

SPACE AND IMAGE

Christopher Pinney

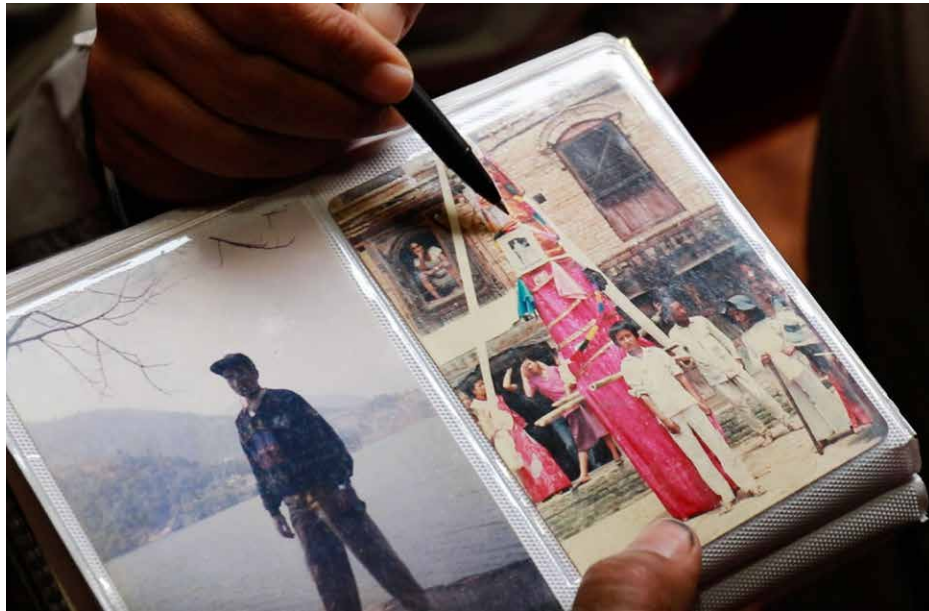
Bhaktapur endlessly made me think of Florence, the difference being that the Italian city has been museum-ified, whereas Bhaktapur's civic and ritual dramaturgy remains vital and ever-evolving. A city of exceptional and often dramatic spaces it is also encrusted with images: exquisite brass figures in wayside shrines, woodblock prints celebrating *Naga Panchmi*, mugshot photos of successful exam candidates, and framed photographs of the deceased paraded through the streets on Gai Jatra.

During the first few days of my first stay I visited a barber for a shave and expressed my surprise that there were no other customers. The barber explained that it was the month of Shraavan during which most customers grew beards. This was my first prosaic introduction to the heterogeneity of Bhaktapur time. The sacred erupts spatially to an even greater degree, not only in



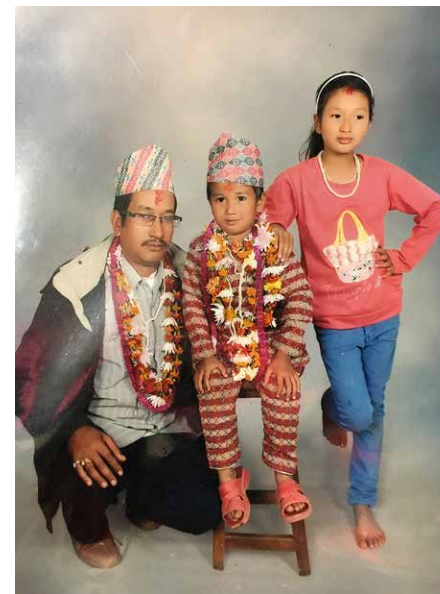
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vast temples surrounding the two main squares, but in corner shrines and unobtrusive places of ritual significance, and the performative rituals of the theatre state.

Photography reveals the multiple layers of Bhaktapur life, from family albums that serve as a kind of *BildungsFoto*, a narration of the formation of character via the camera, to the enthusiastic self-photography of Newari rituals such as the *ihī* ceremony, to elaborate montages produced on phone apps that imagine an ordered cosmos, to displays by photo studios celebrating their success in filing EDV applications for US visas. The Bhaktapur sense of placed-ness, and the extraordinary commitment of its citizens to its archaic spaces and living times needs to be understood in this context of precarity: of earthquakes and an economy that forces many to work overseas.



The past endures in quiet locations as well as extravagant spaces. Throughout Nepal it is very common to encounter small tie racks in photo studios on which are hooked several examples of a type of hat known as a *Dhaka topi*, so-called because the batik-like pattern of the hat's material previously originated in Dhaka in what is now

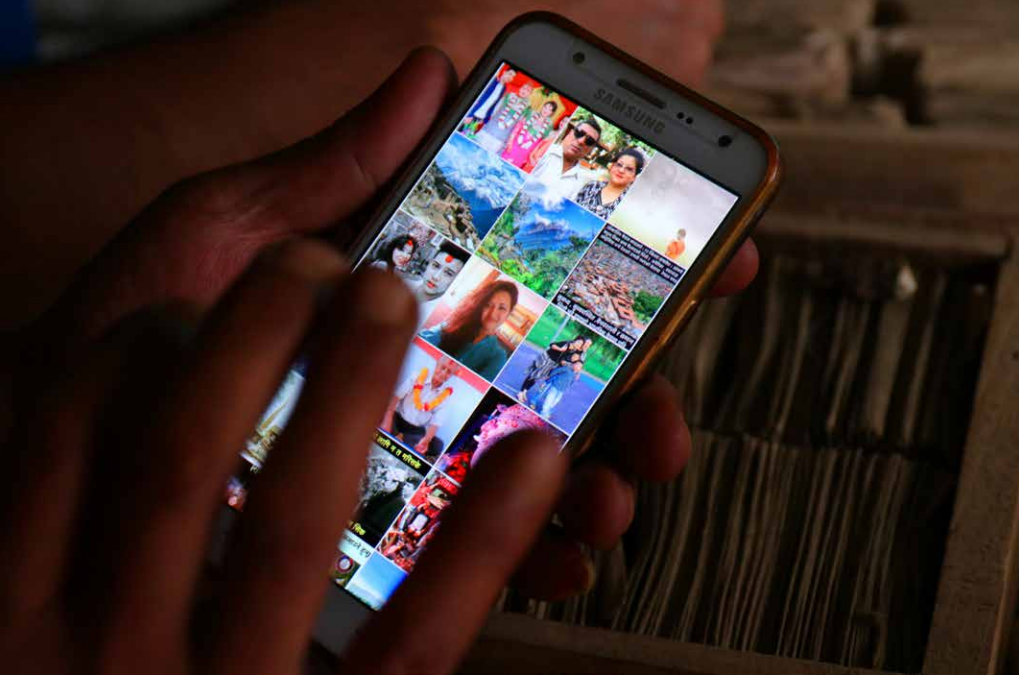




Bangladesh. New Golden Photo Service in Bhaktapur provides a good example. A tiny space situated on what was previously the main Kathmandu-Lhasa trade route which ran through the city (and now forms a meandering commercial artery), its street frontage is little more than a doorway wide and shows a glimpse of a small museum of cameras from the early days of the studio in the 1970s above which is an extensive display of defunct early compact digital cameras which clients brought in for repair but then abandoned.

Squeezing your way past the proprietor Gajendra's work desk and a framed image of the Nepali Royal Family taken before the 2001 palace massacre, the studio space opens up on the right hand side into a small room with an elaborate hand-painted luxury villa set in manicured gardens. On an adjacent wall is a faded photographically-printed tropical beach scene in front of which stands a clutter of abandoned studio lights. Opposite this is a small rack from which hang three ties and two distinctly patterned Dhaka topics in contrasting colours, remnants of a compulsory sartorial regime (for National Identity Cards) that came to an end circa 2005.

A different kind of sartorial politics



is evident at many of the city's other studios. Here the Newar revival is clearly evident. Manifest in the numerous images of young females attired in *haku patasi*, black and red saris, the movement needs to be understood not only against the frame of the UNESCO museumification of Bhaktapur but against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive ethnicization of post-civil war Nepal as a whole. In Dattatri Studio, newly rebuilt after the 2015 earthquake many of the sample prints advertising the studio's services depict strikingly attired Newar models, and framed images attached to the exterior show models posed in *haku patasi* lounging within opulent modern interiors. This is a neo-traditionalism that demands to be understood as a feature of the present day. In a similar way the extravagant and impressive *ihi* ceremony I witnessed took place under the fluttering penants of the North Korea aligned Workers and Peasants (Mazdoor Kisan or NeMaKiPa) Party which

controls Bhaktapur's municipal authority.¹

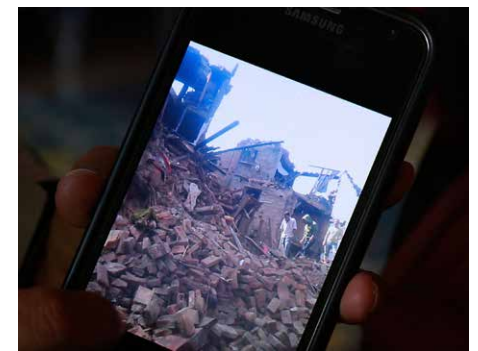
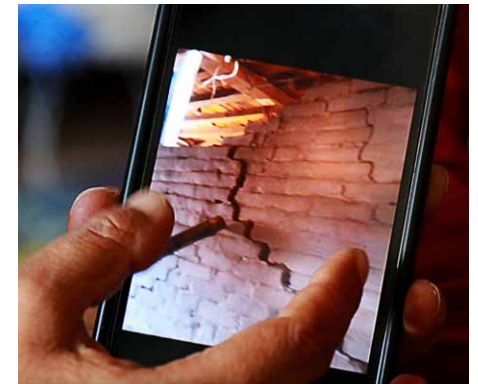
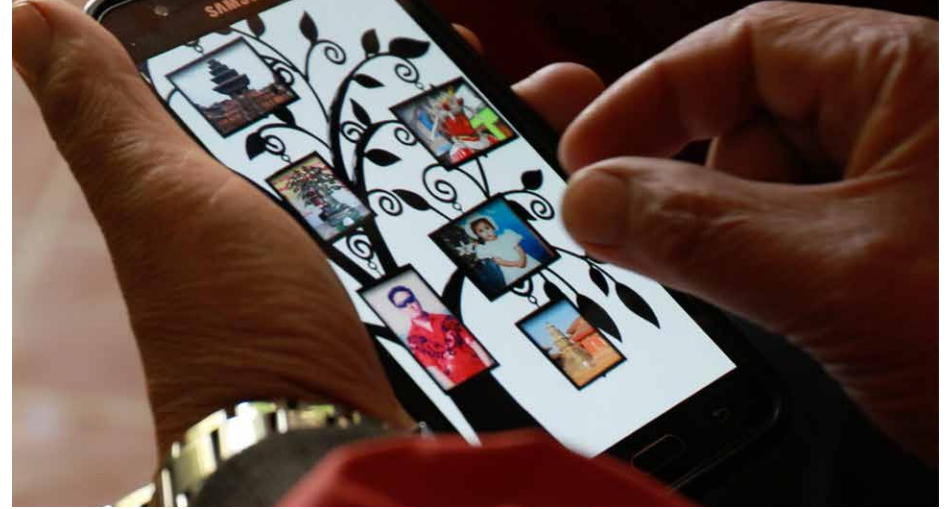
A similar complexity underlies the phone imagery of a local shopkeeper who had previously worked in Qatar. He shared many images recording the destruction caused by the 2015 earthquake which had badly damaged his shop when the upper structure from a temple collapsed onto its roof. Internal walls in his family home were badly fractured and he and his family relocated to emergency UN-funded housing where they lived for a year before renting some rooms nearby. The damage to his shop and the much worse destruction inflicted on neighbouring properties was mournfully recorded on his phone. Many images documented the complete collapse of properties, some show heaps of rubble on top of which anxious human figures perch.

This interlocutor was an eager user of several Android photo-editing and montage apps including MSQRD, PIP Camera, Sweet Selfie, Family Photo Frame, and Photo Keypad. He started the series of which what I came to think of the 'tree of life' image was a



¹ <https://kathmandupost.com/bhaktapur/2020/01/17/in-this-nepali-city-the-north-korean-dream-is-alive-and-thriving>







part in Qatar where he worked in construction. The tree template expressed a yearning for place and family: a statue depicts the Buddha underneath Gaya's Bodhi Tree and is surrounded by key religious structures in Bhaktapur, including the Nyatapola Pagoda, the Bhairavnath Temple and two smaller temples in the city's Durbar Square. These images of his home town are interspersed with images of his wife and daughter.

The tree of life served as a homage to Bhaktapur through the prism of migration. Individual constituent images had complex histories. He did not see his daughter until he was able to briefly return to Nepal by which time she was two years of age. His wife had sent the photographs of herself and their daughter (taken in the New Golden Photo Studio in the main street in Bhaktapur) with another Bhaktapur contact who had just been given a visa for Qatar. She has gotten herself photographed wearing a Newari black and red *haku patasi* sari while the daughter was bedecked in a white dress and head covering. The photos were despatched together with a gift of *sukuti* (dried buffalo meat). Finally, he received the envelope containing photographs of his wife and

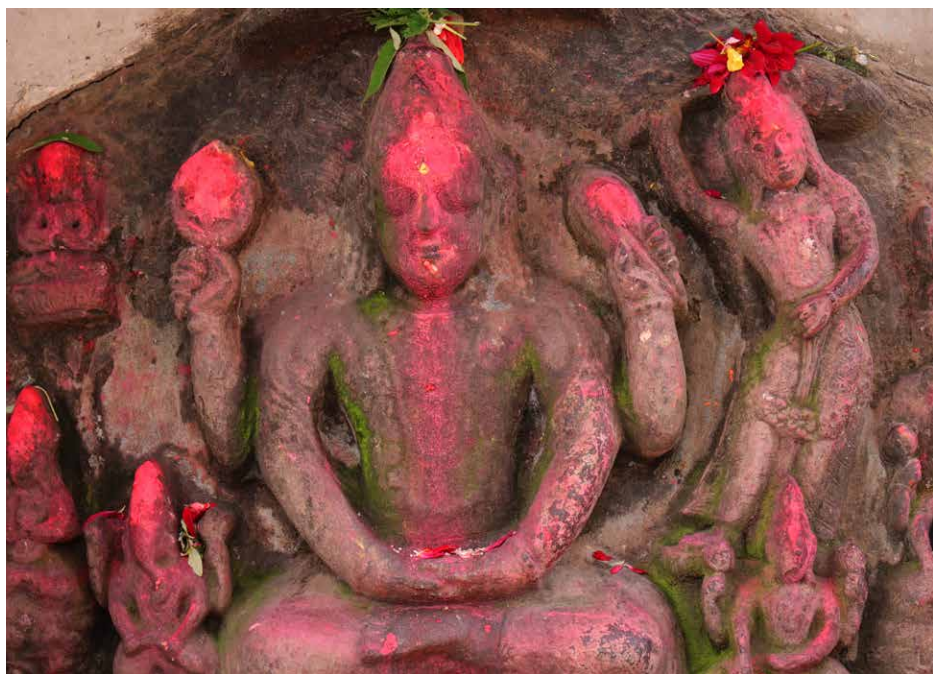


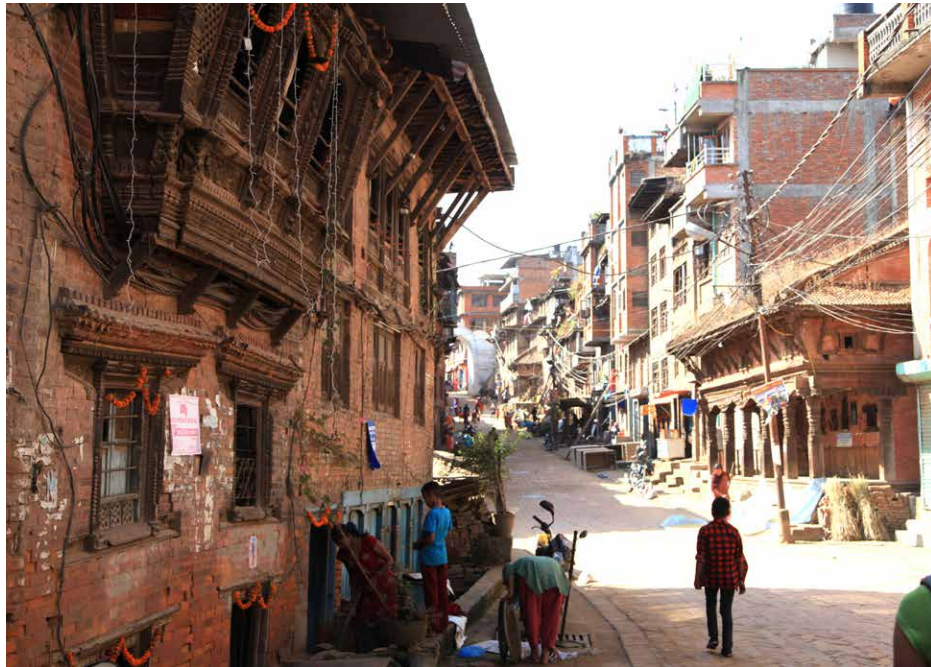
daughter and vividly recalls the emotion on seeing the first image of his daughter.

Post-earthquake, this interlocutor was living in a rented set of rooms, having previously spent ten months in emergency ten by ten foot corrugated steel housing. During my conversations with him it became apparent that the numerous images hanging in his rented quarters were not his own but were, rather, those of his landlord. One is tempted to say that his 'own' images resided in his phone, but it would make more sense to think of a double-dispossession for the architecture of his phone and its apps, manifest in many other images, reflected not his own consciousness but that of a global digital industry for whom the ideal interior design was modelled on upscale north American hotels. It was difficult to think of an aesthetic indeed that was more unlike that of Bhaktapur's everyday material world.

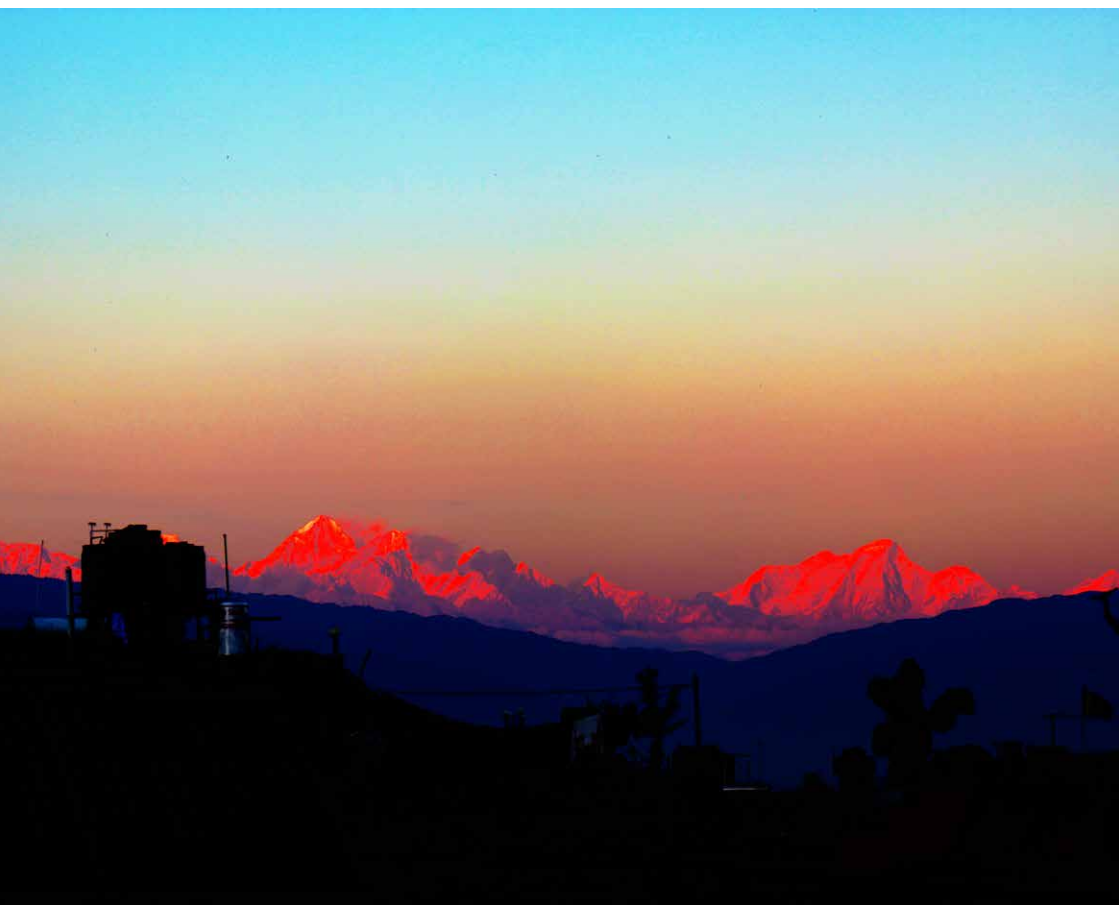
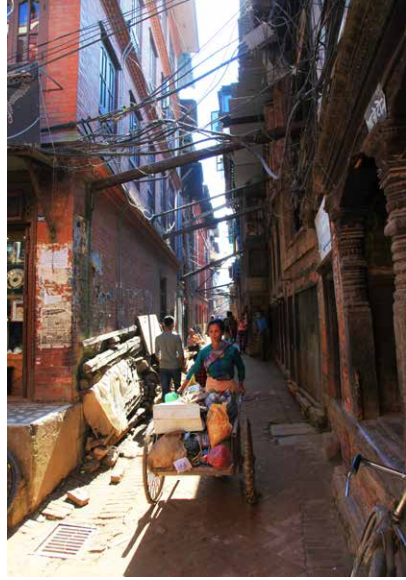
A more representative image of Bhaktapur domestic space could be found in a remarkable photograph documenting the damage wreaked by Bhoka Don. He is a magnificent four year old male goat who has the freedom

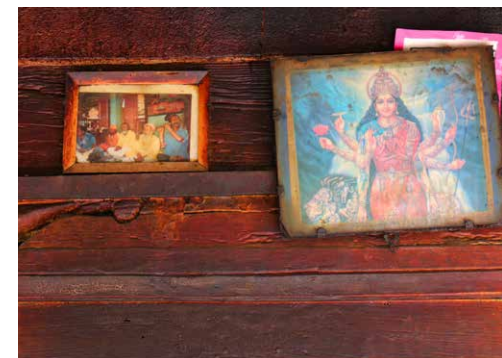
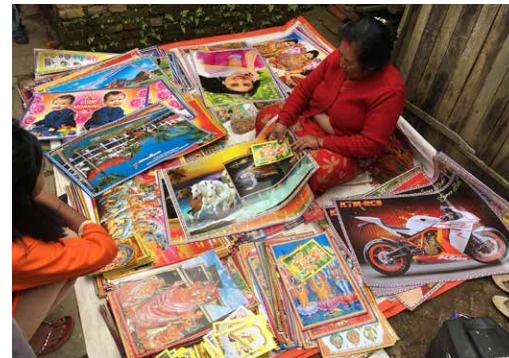
of Bhaktapur. He has the freedom to roam because he refused to be sacrificed during the festival of Dashain. Animals need to give a sign (*sanket*) that they willingly acquiesce to their own sacrifice and Bhoka Don persistently declined to offer this sign. Consequently, he was set free and allowed to rule his own kingdom, coupling with female goats and head-butting humans of his choice. I was forced to flee from him many times. In July 2017 a wonderful image circulated on WhatsApp and Facebook which documented the after effects of Bhoka Don gaining access to a house on the Changu-Narayan road on the outskirts of Bhaktapur.













An aerial photograph of a city, likely Kathmandu, Nepal, showing a dense cluster of buildings with traditional architecture. In the foreground, the dark silhouette of a temple spire or roof structure is visible against the lighter sky. The overall tone is muted and atmospheric.

Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between “representation” through everyday images and “representation” through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

The names of the researchers and the countries in which they researched are:

Naluwembe Binaisa (Nigeria)
Vindhya Buthpitiya (Sri Lanka)
Konstantinos Kalantzis (Greece)
Christopher Pinney (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)
Ileana L. Selejan (Nicaragua)
Sokphea Young (Cambodia)

The project is based in the Department of Anthropology at UCL and is funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant no. 695283.

More information on
<https://citizensofphotography.org>

Research in Nepal was made possible through the skill and expertise of Usha Titikshu.

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