually working on the wheel. In this chapter I will attempt to trace the trajectory of the dwindling demand for pots via recollections from the local community on the lives of potters beginning in the mid 20th century up until present day.

The Thimi potter was once a very busy man. The mid 20th century was a kind of golden age of ceramics in Nepal. At this time it was nearly impossible to run a household without the use of numerous terracotta products, and potters did not have the capacity to fulfill the large demand (Interview on 11/12/13: Kaji Narsingh Prajapati). Ceramics were necessary for food and water storage as well as the distillation of raksi, for which terracotta was perfect due to its porous yet impenetrable surface. Potters dug for their own clay, and many with whom I spoke were nostalgic for a time before their own when potters traded with the King their pots for his land, which was used for harvesting clay and working space. There was a large diversity of styles and forms of earthenware, which was necessary to meet the multitude of needs. Boys started working on the wheel between the ages of 14 and 16, and most learned the craft from their fathers. One of my informants, Santa Bahadur Prajapati (Interview on 11/13/13), remembered always playing with clay as a child, and dreaming of becoming a potter like the rest of the men in his family. Santa, like most potters in Thimi, began his trade learning to throw small tea bowls and dishes. The wheel used during this time was massive and heavy and consequently extremely difficult to control (see Fig. 3). Thus, a boy had to wait until he was older and stronger to be able to throw the larger pots for which Thimi was famed.



Figure 1: Pots Used to Distill Raksi



Figure 2: Pot for Cooking Popcorn



Figure 3: Traditional Wheel

By the time a potter turned 18 he spent his winters working in mountain villages making pots for about 3 months, and often his wife joined him on the journey. One of the reasons for leaving Thimi was that the winter season was a time of many festivities, which distracted potters from their work (Interview on 11/10/13: Laxmi Kumar Prajapati). Potters left Thimi bringing nothing but the clothes on their body and a large empty sack. They were considered honored guests, provided free food and lodging in the village (Interview on 11/8/13: Santa Bahadeur Prajapati). If there was an animal sacrifice held during their stay, the villagers gave the head of said animal to the potter, which was a sign of very high respect. While some potters ventured to these villages on their own in order to avoid any competition, most recounted going in groups of at least fifteen. While in the village these fifteen men each took on a different job. One man spent his whole day wedging clay, another throwing, another beating, and so on. All profit made from selling the pots was split equally between the group, regardless of job differentiation. Pots were traded with villagers for the amount of grain they could contain. The community of potters in Thimi was quite interdependent, and thus there was a somewhat collective desire for mutual success (Interview on 11/8/13: Santa Bahadeur Prajapati). That is not to say that the potters were all completely cooperative and equal, as is so often romanticized in scholarship on craftsmen communities. There was still a sentiment of competition and jealousy amongst the men (Interview on 11/6/13: Kansa Prajapati). For example, fellow potters envied a man who was stronger and could throw more pots. There were also those who were simply known for making better and stronger pots. While all products went unsigned and were mostly identical, the potter still knew his handiwork apart from his peers, and so did the customer. As one local elder put it: “It’s like recognizing your own handwriting”(Interview on 11/20/13: Sanu Ma Khabaja Prajapati).

My interviews suggest that during these winter stays in the villages the potters and their tools were regarded as characters shrouded in a veil of mystery by the local peoples. Many of my

informants spoke of villagers stealing the excess clay from their wheels and eating it to cure nausea and dizziness. The clay had to be stolen and had to be from the potter's wheel; otherwise it would not heal the thief. The potter's string, which he uses to cut the pot away from the wheel, was also an item of intrigue. Krishna Bahadeur Prajapati recounted numerous instances where community healers came to him asking for his string, insisting that it could cure swollen glands if tied around the neck. Perhaps the powers imagined to be held within these tools had something to do with the potter's own reverence towards his implements. "The tool is a Guru," proclaimed local potter Jagat Bahadeur Prajapati (Interview on 11/12/13). He went on to say that the tool is like a third hand, and that without good tools it is impossible to make a good pot. In Thimi, a potter's only tools are the aforementioned string, a piece of bamboo (used to pull and straighten the pot), and the wheel. These tools are worshipped twice a year during Dashain and the Newar New Year. One must not touch the tools or the wheel with his legs or feet, and women were once forbidden to touch the precious utensil. (Interview 9/22/13: Jim Danisch).

Although during this period women were not allowed to use the wheel, they were very much involved in most other aspects of pottery. While a lot of their time was spent making clothes and caring for children, every other available moment was used to assist their husbands with the pots. Their jobs included wedging clay, stamping, helping load and unload pots for firing, and forming the bottoms of pots. Today, the women of Thimi are still doing all of these jobs.

Twilla Maya Prajapati is 70 years old (Interview 10/6/13). She has one son, who is a potter, and whose wife she joins in helping prepare pots for selling. She sits in her purple sari, legs mysteriously folded beneath her, white hair twisted back into a tight bun, and she holds in one hand a large semi-dry planter pot. Defying both her age and seeming fragility, she holds the planter steady and begins to pull out the wet clay from the bottom. Next, she begins twisting the pot by slightly tossing it as she smacks the uneven bottom with the base of her palm, flattening it. With her free hand she throws sand on a flat stone, so that the clay won't stick, and then places the planter there, top up. She lightly taps the pot twice against the stone, spins it, and then repeats. This creates a pleasant shuffling noise, and it appears her eyes have closed. For her final step, she takes a mallet and compresses the bottom of the pot, stabilizing it. This pot will later be stamped, which serves both a decorative as well as a strengthening purpose in that it creates a firm rim. Now, the pot is ready for firing. One of the other female Prajapati with whom I spoke did almost everything necessary for making a pot on her own (Interview on 11/6/13). Her husband, who had another job in the city, came home once a week to work on the wheel and beat a few pots. When I asked her why she didn't just learn to throw pots herself so that she could work independently, she laughed. Making pots is a two-person job, she said, because if she did everything herself that would be too much labor.

Like the roles of women in ceramics, traditional firing and beating processes have also had little innovation since the mid 20th century. Those potters not making glazed ceramics, which is the vast majority, use primarily the same techniques as their fathers and grandfathers. The potter beats the pot in order to make it both lightweight and strong. Most pots, besides those used for religious purposes, are beaten. Coming off of the wheel, the pot is about two thirds of what will be its final size (See Fig. 4 & 5). The beating process begins by placing the pot upside down on a platform and covering it with sand. The potter begins beating from the top to the bottom of the pot. He hits the outside with a large mallet, which is met on the inside of the pot's skin with a flat stone. The potter moves clockwise and creates small imprints with each beat. He has to listen to the sound of the beating to know that he has hit inside and outside of the pot with equal force. It

should sound like a slap in the face. If he does not hit with equal force then the clay will rip, and he will have to waste valuable time repairing the tear.

Before every firing the potter must worship the Hindu god ViswoKarman, who is the patron deity for all craftsmen. Should he not, his firing is doomed to bad luck. A potter will fire his pots about once every four months, and each firing can hold up to 2,000 pots of different variety (See Fig 6 -10). The lowest stack is for the largest pots and the top stack for the smallest, and between each stack is placed a layer of hay. Once everything has been stacked, the mound is covered entirely by hay and ash. The potter then opens four holes, one in the middle of each face of the mound, which is stabilized by the mouth of a broken pot. He lights a fire within each hole. After each hole's fire has been adequately stoked, he closes them and is done for the day. The next morning he will reopen these holes, and poke several more on the top of the mound. The next 24 hours is the most precarious of the whole process, and marks the time when explosions are most likely to occur. The potter must watch his firing closely and tend to it all night. Cousins and uncles whom are paid usually assist him, along with his wife. The entire firing process takes approximately 4 days to complete. There is a lot of smoke and ash that is inevitably inhaled, which has resulted in a long inheritance of lung issues for Prajapati.



Figure 4: Planter Pots Pre-Stamping and Beating



Figure 5: Planter Pots-Post Stamping and Beating



Figure 6: Opening First Hole



Figure 7: Feeding Fire



Figure 8: Stabilizing Ash Walls



Figure 9: All Holes Burning



Figure 10: Husband and Wife Unloading

These harsh working conditions are one of the reasons many have opted out of pursuing careers in pottery or have turned to the less taxing environment of glazed ceramics. The Ceramics Promotion Project (CPP), started in 1984, was a game-changer for the ceramics industry in Nepal. Under the department of Cottage and Small Industries and funded by the German government the CPP set out to give the traditional craft a second wind. This project changed how potters conceptualized ceramics from a subsistence craft into a business. Their idea was to significantly modernize the traditional form, while keeping an emphasis on the handmade object and the value of the craftsman. The CPP's objectives were to create employment opportunities within the field of ceramics and to develop glazes through importing materials from India. In order to achieve these goals the CPP developed the following:

(a) Some machinery/Equipment invented or adapted and produced in Nepal e.g. Traditional wheels, electric wheels, kilns, burners etc. (b) New products introduced to the market e.g. glaze handmade crockery, glazed handmade decorative items, unglazed floor tiles, jigger products, ceramic jewelers etc. (c) Clay and glaze products developed to support the industry e.g. clay bodies, glaze, engobes, refractories etc. (d) Skill training on modern ceramic to more than 750 persons both in Kathmandu Valley and rural parts of Nepal. (Premi; *Fine Arts Nepal*).

Some of the technologies mentioned above were slow to catch on within the Thimi pottery community. Many people were suspicious of the electric wheel and also found it relatively impractical considering the fickle nature of electricity in Nepal. However, some of those who did pursue this alternative to traditional pottery are now running successful ceramics businesses, which sell their wares locally as well as for export. The electric wheels offer physically easier and more efficient ways of making pots, which however did not lead to further involvement of women in wheel throwing. While women are now working on the wheel, they only do so in order to trim others' pots. They refuse to learn to throw anything, insisting that they are not strong enough and that their dresses will get in the way.

It seems that as the value of the clay pot has decreased in Thimi, and so has the value of the potter. While the rise of plastic usage is largely to blame, it is not the only reason younger generations have shown little interest in ceramics. One of the other major problems facing the ceramics industry of Kathmandu Valley is clay deficiency. As new building developments replace the rice fields, where clay was once harvested, potters find themselves competing with brick-makers for the quickly diminishing clay resources in the Valley. In order to throw a pot on any kind of wheel, a potter needs quite a bit of room. Today, one finds potters crammed into corners, crouched low over their wheels. The severe and increasing lack of space to both harvest local clay and work on the wheel poses perhaps the largest threat to the potter community. However, there are those who assert that some things simply must be made of clay, and thus there will always exist a potter. These are the clay products used for religious purposes, that some argue will exist as long as religion does in Kathmandu, to which I will turn in the following chapter (Charpentier; 1973, Kasten; unknown).

Chapter 2: The Making of the *Kalas* in the Bura Janku Rite²

The Bura Janku is a Newar old-age consecration rite conducted by both Hindu and Buddhist Newars, but here I will focus on the Hindu variant of the rite. The first Janku occurs when an old man or woman is 77 years, 7 months, 7 days, and 7 hours old. After which, there will be a successive Janku every 10 years³. Performing this rite is extremely expensive, and costs are known to exceed 500,000 rupees. The ceremony marks the transformation of the old man or woman into a deity, and requires (among many other things) the use of between 20-30 *kalases*. A *kalas* is a vessel made out of either clay or metal, which is metamorphosed into the body of a God or Goddess during a ritual. Most prefer to use clay *kalases* and claim that clay is the purest of all materials and, not to mention, significantly cheaper than metal. The majority of *kalases* are painted by a person of the Chitrakar caste, who uses various symbols and designs to depict the deity of each *kalas*. These depictions are extremely important for those involved in the ritual in that without them confusion is bound to ensue around which pot a deity belongs. Gods and Goddesses must be present in the form of a *kalas* to witness the joining of the old man or woman to their ranks. Describing the Janku in its entirety goes far beyond the scope of this paper, and here I intend to form only the beginning of an understanding of the *kalas*.

The mud floor is very cold on the second story of Kaji Narsingh Prajapati's home. I am talking with him about his late father's Bura Janku ceremony and the role of *kalases* therein. We examine particularly one of the *naga kalases* (See Fig. 11) used as a bathing vessel, and when our interview concludes he offers me said *kalas* as a gift. I am immediately caught off guard and vehemently decline. To me, it seemed that this small clay object had a presence and a very rich history, which I had just spent the past few hours learning about. I felt undeserving. I understood this *kalas* to be a kind of "biographical object," a term coined by Violette Morin in her essay "L'objet Biographique" (1969). "Biographical objects" are witnesses to a person(s)'s life and are rooted to a place and time. One distributes oneself, one's identity, amongst the things around her. One collects a life by collecting objects that reflect that life and thus come to be termed "biographical." This is both a public and private affair in that one is demonstrating her identity not only to herself but also to those around her. How does an object become "biographical"? How did the *naga kalas* come to embody a life in such a way that I felt unworthy of possessing it? How was it made? Who was its maker or makers? Who were its users? As I begin to ask these questions of the *kalas*, I engage with an archeological method of inquiry known as *chaîne opératoire*. *Chaîne opératoire*, originally put forward by André Leroi-Gourhan, aims to track the processes by which objects are made, received, and eventually done away with. *Chaîne opératoire* does more than map the life-histories of these objects; it also reveals the power dynamics and socio-political interactions inherent in their becomings, as is demonstrated in Marcia-Anne Dobres' essay "Technologies Links and *Chaines*: The Processual Unfolding of Technique and Technician" (1999). This method shows how matter is transformed into a

² This chapter is informed by a series of interviews dating between 11/6/13 – 11/22/13 with the following individuals: Krishna Bahadeur Prajapati, Kaji Narsingh Prajapati, Ratna Shova Chitrakar, Santa Bahadeur Prajapati, Premrak Bajracharya, Sanu Ma Khabaja Prajapati, Jagat Bahadeur Prajapati, Santa Kumar Prajapati, Basanti Prajapati, Laxmi Kumar Prajapati.

³ The exact number of years required between different *Jankus* is highly debated. Often the *Janku* will occur when the family of the old man or woman is most financially stable rather than the exact astrological date.

functioning and culturally meaningful object, which is a project particularly pertinent to the use of ceramics in consecration rites.

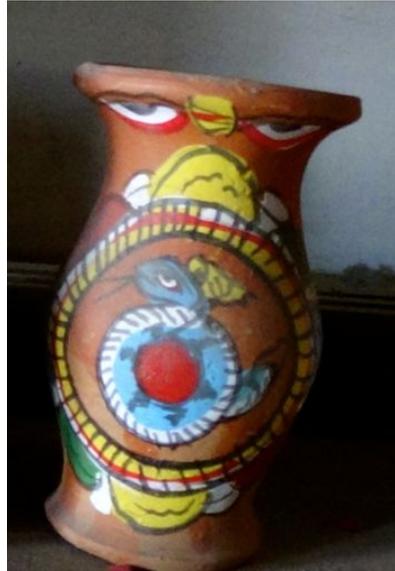


Figure 11: Naga Kalas

Objects, specifically “biographical” art objects, such as the *kalas*, are not passive in these social interactions and transformations but rather act as quasi-independent agents. These objects mediate agency between different social parties. This is a theory developed by Alfred Gell in his controversial work *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, which urges its readers to examine the social relations surrounding art objects rather than their aesthetic qualities. Gell defines agency as the following: “attributable to persons (and things...) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences...events caused by acts of mind or will or intention...An agent is the source, the origin, of causal events, independently of the state of the physical universe” (Gell 1998: 16). These objects act as extensions the agency of their owner/user/maker, and this agency necessitates a recipient party; however, the roles of recipient and primary agent are constantly swapping. Thus, the *kalas* is not only “biographical” in that it represents something about its owner, but it is additionally a marker of his or her agency or capability. Objects such as the *kalas* are continuously being “made” throughout their lives and thus have had a number of makers and owners who scar the pot with marks of social exchange that were inherent in its makings. The *naga kalas* that I was offered is the “biographical object” of Kaji Narsingh Prajapati’s late father, but the pot also has a biography of its own, independent of Mr. Prajapati. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Arjun Appadurai argues that by tracing the paths of objects as they move through different hands and through different homes, one can shed light on the broader contexts of their creation:

It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculation that enliven things. Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. (1986: 5)

In this chapter, I heed Appadurai, Gell, and Dobres and begin to analyze the trajectories of three specific *kalases* used in the Bura Janku rite.

The alimdyo *kalas* undergoes the most complex series of becomings of all the *kalases* used in the Bura Janku. The vessel takes the form of a Stupa (See Fig.12) and is imbued with the presence of the five goddesses associated with the Buddha: *Vajradhātviśvarī*, *Sattvavajrī*, *Ratnavajrī*, *Dharmavajrī* and *Karmavajrī*. It is essential that this *kalas* be made the day of the ceremony, and the potter who is chosen to make the alimdyo must be completely pure. This means that he should not have any kind of blemish on the body such as tattoos, scars, missing fingers, etc. In addition he cannot be blind or deaf or have any mental illness. The potter must not eat and must bathe before making this *kalas*. The state of the body and mind of the potter will have direct transference unto the sacred vessel. If he is not adequately pure, the Janku will be doomed to bad luck. Some potters who had made this *kalas* said they never charged the family for their work, for, they explained, it was not good to ask for money for things of God. That said, they would demand a payment for the making of all other *kalases* necessary for the ceremony. Once the potter has gone and made an offering to his patron god ViswaKarman, the family of the old man or woman receiving the rite come to the potter while he is on the wheel. First, the family and the potter worship the ball of clay that is to become the alimdyo *kalas*. Then the potter centers the clay and creates a hole in the middle. At this point, the potter stops the wheel and the group conducts a puja inside the hole. This puja consists of rice, flower, and a splash of egg yoke. The potter starts the wheel again and forms the *kalas*, closing it at the rim. The alimdyo *kalas* will never be fired or painted, and at the end of the Janku must be “taken home,” or, in other words, left inside a Buddhist temple.



Figure 12: Making of Alimdyo Kalas

In this instance, the alimdyo *kalas* is a secondary agent of the potter and proof of his purity. The potter’s ability to successfully make the *kalas* demonstrates both his skill as a craftsman as well as his relative “pureness” within the community of potters. Because the family worships the

kalas when it is still a ball of clay and conducts puja before the Brahmin priest has officially consecrated it, it seems that the alimdyo *kalas* begins to the process of transformation while still on the wheel. Though it may be a stretch to suggest that the potter acts as a kind of priest while forming the *kalas*, I do think that in this moment the potter is significantly responsible for metamorphosing of the clay into a *kalas*. This is one of the first stages of the alimdyo *kalas*'s becoming, in which the potter is the primary maker. The next stage will be during the ceremony when the *kalas* fully realizes its divine transformation. While the alimdyo *kalas* is "made" by both the potter and the priest, it is never really possessed by either, and nor does the old man or woman receiving Janku possess it. This particular pot eludes possession in that it is the property of the five goddesses. While it can be used for witnessing the transformation of the old man or woman into a God, it can never be kept and must be returned to its rightful place. Thus, the life of the alimdyo *kalas* post-Janku is perhaps less interesting to us in regard to agency than a *kalas*, which is kept after the ceremony and therefore possessed. For example, the *Biz Kalas* is kept after the ceremony, and I will pursue this trajectory after I first give a brief overview of the Bura Janku itself.

After the family has returned home from their puja at the potter's place, it is time to begin the ritual bathing. The aforementioned *naga kalases* are filled with water, which is then poured over the old man or woman by cousins, siblings, nieces, and nephews.⁴ The next step is undergone only by males receiving the consecration rite and constitutes one of the few differences between Jankus for men and women. The man's head is shaven by his oldest son first with a golden razor and then with a silver one. The matriarch catches the fallen hair in a piece of cloth, which is then taken to the river. While this is happening, the Brahmin priest prepares the *kalases* and the brick mandala within the home. Once the old man or woman is bathed, the family enters the home to begin worshipping around the mandala. The old man or woman is seated next to the priest before the mandala. The eldest son or nephew sits in front and to the left of the mandala (See diagram Fig. 13). While the priest transforms the *kalases* into deities, which is done through Tantric means, he simultaneously directs the eldest son or nephew on how to perform the specific puja for each *kalas*. Most of these vessels are topped by small clay bowls, in which the son places one-nut, one coin, and rice grains. The old man or woman stays seated, performing similar pujas on his or her smaller mandala and *kalases*. Each *kalas* must be individually transformed, and the consecration of all vessels takes about three hours. After these transformations are complete, the family of the old man or woman come and performs puja on him or her, thus enacting their own metamorphoses, to which the *kalases* bear witness. Now that the individual is amongst the Gods, he or she is no longer required to worship or perform pujas to other deities. This new status also necessitates the adherence to a plethora of new rules, for example: no lying, no stealing, no killing animals, no malicious thoughts, no unkindness towards women, among others. After the consecration, the family leaves the home carrying the now godly man or woman in a decorated chariot around the neighborhood. This tour consists of visiting all nearby temples and ends back at the home where a large feast is held and attended by all neighboring peoples.

⁴ There are some instances where the potter is also reported as participating in this ritual bathing. The potter is then given the *naga kalas* as a kind of payment for his work.

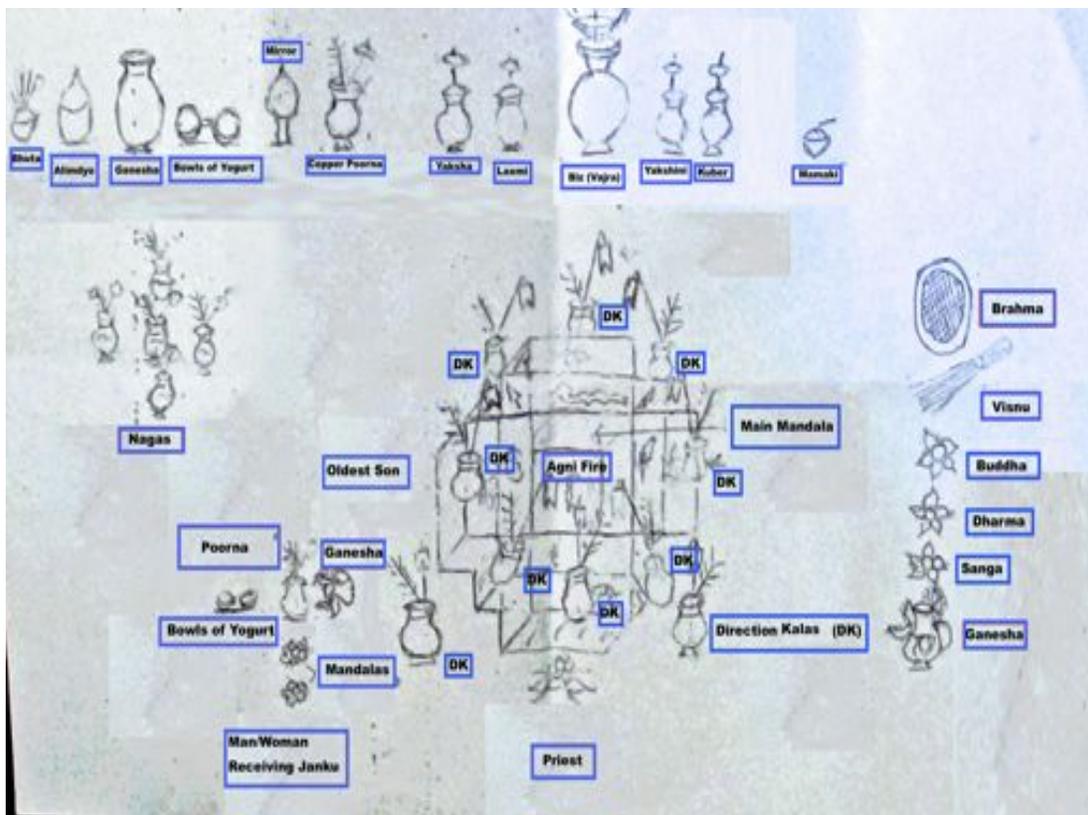


Figure 13: Bura Janku Map (Sketch by Premrak Bajracharya)

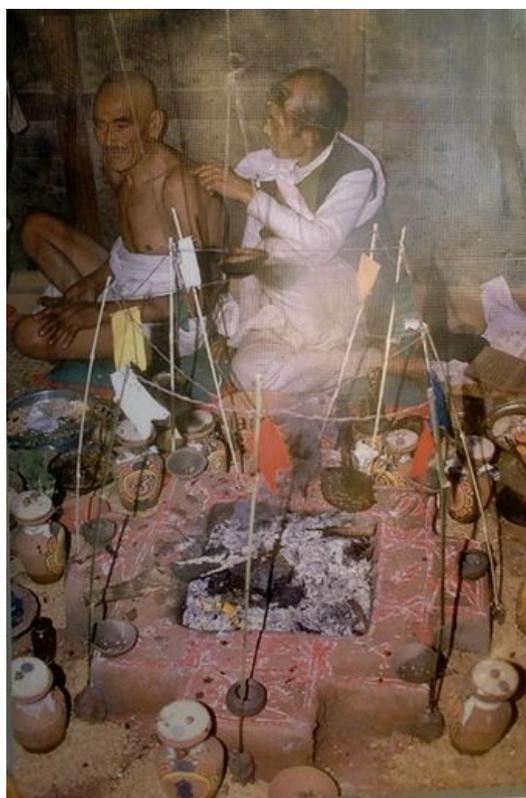


Figure 14: Bura Janku Mandala (Courtesy of Judith Chase)

The divine status of the *kalas* post-Janku is unclear. Most of these *kalases* will be brought to their respective associated shrines and temples and some will be given to those who aided the consecration. For example, the Brahmin priest is entrusted with the Laxmi *kalas*, and those who participated in the ritual bathing are awarded a *naga kalas*. These *kalases* should not be used again and should either be hung from a window or kept in the shrine room. Out of all of the people with whom I spoke, the Brahmin priest was the only one who admitted to re-using the *kalas* for rather mundane purposes. I was unable to acquire a clear explanation as to why one hangs a *kalas* from the window, but some suggest it is so that the home is protected from evil spirits and bad luck. However, others asserted it was simply to save space inside of the house. While there is disagreement over whether or not the *kalas* is still a full manifestation of a god post-Janku, most agree that at the very least there remains a kind of residue of the divine power with which it was once imbued. Everyone I spoke to concurred that once the *kalas* is broken all of its previous godliness disappears, and its remains can simply be thrown out. In this instance the *kalas* is a secondary agent to whichever God or Goddess it embodies. It conveys its powers of protection and good luck onto its user and their home. But on another level, the *kalas* is a secondary agent to the user him or herself. The user employs the *kalas* as a protector, and its power is intrinsic upon the user placing it in their shrine room or hanging it from a window. Here we see the curious dependence of divine agency on that of the human, which is apparent in the consecration of objects and employment thereof, a topic elaborated upon in Bruce Owens' essay "Human agency and divine power: transforming images and recreating gods among the Newar" (1995). Owens claims that this interdependency is stereotypical of South Asian religions and can shed light on the complex relationships between humans and Gods. He too contends that this relationship is manifested in objects such as the *kalas*. As I argued earlier, these objects are a kind of fossil, which chart the intricate networks of agency and power on the planes of both the human and divine.

Perhaps the most interesting *kalas*, in regards to agency, is the *Biz kalas*. The vessel is unique to the Bura Janku rite and is the embodiment of the Vajra, or lightning bolt. This *kalas* is painted and larger than the others (see Fig. 14). The *Biz kalas* is kept by the old man or woman and acts as a marker of his or her seniority and divine status in the community, as does the piercing of the ears. This is a very powerful object to be the keeper of in that it denotes one's godliness and all of the privileges therein. One such privilege is that women who have been widowed are again permitted to wear gold bracelets, red saris, and red tikas since the death of their husband (Coon 2010). Post-Janku these senior men and women must be invited to all local feasts, at which they are always served first. Despite all of these privileges and their divine status, persons who have received Janku are not exempt from the limits of their caste-position.



Figure 15: Biz Kalas

As the *Biz Kalas* hangs from the window of a living god or goddesses' home, it *does* a number of things. First, it exemplifies the craftsmanship of the potter and the painter, and their ability to make successful ritual objects, thus fulfilling their caste professions. Second, it marks the Brahmin Priest's religious authority and consequential capacity to transform matter into the divine. Thirdly, the *kalas* evidences that its associated family has hosted a large feast for the community and that their hospitality must be reciprocated. Many of my informants did not necessarily want to have a large ceremony but felt it was obligatory in order to requite all of the Jankus they had attended. In this instance, the *Biz kalas* is an invoice to the neighborhood of the debt they owe the family to which the *kalas* belongs. Lastly, the *kalas* embodies not only the old man or woman's newfound prestige as a deity and the respect and honor they are consequently due but also signifies the limits of caste still inherent in his or her existence, which even a godly status could not revoke. Also, it acts as a reminder to both them and the community that they must adhere to the extensive rules of living gods and goddesses previously discussed. Thus, the *Biz kalas* is an agent working both for and against the man or woman receiving the Janku. In that it is a simultaneous extension of *their* agency unto the community as well as an extension of the agency of the Newar caste-system and the culturally defined expectations of elders at large. Here again, we see how one object has the capacity to incarnate a myriad of agencies of various makers and users and the differentiated levels of power therein. The *kalas* is thus "biographical" in that bears witness to and stands as a testament of the biographies of the humans around it.

This logic follows that of contagious magic in the rationale that things that come into contact stay in contact. That is to say that even as the *Biz kalas* hangs from the window of the consecrated man or woman's home and is in his or her possession, it still *acts* on behalf of a multitude of other agents who were participant in its becoming, and this gives the *kalas* a kind of vitality, a vibrancy if you will independent of its owner. It is this very vibration that I believe I felt that day on Kaji Narsingh Prajapati cold mud floor, as I held the *naga kalas*. In this small clay pot I saw the layers of the technical processes that had brought it there, and this gave the *kalas* a meaningful presence. In his essay "The technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology" (1992), Gell argues by using the example of the Kula canoe-board that technical processes are what give an art object weight within the social realm:

...the technical activity which goes into the production of a canoe-board is not only the source of its prestige as an object, but also the source of its efficacy in the domain of social relations; that is to say, there is a fundamental scheme transfer, applicable, I suggest, in all domains of art production, between technical processes involved in the creation of a work of art and the production of social relations via art. (Gell; 56)

In the case of the *kalas*, I consider the potter, the painter, and the priest as all conducting a "technical activity" which contributes to the creation of the *kalas*. I would even argue that the placing of the *kalas* outside of the window is a kind of technical process. The numerous processes, or imagined processes, that go into making a *kalas* are what imbue it with vibrancy and power.

How would this vibrancy be altered if machines instead of craftsmen conducted the technical processes? Would the *naga kalas* emit the same energy were it placed in a museum rather than in the home of its' late owner? What happens to the "biographical object" when it is extracted from its "biographical" context? Is the pot perhaps especially "biographical" in the

case of Thimi considering the identity politics around the Prajapati caste? In the following chapter I explore these questions in relation to the current devaluation and disappearance of craftsmen and craft, specifically potters and pots, in the Kathmandu Valley.

Conclusion: Potential Futures

Responses to the dying tradition of pottery in the Kathmandu Valley are conflicting and diverse. There those who try to freeze and capture the “primitive” craft inside glass cases, a few who do their best to innovate it, and others who could not care less about its extinction. In this concluding chapter I aim to flesh out these various responses, and explore the implications therein for the future of ceramics in the Kathmandu Valley.

An object’s value, especially one which is handcrafted and shows ripples of an age-gone by, exponentially increases the moment it is classified as “vanishing.” There is a popular myth that when an artifact is no longer being made it simply disappears. However, the process of “disappearance” is much more complicated than that. The prominent Japanese philosopher Yanagi Soetsu is famed for his high valorization of the craftsman and marks his death as correspondent to the moral degradation of society at large. Here, we see an argument for the preservation of potters and their technologies as an ethical pursuit, done on behalf of humanity. From this, however, emerges one of the stickiest questions in regards to preservation: namely, preservation for whom and to what/whose benefit? In an interview with Ambica Shrestha, the President of Dwarikas Hotel Kathmandu (an establishment that showcases traditional Newari craftsmanship), she expounded the importance of cultural preservation: “Your heritage is your root from where you came, if you leave your root you are lost. As we go further and further in the global world we need to remember where we come from” (Interview 11/18/13). While Shrestha later emphasized that Newari culture stay out of museums and remain a “living tradition,” I do not think this project is inextricable from that of preservation. However well intended, such enterprises are never innocent but almost always tied to national politics and imagined histories (Clifford, 1998). One sees this in the entanglement of heritage and preservation industries with those of tourism, which is fine as long as the local persons making cultural and ethical compromises on the behalf of entertaining “authenticity” are somehow reimbursed. Why should a Bhaktapur potter labor over the massive and troublesome “authentic” wheel solely for the sake of a tourist’s camera when he is receiving very little income compared to those working with more modern technologies? But perhaps this reimbursement does not necessarily have to come from the tourists’ end. As Sara Shneiderman (2011) has noted, governments have a tendency to reward “authenticity.” So, is there a possibility that the Nepali government will make a gesture which would likely result in a revitalization of the craft and once again give their potters land to work and harvest clay? Of this I’m not sure. However, I would not be surprised to see an increase in potters’ villages transformed into tourist destinations as the numbers of these craftsman and their crafts continue to dwindle.

The promotion of ceramics in Kathmandu Valley is currently being undertaken by both the pottery school in the SOS Children’s Village (Sanothimi) and the Nepal Ceramics Co-operative Society Ltd (NCCS). The SOS Children’s Village pottery school (est. 1972) offers classes that teach both traditional and contemporary ceramics to local high-school students and the resident orphans. Despite the shrinking numbers of local potters, this program’s enrollment turnout is at an all time high. However, almost 90% of this population is Prajapati and only 20%

female. The Kathmandu Valley's traditional pottery is closely bound with and perhaps inextricable from the Newar caste-system and gendered labor division. Prajapati is a sub-caste of the middle-tiered Jyapu stratum. The Jyapu are those who work with the earth, such as craftsmen and farmers. Being a potter is seemingly inseparable from being Prajapati in the belief-systems of many local peoples. This became strikingly clear in an interview with Thimi elder Jagat Bahadeur Prajapati (11/12/13): "What is a Prajapati if he is not a potter?" he questioned passionately. "Our job is to work with clay. If not that then who are we? Today young Prajapati do not love clay, which is the thing that must be loved!" Here we see a complex identity politics around what it means and who is allowed to be a potter. According to Jagat, pots are a kind of "biographical" emblem for the Prajapati, and their disappearance is a major loss in this collective identity. Although this is changing, it seems the notion of "traditional Thimi pottery" to a large extent implies the exclusion of non-Prajapati and women from working on the wheel. Dil Bahadeur Prajapati (Interview on 11/17/13), the head instructor of the pottery school, noted that while more women are attending his classes they still refuse to throw large pots and prefer to trim and decorate. A potter is paid significantly more in a factory job for throwing than for trimming pots, and thus this reluctance on the part of women has financial consequences. The NCCS faced similar problems in regards to female involvement in ceramics. They have found that women who start working on the wheel are likely to stop once married. This is because the husband and his family do not usually encourage such pursuits, especially if they are not working potters. The continued lack of female participation in wheel throwing is extremely unfortunate because, as Ambica Shrestha asserted in our interview, in these women lays the potential for the revalorization of the craft. Shrestha is confident that women and non-Prajapatis will become more involved in pottery, but that this requires a major conceptual shift, which will take time. Sadly, in the case of Thimi there is little time left.

The youngest working potter that I encountered in Thimi is 35 years old. His children have no interest in the profession of pottery and have never even touched clay. This is typical of the Thimi youth today. Traditional pottery forms and histories are only known by the elders in the community, and this knowledge will not be obtainable for much longer. Pottery in the Kathmandu Valley, needless to say, is on its last leg. It will be interesting to see how the disappearance, preservation, and innovation of pots and potters negotiate and challenge one another in the pivotal coming decades.

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 Jim Danisch: 9/22/13, 9/26/13
 Kaji Narsingh Prajapati: 11/12/13
 Kansa Prajapati: 11/6/13
 Krishna Bahadeur Prajapati: 11/16/13
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Pankha Bahadeur Prajapati: 11/10/13
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 Poorna Krishna Chitrakar: 11/15/13
 Ratna Shova Chitrakar: 11/15/13
 Santa Bahadeur Prajapati: 11/3/13 – 11/25/13
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 Sanu Ma Khabaja Prajapati: 11/20/13
 Tej Maya Prajapati: 11/5/13
 Twilla Maya Prajapati: 11/6/13

Suggestions For Further Research

I would recommend that those interested in ceramics in the Kathmandu Valley conduct further research into the nuances of the Prajapati's position within the Newar caste-systems, which I was unable to pursue at length. There is also much investigation to be done on the consecrations performed on pots in rituals. I urge anyone interested to collect accounts of potters lives and traditional pottery forms while the knowledge and memories are still available.



Figure 16: Discussing the *kalas* with Basanti Prajapati, Santa Bahadeur Prajapati, and Sanu Ma Khabaja Prajapati