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Gai Jatra Bhaktapur, Nepal

Christopher Pinney

The relationship of the photograph to the future is nowhere more visible or more paradoxically expressed than in the yearly Nepali festival of Gai Jatra, also known as Saparu.

Prior to the festival, which occurs on the August full-moon, I had been staying at Bhaktapur where locally-made festival merchandise had made its appearance several days previously. This included beautiful hand-coloured block printed images of cow heads, cow horns made from plaited rice stalks, and small flags (jhallar) featuring the sun and the moon.

In 2017 I taught a seminar on Visual Anthropology at the research institute Martin Chautari in Kathmandu early in the morning before then heading to Bhaktapur (about 30 minutes east along the valley) to observe the procession to the underworld of those who had died during the previous year.

The central part of Bhaktapur was thronged with spectators watching many dozens of gai, the "cow mothers" to whose

tails the deceased cling as they make their journey onwards to the Vaiturni River and the Dharma Sabha where their karmic balance sheet will be assessed. There is good reason to think that the dominance of photographs in the ritual is recent.¹ Earlier accounts suggest that most of the participating units in the ritual featured an actual cow, and/or a young boy decorated with horns. These rice stalk horns were in evidence in 2017 but were few and far between.

Some families gathered round four-wheeled handcarts which functioned as mobile shrines to the departed but most were focused on pyramidal structures made from stout bamboo and adorned with elaborate black and red Newari textiles (Gutschow terms these “cow scaffolds”). The handcarts often featured dried lotus leaves, sculptures of cows and food which was deposited near the deified stones that marked crossroads (chvasah).

Photographs of the deceased were displayed on the handcarts and also in the middle of the pyramidal structures which were topped with rice-stalk cow horns and a chamar or chauri made from yak’s tail, a small hand-painted picture of a cow, and a small ritually significant umbrella that “roofed” or housed the soul of the departed. A milky sweet was affixed to many of the photographic images

¹ Anderson (1971) makes no mention of photographs. In 1986 Gutschow observed thirteen “poster[s] depicting the deceased” (the implication is that these were photographic images) and in 2002 he observed forty-four (2017: ii. 290).

which were often also accompanied by chromolithographs of Hindu deities and mirrors. All these “cow scaffolds” are stabilized by long cloth cords that criss-cross each other and create the appearance of a singular effervescent structure which processed until late into the night.

Interspersed among this increasingly ecstatic mass were musicians including phalanxes of children playing flutes and dazzlingly attired in Newari costume. Also evident were figures dressed as Yama, Garuda, and comic archetypes such as a hukka-smoking farmer wearing a Bhadgaon topi (on the carnivalesque dimensions of Sapatu see Levy 1992).

Most striking was the atmosphere of celebration. There were some sad and weary faces but they were a minority. Most were jubilantly urging the dead on their journey to heaven. At the end of the festival the structures are disassembled. The horns and block print are immersed in the local river: the photographs are returned to domestic displays. But for one day they animate a forward-looking dramaturgy that points the faces of the dead firmly towards the future.

REFERENCES

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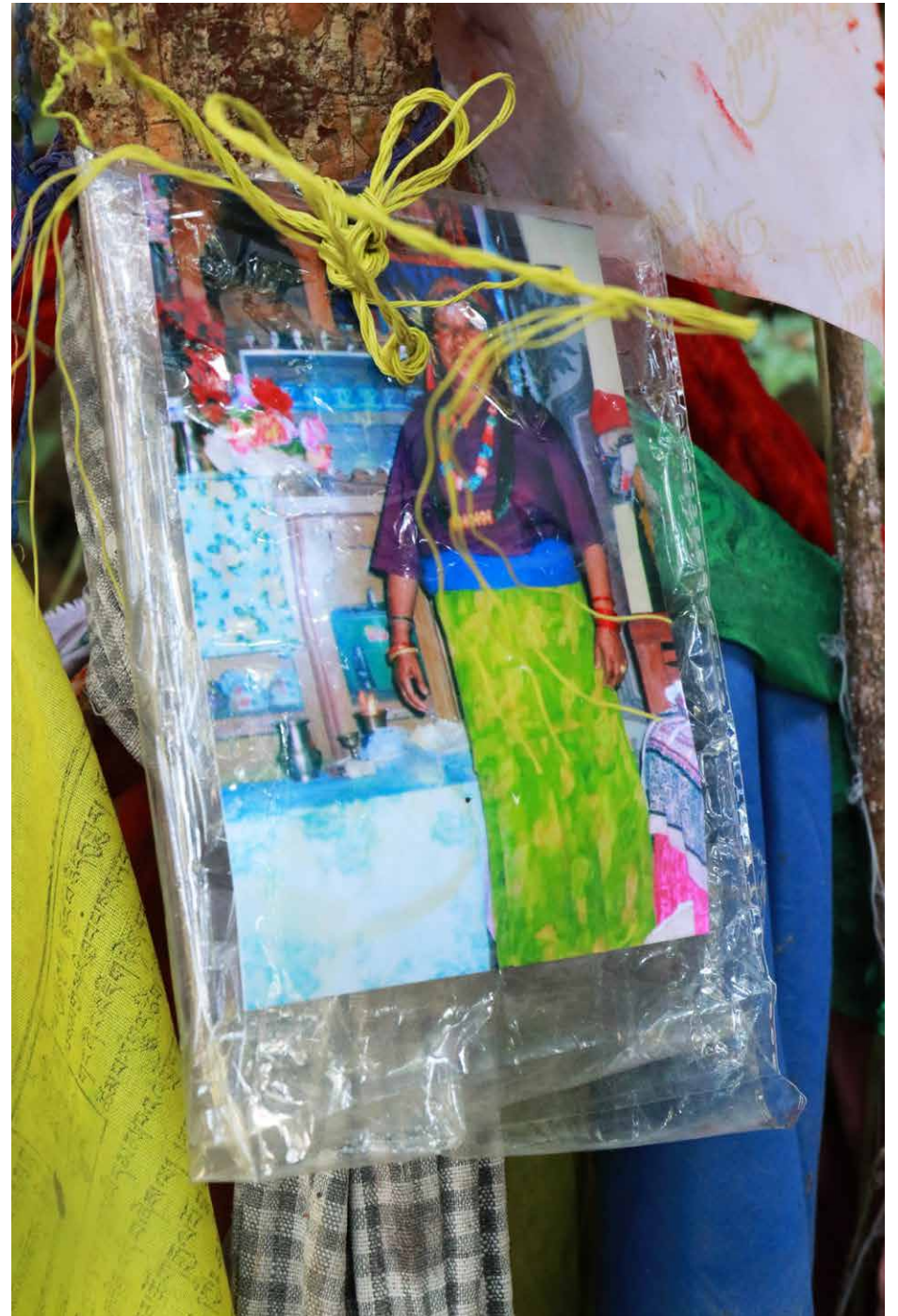




Photographs of the dead are also highly visible at the Buddhist pilgrimage site of Namobuddha, where images are left attached to trees in the forest between the stupa and the monastery. Some of the images have clearly been Photoshopped and laminated for specific use in this setting. Many are headshots printed against bold plain-coloured backdrops. Some are more elaborate: one image of a child is surrounded by red hearts. Some are framed, others are small prints enclosed in plastic wrapping, and many are simply passport size images that have been tucked into the corners of pre-existing frames, or tucked under the cloth straps used to suspend the multi-colour prayer flags that festoon the forest.

Their function in a system of 'distributed personhood' can be seen to be prefigured in a myth closely associated with this location. Namobuddha's ritual power stems from two events. The first was 6,000 years ago when Prince Mahasatwo discovered a

tigress and her five offspring who were starving. Realizing that their survival depended upon his compassionate sacrifice he started to cut pieces of his own flesh to feed the cubs. The scene is recreated at a nearby Rigsum Gonpo wayside shrine. The bones which were eventually left were then installed in the stupa at Namobuddha. The tiny settlement would gain its name several millennia later when the Buddha arrived and declared himself to be the reincarnation of Mahasatwo.





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>

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