

## The Transmission of All Powers: Sarvāmnāya Śākta Tantra and the Semiotics of Power in Nepāla-Maṇḍala

Jeffrey S. Lidke

Berry College

ON SEPTEMBER 20, 1997—the final day of Indra Jātra, the Festival of King Indra—the former king of Nepal, Śrī Pañc Mahārāja Birendra Śāh Deva, visited the home of the virgin Kumārī Ghār in Indra Chowk, the site of the old royal palace in Kathmandu. His purpose was to receive *prasāda*, or divine blessing, from Nepal’s living goddess, the virgin Kumārī. While a crowd of several thousand Nepalis and tourists waited outside the seventeenth-century Newar temple that houses the young virgin Kumārī, King Birendra was escorted into the inner chamber that serves as the goddess’s living quarters and site of worship. Although only the king’s closest aides and the Kumārī herself can verify exactly what happened at that point, there is one tangible barometer that is used to judge the success of such an encounter: the continuation of the king in his position as symbolic head of the nation. The textual and oral traditions of Nepalese Śākta Tantra claim that the king’s reappearance from the *sanctum sanctorum* of the living goddess indicates that he has been bestowed with the power (*śakti-pāta*) to continue his rule. Texts like the eighteenth-century *Kumārīpūjā-Paddhati*<sup>1</sup> maintain that if the Kumārī disfavors the king during this critical annual meeting, he will fall from power. Conversely, by favoring the king, the Kumārī empowers him to reign over the kingdom of Nepal for another year—a “transcendent” bestowal of governance inseparably linked with the social institutions and practices constructed by Nepal’s kings over the last millennium.

Arising out of a long tradition of virgin worship, the *Kumārīpūjā-Paddhati* and other esoteric texts proclaim that the Kumārī is actually the living embodiment of *śakti*, divine power. While to the uninformed the Kumārī may seem to be only a seven-year-old Nepalese girl, a tantric initiate—such as the king—sees in her an instantiation of that very power that is the source of all creation and whose ultimate seat resides in his own heart as his inner Self (*antarātman*) and inherent nature (*svabhāva*). From the perspective of Śākta Tantra, the king visits the Kumārī for a vision (*darśana*) of the goddess and direct contact with the supreme power that grants both worldly gain (*bhukti, artha*) and final emancipation (*mukti*). A blessing from her bestows both political legitimation—in that it publicly proclaims divine ratification

of the king's sovereignty—and spiritual legitimation. This mystico-political relationship between the king and the virgin goddess highlights an ancient and deeply imbedded tradition of religious ideology that informs the Nepalese sociopolitical complex and reveals the inseparable connection between divine and political power in Nepal. In this Hindu nation the powers of state derive directly from a goddess who, although transcendent in her essential nature, reveals herself most prominently in the flesh, bone, and—most importantly—clan fluids (*kulāmṛta*) of young virgin girls.

Understanding that power resides most potently in secrecy, Nepal's regal *tāntrika*-s have taken a cue from Abhinavagupta and have veiled their esoteric practices behind the façade of mainstream Hindu devotionism. Like his predecessors, Birendra Śāh Deva publicly proclaimed himself to be an incarnation (*avatāra*) of the god Viṣṇu. However, like the founder of the Śāh dynasty, Pṛthivī Nārāyan Śāh, he was an initiate of Śrī Vidyā Śākta Tantra. Although politically displaced by the upheavals and transformations that resulted from the People's Movement in the early 1990s, King Śrī Birendra Śāh Deva still stood at the center of an elaborate ideological and ritual complex—informed predominantly by Śākta Tantra—that linked the divine body to the king's body to the immediate social body, which has been constructed and maintained as the goddess's universal form (*Devī-viśvarūpa*). In this realm, densely coded tantric ritual is the catalyst that transforms civic space into a vibrant seat of power.

#### NEPALESE SARVĀMNĀYA ŚĀKTA TANTRA

The relationship between king and Kumārī catalyzes from the political center a complex matrix of mystico-political power rooted in a Nepalese form of Kaula Śākta Tantra called Sarvāmnāya. Sarvāmnāya Śākta *tāntrika*-s utilize multiple forms of Devī—particularly Bhuvaneśvarī, Dakṣiṇakālī, Kubjikā, Ugra Tāra, Guhyakālī, and Tripurasundarī—to construct a dyadic semiotics of power. Employed on a primary and esoteric level within this system, Devī, the goddess, signifies that singular consciousness-power (*cit-śakti*) that manifests creation through the flashing forth of her phonemic self (*mātrkātmaka*) into a vibrant circle of power, *śakti-cakra*. On a secondary and exoteric level, Devī functions as a sign of the politico-military power of Nepalese kings. This paper investigates the interplay between these two levels through a study of the correlation of Sarvāmnāya theology, ritual, and yogic practice to the variety of cultural productions in Nepal—including architecture, paintings, music, and public ritual—which function as signs of the king's right to abide at the center of Nepāla-Manḍala.

At the esoteric level the Nepalese Sarvāmnāya system represents itself as the culminating synthesis of all (*sarva*) tantric transmissions (*āmnāya*-s). By the twelfth century Śrī Vidyā had established itself at the heart of Nepal's

Sarvāmnāya system, which at this point was in its incipient stages. The term *āmnāya* encompasses a polysemantic field that lends itself to a diversity of translations, including “transmission,” “sacred tradition,” “sacred text,” “family or national custom,” “instruction,” and “family.”<sup>2</sup> The contemporary Nepalese Sarvāmnāya system represents itself as the culminating synthesis of all (*sarvā*) the transmissions (*āmnāya-s*) preserved by clans (*kula-s*) of practitioners united through the seminal wisdom of tantric adepts. In particular, the Sarvāmnāya system incorporates the six streams of Āgamic revelation, or six transmission schools (*ṣaḍ-āmnāya-s*): the eastern (Purvāmnāya), southern (Dakṣiṇāmnāya), western (Pāścimāmnāya), northern (Uttarāmnāya), lower (Adhāmnāya), and upper (Urdhvāmnāya) transmissions. In the esoteric interpretation of the Sarvāmnāya system, each of the six *āmnāya-s* is associated with a particular goddess, who in turn is correlated with one of the six *cakra-s*, or energy centers, in the subtle physiology. The Sarvāmnāya path involves sequential initiation, stage by stage, in each of the six transmission schools in order to awaken the *kuṇḍalinī-śakti*, the serpentine power at the base of the spine, and activate in turn each of the *cakra-s* along with the corresponding goddesses who are mistresses of the *cakra-s* (*cakreśvarī*). The final stage of the Sarvāmnāya path involves initiation into the upper transmission school (Urdhvāmnāya), which is associated with Tripurasundarī, the supreme goddess of the Śrī Vidyā *kula*. Through this final initiation the *ajñā-cakra*, situated between the eyebrows, is activated, and the *kuṇḍalinī-śakti* rises up to the *sahasrāra-cakra* at the crown of the head, culminating in a state of full empowerment in which the tantric practitioner (*sādhaka*) realizes his or her identity with Tripurasundarī, “the beautiful goddess of the three cities.” The foundation of this process of ascension is *yantra* practice. A *yantra* (lit., “instrument”) is an aniconic depiction of a respective goddess’s emanation as both light and sound. Through training in Sarvāmnāya *yantra* practice, which includes external worship, *mantra* installation, visualization, and meditation, the *yogin* transforms his own body into a conduit through which each of the multiple forms of the goddess is awakened and united in an encompassing totality of power, represented by the Śrī Cakra, the *yantra* of the highest and final transmission, Urdhvāmnāya.

At the exoteric level, this semiotics of internal mystical ascendance is transfigured into a semiotics of governmental power and sociocultural cohesion via the symbolism of the *maṇḍala*. A careful reading of Nepalese mythico-historical texts like the *Nepālāmāhātmya* suggests that a king’s capacity to rule is directly proportional to his attainment as a *sādhaka*, a tantric adept. It is for this reason that such texts describe the geopolitical landscape of Nepal as a divine territory, *maṇḍala*, with temples and *śākta-pīṭha-s* strategically constructed for the channeling of power through and beyond the king’s body into his extended body, the body politic. Tantric Nepalese kings, such as Pṛthivī Nārāyan Śāh (eighteenth century), thus imagined their dominion over the mesocosmic *maṇḍala* to be a direct reflec-

tion of their ability to harness the divine energies of Devī within the *maṇḍala* of their own bodies. Through a dyadic semiotics that linked internal spaces to public domains, the Devī-power cultivated through mystical practice could be inscribed into those sociocultural products—temples, paintings, and festivals—which functioned as public signs of the Devī’s power to maintain order within the kingdom.

### THE KING AND ŚĀKTA TANTRA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The identification of *maṇḍala*-s, and more specifically tantric *yantra*-s, with the sociopolitical territory of kings reflects important historical links between Śākta Tantra and Nepalese kingship. By at least the twelfth century (Malla period)—and probably as early as the eighth century (Licchavi period)—Nepal’s kings were becoming initiates of Hindu Tantra. For them the *maṇḍala* was both a template of their kingdom and a spiritual device for identifying themselves with the body of their chosen goddess. In this way, the *maṇḍala* has functioned dyadically as an instrument for obtaining both mundane and transcendent modes of power.

The dyadic employment of the *maṇḍala* has roots in the Veda where the term denotes a division or book of mantric *hymns* within the *Ṛg Veda*. As such, the term, even in its earliest sense, suggested a rich interplay between potent sound (*mantra*), the human vessel of that potency (*ṛṣi*), the deities (*deva*-s) invoked and equivocated with those sonic potencies, and the related worlds/territories (*bhuvana*) that were the spatial extensions thereof. As liturgies for ritual, these *maṇḍala*-s, ten in total, linked divine sound and space to the bodies of the ritual officiants. By the time of the Purāṇas, epics, and *śāstra* literature this term interwove a polysemantic field: the *maṇḍala* was the universal kingdom with Mount Meru at its center (*Matsya Purāṇa* 114.56); it was a regal administrative unit or “territory” (*Arthaśāstra* 6.1–2); it was a palace modeled on the Mount Meru *maṇḍala* (*Matsya Purāṇa* 269.36, 49); it was the celestial space of the sun, planets, stars, and moon (*Vāyu Purāṇa* 53.28); it was a sacred zone near Prayāgā protected by Hari (*Matsya Purāṇa* 104.9); and it was a seat (*pīṭha*) for sacred images (*Matsya Purāṇa* 262.6, 9, 17). Within the genitive compound *maṇḍala-īśvara*, “ruler of the territory,” the term indicates the provincial ruler or regent of a political zone (*Bṛahmaṇḍa* 3.38.30, *Arthaśāstra* 6.1–2).

These interrelated meanings arose from a classical vision of correspondences (*bandha*-s) between the multiple levels of a hierarchical, multi-leveled universe. Adopting a structural grid used effectively by David White, we can place these meanings within a tri-cosmic conception of interrelationality that correlates a “big universe” (macrocosm) with a “little universe” (microcosm) through an “intermediating universe” (mesocosm).<sup>3</sup>

At the macrocosmic level the *maṇḍala* is the cosmic emanation of the universal king, Nārāyaṇa, who brings the universe into being through the god Brahmā, who arises on a lotus from Nārāyaṇa's navel. This universe is the Jambudvīpa-maṇḍala, with Mount Meru as its *axis mundi*. Situated within the regal palace on Mount Meru, the creator god Brahmā rules as the lord of the territory, *maṇḍaleśvara*. As a regent of Nārāyaṇa, Brahmā governs horizontally through a conquest of the four directions and also vertically as ruler of all the beings in the three worlds (*trailokya*): earth, heaven, and sky. Closest to him are those who, due to their ritual purity, have a position of high authority. These are his administrators, political and spiritual advisors, and priests. At the peripheries of this cosmic territory, one finds protector deities, those who are "less pure," but nonetheless powerful and critically important to the protection of the *maṇḍala*.<sup>4</sup>

At the microcosmic level, the *maṇḍala* is the sociopolitical zone of the human king. The *Arthaśāstra* and its commentarial texts contain a detailed description of the internal structure of the earthly kingdom. Within this system there is a hierarchy of kings spiraling out from the Rājādhirāja, or king of kings. The Rājādhirāja is the equivalent of a Cakravartin (literally, "wheel turner"), whose domain contains multiple domains within itself, each with its own lesser king, just as Nārāyaṇa—with whom the Rājādhirāja is classically equated—is the supreme ruler of a cosmic *maṇḍala* that contains multiple regions and sub-rulers within it. To be precise, the earthly *maṇḍala* contains twelve sub-kings, each with distinct political functions. Not all of these kings are allies. Rather, the *maṇḍala* vision incorporates enemy kings whose antagonistic intentions are seen as integral to the *maṇḍala*-system. These twelve kings are each linked to an emanational power, or *prakṛti*, which in turn each emanate five *prakṛti*-s: (1) administrators/advisors, (2) territory, (3) forts, (4) treasury, and (5) army. In all, then, there are seventy-two *prakṛti*-s: the original twelve plus the five emanations of each. These seventy-two emanational powers comprise the *rāja-maṇḍala*,<sup>5</sup> predicated on a complex political theory of "mathematically balanced diplomacy."<sup>6</sup>

The center of this microcosmic *maṇḍala* is the king's palace, modeled on Mount Meru. Mirroring its macrocosmic template, the *rāja-maṇḍala* embodies a hierarchical arrangement that positions those of purity closest to the king and those impure but powerful at the peripheries where the *maṇḍala* needs protection. In between, the division of the classes (*varṇa*-s) are arranged such that they radiate out from the center, with brahmin communities being closest to the palace and lower-class communities being furthest away. In this way, the king sat as the hub of a "cosmo-moral" order. Ronald Inden writes,

The Cosmic Overlord [Rājādhirāja] encompassed the cosmos—his domain [*maṇḍala*], consisting not only of the earth and the nether

regions below, but also of the heavens above—in the specific and total sense that he could create order, and destroy without in any way diminishing himself, either his power or his substance. Like the Cosmic Overlord [Nārāyaṇa], the overlord of the earth encompassed these kings of the four quarters of the earth. Those who worshipped the image or sing of the Cosmic Overlord, who ‘shared in’ his being, were called his *bhaktas*. Those who assembled around the lion-throne to do homage to the overlord of the earth were also ... his *bhaktas*, those who shared in his kingship, those who were, as we would say, ‘loyal’ to him. The idea of the king of kings as a hypostasis of cosmo-moral order on earth was, thus, no figure of speech. He did indeed embrace within his persona, himself together with his domains, the entire earth as an ordered, integrated totality.<sup>7</sup>

As a “cosmo-moral order,” the earthly *maṇḍala* serves as a “protected-field” (*kṣetra-pāla*) in which citizens pursue the four aims of life—dharma, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*—according to their position within society. To nuance our understanding of the relationship of citizen to state we now have to complexify our usage of the term “microcosmic.” Operating in a way that parallels contemporary Western theories of the hologram, *maṇḍala*-logic allows for multiple reduplications of the same template within itself such that the categories of micro- and macrocosmic have to be understood as relative to the one positioned within the field of *maṇḍala*-s. In other words, the king’s territory is a microcosm of the Jambudvīpa-*maṇḍala*, and yet at the same time it is a macrocosm for the citizen within that kingdom, who is him- or herself the absolute microcosm, the *aṇu*, or smallest divisible unit within the political matrix. Yet the citizen is not simply a part of a whole. According to *maṇḍala*-logic, the citizen, as a microcosm, is by definition potentially co-substantial with the macrocosm. The line of thinking we are now tracing takes us into the domain of Tantra, which by the seventh century had risen to the status of a state ideology in several regions of the subcontinent. As White has argued, the foundational feature of Tantra is the use of the *maṇḍala* as a polysemantic ritual grid that interweaves divine and human communities (*kula*-s) through the harnessing of bodily fluids and powers at multiple levels within the self-replicating Hindu cosmos.<sup>8</sup> To understand the sophistication of the tantric *maṇḍala* we now turn to an analysis of the *maṇḍala* as a mesocosm, or intermediating sphere that makes possible the recognition of the identity of the microcosm with the macrocosm.

As a number of scholars have argued—most recently, Ronald Davidson<sup>9</sup>—the tantric notion of the *maṇḍala* clearly arises out of preexisting political and ritual uses of the term. In the *Arthaśāstra*, the king’s earthly *maṇḍala* is a field of sacrifice (*yajña-kṣetra*) in which the king functions as the sacrificial



patron (*yajamāna*). The origins of this notion trace back to Vedic ritual practice in which the sacrificial arena is constructed as a replica of the cosmos itself. The rituals enacted within that sanctified space carry the power to establish or destroy balance, throughout all the worlds. Done correctly, Vedic ritual establishes order (*ṛta*), truth (*sat*), and righteousness (dharma) over their opposites. The core of this process is sacrifice. As described in *R̥g Veda* 10.90 the victim is the “cosmic person” whose microcosmic representative was the patron of the sacrifice, the *yajamāna*, who gains immortality through a symbolic sacrifice in which an animal or ritualized object comes to represent the sacrificed *puruṣa*. Through sacrifice, the person—whether cosmic or human—becomes the embodied universe and “extended beyond.”

Within this discourse of ritual cosmogony abides a powerful theology of immanence and transcendence that translates directly into sociopolitical structures. In this context the ritual domain is the extended body of the sacrificer. It is a mediating universe (mesocosm), the purpose of which is to link the microcosmic body of the sacrificer to the macrocosmic body of the supreme person. As such, Vedic sacrifice logically functions as the paradigmatic ritual grid for establishing royal territory. In great regal sacrifices like the *rājyasūya* and *aśvamedha* the king assumes the equivalent of the *yajamāna*, giving rise to his political *maṇḍala* as a sacrificial sphere, non-distinct from his own being, and, inevitably, non-distinct from the ultimate sacrificial *maṇḍala*, which was the universe itself.

As a *yajamāna*, the king’s body is the equivalent of his sacrificial domain, which is the entirety of his kingdom. Like the Jambudvīpa-*maṇḍala* arising from and residing within Nārāyaṇa’s body, so the earthly *maṇḍala*, through sacrifice, arises from and is contained within the ritualized notion of the king’s body. In this way, the *maṇḍala* links center to periphery, ritual to body, godhead to society, politics to liberation. And in each self-replication of itself, the *maṇḍala* contains its own fullness.<sup>10</sup>

The political implication of this process of identification is clear: the king’s authority and power springs from a divine source. However, Tantra declares that the king is not the only individual capable of divine-recognition (*īśvara-pratyabhijñā*). Ultimately, anyone who receives the requisite initiation from the qualified teacher is theoretically capable of partaking in the full potency of the wisdom and potency of the *maṇḍala*, be s/he upper class or lower class, male or female. Interpreting the *maṇḍala* as an all-pervasive, self-replicating power-grid, Tantra announces the possibility for empowerment at all levels of the cosmos, at all levels of society, and within all people.<sup>11</sup> As central pivot of the *maṇḍala*, the king, like the Vedic *yajamāna*, is, in White’s words, the prototypical “Everyman.”<sup>12</sup> He functions in place of and on behalf of all those in his kingdom. By participating in the ritual structures of the kingdom, the individual citizen is linked directly to the divine. Additionally, individuals model kingly rituals through the private

rituals that are the heart of tantric practice. The king's dharma then is to insure that his citizens are safe to pursue their own respective practices. In this regard, he must conquer the enemies of the state (*asura-s*) through the ritual of warfare. It is through this ritualized engagement in the protection of his territory that the king attains his liberation, a point articulated with force in the *Mahābhārata* and further clarified in the *Devīmāhātmya* and a vast number of subsequent tantric texts.

### SIGNIFICANT ŚĀKTA SITES

The temple of Cāṅgu Nārāyaṇa, situated atop Dolādri Hill some thirteen kilometers outside of Bhaktapur, is an important site for focusing this discussion of the historical roots of the relationship of Nepalese kingship to Śākta Tantra traditions. Under the reign of the Licchavi kings, Kathmandu architects had by the fifth century developed a unique style of pagoda architecture. As the earliest example of that unique style, Cāṅgu Nārāyaṇ was crafted in the fifth century to mark the eastern gate of the Kathmandu valley *maṇḍala*.<sup>13</sup> Strategically situated atop Dolādri Hill some eight kilometers outside Bhaktapur, the temple embodied several paradigmatic elements that help us solidify the link of kingship to Tantra in Nepal. First, there is the temple's founding myth, re-counted in the seventeenth-century *Nepālāmāhātmya*. Clearly modeled on the *Devīmāhātmya*, this text describes Doladri Hill as the site of a great battle between the gods and *asura-s*. In the early stages of the battle, the gods, led by Nārāyaṇa, are being overwhelmed. In a climactic moment Nārāyaṇa is beheaded, and from his decapitated body arises Chinnamastā, a beheaded tantric form of Devī who quickly makes piecemeal of the demons. According to the tantric priest of the Cāṅgu Nārāyaṇ complex, Chinnamastā is the *śakti* of this particular form of Nārāyaṇ, who has, since his inception, been a tantric deity and was crafted in a headless form to match the accounts of the *Śatapatha-Brahmaṇa* 14.1.1.8 in which Viṣṇu beheads himself and becomes the "pure essence."<sup>14</sup>

At the southwest edge of the temple complex stands a small shrine to Chinnamastā encircled by a family of female powers (*kula-śakti*). While they are commonly referred to as the Daśamahāvidyā, these divinities more likely originated as the Navadurgā, or Nine Durgās, who function as protector goddesses in the valley. In this context, they function as the protective emanational powers of Nārāyaṇ, the king of gods, with whom the fifth century Licchavi King Mānadeva so clearly identified himself, as evidenced from his self-portrait as a kneeling *garuda* before the western temple wall as well as by his famous pillar inscription in which he ascribes to himself the powers of divinity, including superhuman beauty and the capacity to slay enemies by assuming the form of a lion. The relationship



of these goddesses to the central image of Nārāyaṇa epitomizes the status of Śākta Tantra in the lives of Nepal's kings. The Kumārī is worshiped as the secret power of the king, who is commonly identified with Nārāyaṇa. Similarly, at the Cāṅgu Nārāyaṇa complex, Chinnamastā is worshiped as Nārāyaṇa's secret power (*rahasya-śakti*) and the vehicle through which he exhibits his universal body (*viśvarūpa-deha*).<sup>15</sup> Here, as in many sites in Nepal, while the male god is front and center, female power is the secret core of divine power.

The *Gopālarāj-Vaṃśāvalī* states that King Mānadeva (ca. fifth century) took as his *iṣṭa-devatā* the goddess Māneśvarī.<sup>16</sup> This goddess, whose name means "mistress of the mind," was regarded as a form of Durgā and later came to be identified with Taleju, the tutelary deity (*kula-devatā*) of the Malla kings.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Mānadeva appropriated a form of the goddess as his personal deity suggests that the association of kings with powerful goddesses is one that spans nearly fifteen hundred years of Nepalese history. It is not unreasonable to think that this Māneśvarī was linked with traditions of proto-tantrism. Mukunda Aryal posits that Mānadeva also constructed the temple to the headless goddess Chinnamastā at Cāṅgu Nārāyaṇa.<sup>18</sup>

With respect to other historical evidence, an important inscription from the Mānadeva era (464–507)<sup>19</sup> describes the Mātrkā Sārvānī surrounded by a circle of other mother goddesses. This description indicates strongly that early Śākta traditions had established themselves in the Kathmandu Valley by as early as the fifth century. By the eleventh century, Sārvānī figures prominently in the Krama-Kaula traditions of Kashmir.<sup>20</sup>

The circa seventh-century temple to Jaya Vāgīśvarī in Deopatan presents another historical instance of an early tantric presence in the Kathmandu Valley. An important section of chapter 4 of the *Nityāṣoḍaśīkārṇava*<sup>21</sup> identifies Vāgīśvarī with Tripurasundarī, an identification confirmed by many of my informants. Vāgīśvarī is more specifically identified as the goddess of the *vāgbhava* section of the fifteen-syllable (*pañca-daśākṣarī*) *mantra* of the Kādi tradition of Śrī Vidyā. Consisting of the five seed-syllables (*bījākṣara-s*) *ka, e, ī, la,* and *hrīm*, this particular *kuṭa* or section of the *mantra* is said to reside in the lowest *cakra* of the body.<sup>22</sup> It is for this reason that contemporary Śrī Vidyā *tāntrika-s* identify Vāgīśvarī, the "mistress of speech," as divine sound to be harnessed within the body. In interpreting Kathmandu city as a *maṇḍala*, *tāntrika-s* understand this Vāgīśvarī Temple to be complemented by other shrines embodying the other two sections of the fifteen-syllable *mantra*.

The issue of the Vāgīśvarī Temple's antiquity is of particular interest in our attempt to reconstruct the history of the relationship between Śākta traditions and kingship in Nepāla-Manḍala. At first glance, the small temple to the mistress (*iśvarī*) of speech (*vāc*), located at the Chabahil crossroad in Deopatan, appears to be only "an ordinary Malla Period Newar-style

temple.”<sup>23</sup> However, as Slusser aptly notes, there is more to this temple than first meets the eye. “[A] closer look,” Slusser writes, “reveals antique foundations incorporating thresholds decorated with lions peering out from rocky caves. The worn doorstep is the halved plinth of a Licchavi *caitya*.... Peering through the latticed doorway into the dim cellar, one can discern the cult image itself, worshipped there since the late fifth or early sixth century, when it was ‘commissioned by Guhasomā....’”<sup>24</sup> It is important here to take note of the name Guhasomā, which means “elixir (*soma*) of the secret place (*guha*).” In tantric circles, *guha-soma* is one of many appellates for the clan fluids, called *kula-draṅva*-s, that are exchanged and consumed during the course of esoteric rituals. At a microcosmic level *kula-draṅva* is the serpentine power of the *kuṇḍalinī-sakti*, whose awakening and ascent is the medium by which the *tāntrika* is united with the godhead. At a mesocosmic level, *kula-draṅva* takes the form of the bodily discharges that are exchanged in the context of the secret ritual in which initiates of the same clan consume fluids for the purpose of empowerment. At the macrocosmic level, *kula-draṅva* is the unending flow of Devī’s divine bliss. At the level of absolute reality, *kula-draṅva* is the undifferentiated I-awareness, residing equally at all times, in all places, and all people.<sup>25</sup> Was the Guhasomā who commissioned the Jaya Vāgīśvarī aware of the multiple meanings of her name? Was she an initiate of one of the many proto-tantric cults that by even the fifth century were engaged in the cultivation and exchange of secret elixirs (*guha-soma*) for the purpose of cultivating various psychophysical powers (*siddhi*-s) such as magical flight? Was she a tantric messenger (*dūtī*) for the king? Did King Aṃśuvarman, referred to in the inscription, erect the Vāgīśvarī shrine as a testimony to his associations with these cults? While the partially damaged inscription itself does not answer these questions, the nearby temple of Guhyeśvarī provides strong evidence that Śāktism has long held a favored place among the kings of Nepal.

Guhyeśvarī Temple is located on the left bank of the Bāgmatī River, at the northeastern edge of the Paśupatināth Temple complex. In his study done in collaboration with Nutan Sharma, the German anthropologist Axel Michaels has uncovered significant information about this important temple and the goddess who abides at its center.<sup>26</sup> As Michaels’s study documents, the Guhyeśvarī complex is replete with material testimony to the devotion of Nepalese kings to this “goddess of the secret.” The temple itself is rather recent, having been established by King Pratāp Malla (1641–1671) in the year 1645 C.E.<sup>27</sup> However, the present form of the temple is but a more modern marking for an ancient power-seat (*śākta-pīṭha*). The fourteenth-century *Gopālarāj-Vaṃśāvalī* points to the early history of the goddess Guhyeśvarī:

In the course of time, with the advent of the Kali Yuga, in the kingdom of Yuddhiṣṭhira ... the main deity Śrī Bhṛṅgāreśvarī Bhaṭṭārikā

emerged in the land.... Situated in the lap of the Himālaya, it was at first covered with a dense forest. Thereafter, Gautama and other sages came to live here.... In the meantime, when Śrī Bhṛṅgāreśvarī Bhaṭṭārikā was roaming about the Śleṣmāntaka Forest, the Gopālas [= first kings] came [to the valley]. A brown cow, Bahuri by name, belonging to the cowherd named Nepa, went daily to the bank of the river Vāgmati to worship at a hole by letting her milk flow. The cowherd saw the spot where his cow worshiped with milk. On digging at the spot, Śrī Paśupati Bhaṭṭārikā emerged.<sup>28</sup>

As Michaels has demonstrated,<sup>29</sup> Śrī Bhṛṅgāreśvarī (“goddess in a flask”) is an early epithet for Guhyeśvarī. If this is indeed the case, then the chronicle suggests that it was not Śiva, Viṣṇu, or any of the other male deities, but the goddess who first came to the valley. After her arrival, Lord Śiva (Śrī Paśupati Bhaṭṭārikā) emerges in the same Śleṣmāntaka Forest that now houses both the Paśupatinātha and Guhyeśvarī Temple complexes. An important verse in the circa eighth-century *Niśisañcāra-Tantra*<sup>30</sup> links these two divinities together as national deities: “I seek the lord of beasts [Paśupati], the god seated in Nepal, united with the mistress of the secret.”<sup>31</sup>

Another important early reference to Guhyeśvarī comes from the *Kālikulakramārcana* of Vimalaprabodha. In a personal communication to Michaels, Sanderson cites a manuscript dated 1002 C.E. that mentions Guhyeśvarī and concludes that “The tradition of Guhyeśvarī as ‘*rāṣṭra-Devī*’ is then definitely pre-1000 A.D.”<sup>32</sup> Sanderson’s conclusion coincides with that of Divakar Acarya, who maintains that the traditions of Guhyeśvarī were established in the first millennium C.E.

In Nepal the goddess Guhyeśvarī assumes multiple identities and is known by many names. Some Hindus call her Satī, the wife of Śiva. Hindu *sādhaka*-s know her as Durgā, Kālī, Kālikā, Guhyakālī, Kubjikā, and Taleju, all epithets for the chosen deities of Nepalese kings. Buddhist *sādhaka*-s identify her as Nairātmyā, the consort of Hevajra.<sup>33</sup> With respect to Guhyeśvarī’s identification with Satī, the *Nepālamāhātmya* identifies the current site of the Guhyeśvarī Temple as the place where Satī’s “secret part” (*guhya*) fell to earth after she had committed *sati*.<sup>34</sup> What is the secret part? It is the genitalia of the goddess, the lower mouth (*adhavaktra*), and womb (*yonī*) from which flows the highest power (*paramaśakti*) of divinity. As the site of Devī’s secret part the Guhyeśvarī *śakta-pīṭha* is regarded by many Nepalese *tāntrika*-s to be a power seat of the highest order. At this site, where the goddess is represented by a hole in the ground, *tāntrika*-s worship divinity in its full potency as the ultimate sexuality of the godhead.<sup>35</sup>

The various epithets of Guhyeśvarī point to her identification with Tripurasundarī, the goddess who infuses the king with her secret power. The *Tripurasundarī-Paddhati*, an important ritual text housed at Nepal’s National

Archives that is dated 1089 C.E.<sup>36</sup> contains the earliest known reference to Tripurasundarī in Nepal. The *paddhati* is bound together with a manuscript of the *Nityāṣoḍaśīkārṇava* dated 1388 C.E., which strongly suggests that the Tripurasundarī worshiped in the *paddhati* is the same goddess who was already being worshiped at that time by Śrī Vidyā Kaulikas from Kashmir and Tamil Nadu.

### TALEJU: THE GODDESS ON HIGH

In order to understand more fully the semiotic richness of the identity of Tripurasundarī with Guhyeśvarī, we must turn to an examination of another goddess with whom she is at times identified: Taleju, the mysterious “goddess on high,” and the proclaimed *iṣṭa-devatā* of many Nepalese kings. The importance of this goddess is captured by Anne Vergati:

Before 1768, the three towns of Kathmandu Valley had separate kings [and] each ruler had the same tutelary divinity: Taleju. It is only after the arrival of Taleju, in the fourteenth century, that a blueprint for the organization and hierarchization of the entire society of his kingdom—Buddhist as well as Hindu—was drawn up by Jayasthiti Malla. If Taleju occupies a position close to or within the Royal Palace in each of the three towns, the caste hierarchy is reflected in the settlement pattern which encircles the palace: the higher castes live closest to the palace, the others further away in roughly concentric circles. The divinity occupies, so to speak, the central position in a social *maṇḍala*.<sup>37</sup>

Why did the kings of the three cities of the valley—Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan—all take Taleju as their chosen deity? Vergati suggests that the answer is linked, at least in part, to the “historical context in which Newar society evolved into its present form.”<sup>38</sup> In the Newar pantheon, the only divinity constantly linked with royalty is Taleju. According to Newar oral tradition, this divinity came from India to Nepal in the middle of the fourteenth century with Harisimha Deva, who was a king of the Karnatak dynasty that originated from Ayodhya. He reigned in the Terai, as Simraongarh, not far from present-day Simra. After a battle between Harisimha Deva and Ghiyas-ud din Tughlaq, the former had to flee into the mountains where he entered Nepal. He brought with him a new form of Devi.<sup>39</sup>

This “new form of Devi” brought with her to Nepal a rich history of secrecy, reflected most immediately in the multiple obscure forms of her name, which has been rendered in different contexts as Tulasī, Tulajā, Talagu, and, of course, Taleju.<sup>40</sup> One common account of the goddess’s origins

traces her back to the events narrated in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is said that the goddess was captured by the demon Rāvaṇa but eventually escaped and was later found by King Rāma, who installed her at Ayodhya. From there, the goddess made her way to Simraongarh and became the tutelary divinity of King Harisimhadeva. A competing account, noted by Vergati, states that Taleju was the secret deity of Rāvaṇa, worshiped by him because she bestowed such great power. Knowing that Taleju was the source of Rāvaṇa's strength, Rāma captured the image of this goddess and drowned it in the Saryu River. Hundreds of years later, a prince of Simraongarh named Nānya Deva was advised by his astrologer that at the Saryu riverbank he would find an object that would empower him to establish a kingdom north of Simraongarh. Following this advice, he found the image and carried it with him until he reached the site of Bhaktapur, which at that time was covered with jungle. There he established a kingdom and built a temple for Taleju. Neither of these two accounts is accepted by most historians. Rather, historians are generally in agreement with the *Gopālarāj-Vaṃśāvalī*, which states that King Harisimhadeva died on his way to Bhaktapur from Dolakha, east of the Kathmandu Valley. Whatever the case may be, by the time of Jayasthiti Malla (1382–1395 C.E.), Taleju, the mysterious goddess on high, had been selected as the king's personal protectress and object of worship. Her power was so great that a Tibetan militia even sought to take her by force.<sup>41</sup>

The question remains: who is this goddess? Brown Bledsoe remarks, "There is still no definitive answer to this question, at least none openly spoken."<sup>42</sup> In his devotional public poem, *Sarvāparādhastotra*, King Pratāp Malla addresses her as Caṇḍikā, Ambikā, Durgā, and Bhavānī.<sup>43</sup> However, she has other identities that link her with goddesses whose names were once uttered only behind closed doors in sanctified ritual domains that not only allowed but encouraged the transgression of the sacred codes of moral conduct. Such transgressions were seen as the means to awakening a divine power capable of granting all desires, mundane and transmundane. In these circles, Taleju's name was rich with multiple nuances. The Newari *tale*, meaning "higher or upper," combined with the honorific *ju* renders Taleju the "goddess on high," perhaps referring to the high temple. Or, in a domestic context, Taleju can refer to the family goddess situated on the upper floor of the traditional Newar house in its *āganchem*, or shrine room. In Sanskrit *tal* has the opposite meaning of "bottom, lower, or foundation," and is related to *adhas*, as in Adhāmnāya, the "transmission of the base." And *eju*, based on *vej*, means "to tremble, vibrate, or stir." Rendered in this way, Taleju is the "goddess who trembles/stirs at the foundation." As such, Taleju recalls Kubjikā, the "coiled one," whose serpentine form as the *kuṇḍalinī-śakti* resides at the foundation of the microcosm, coiled three and one-half times, replete with liberating potentiality.

The association of Taleju and Kubjikā, as Dyczkowski points out, links Taleju to the traditions of the western transmission (Paścimāmnāya) and such central texts as the *Kubjikā-Mata*.<sup>44</sup> However, the goddess does not always stay rooted in the foundation. Upon initiation from a competent teacher (*ādḥikārīguru*), a *sādhaka's kuṇḍalinī-sakti* awakens and rises through the body's central artery until established at the top (*tale*), where the goddess of the foundation, Kubjikā-Devī, reveals her form as the goddess of the heights (*tale-ju*). Situated in the *sahasrāra-cakra*, at the upper reaches of the tri-cosmos, Taleju assumes the transcendent form of Parā, whose name literally means "beyond, above." It is for this reason that Taleju is addressed by Pratāp Malla as *sarvā-parā-adha*, the "goddess who is both the supreme height (*parā*) and foundation (*adha*) of all things (*sarvā*)."<sup>45</sup> As Parāśakti, Taleju is linked with the upper transmission (Urdhvāmnāya) and with its clan deity (*kula-devī*), Tripurasundarī; its authoritative text, the *Nityāṣoḍaśikārṇava*; and its central aniconic symbol, the Śrī Yantra.

In sum, Taleju is the embodiment of all goddesses. Although a deity shaped strongly by geospecific histories, Taleju functions as Nepāla-Maṇḍala's Mahādevī, the feminine embodiment of absolute, non-dual, consciousness. The symbolism and rituals connected with her synthesize each of the six transmissions and fuse them into a centralized, all-encompassing system, the Sarvāmnāya, whose function is to link Nepāla-Maṇḍala directly to the *maṇḍala* of liberating energies within the microcosm and in turn their ultimate source, the Devī herself, who is both within and beyond the *maṇḍala*.

The disclosure of the location of the treasure is meaningless without a map detailing the means to access it. We may know the identity—or at least partial identity—of Taleju, but such disclosure leads nowhere if it is devoid of a description of the means by which disclosed secrets become sources of liberating illumination. As the goddess of the secret, Taleju functions as a metaphor for heightened states of awakened consciousness linked with the highest, non-verbal modes of speech, *parā-vāc*.

These states are produced through the highly secretive yogic disciplines detailed in the primary texts of each of the *āmnāya-s*.<sup>46</sup> The *paddhati-s* apply the doctrines and techniques of these primary texts and translate them into the personal, civic, and state rituals that invigorate Nepāla-Maṇḍala with the powers of Taleju, she whose secret identity encompasses the triad Guhyeśvarī, Kubjikā, and Tripurasundarī as well as the deities encompassed by them.

The project of interpreting Taleju requires a multi-leveled investigation. First, one must read the root classical texts (*mūla-sāstra-s*) connected with the various goddesses that she encompasses. Second, one must read the colophons of these goddesses' respective *paddhati-s*. Third, one must understand Taleju's relationship to the king's patron god, Bhairava, and this deity's



associated texts. Fourth, one must understand that as a national goddess, Taleju derives her power from the esoteric practices, linked to the fluids and subtle energies of the *mūlādhāra-cakra*—at the base of whose vibratory lotus sits Kubjikā, the coiled one, wrapped around her lord’s supreme form as *para-liṅga*. This rich imagery is etched in stone at the Paśupatināth complex where the Vasukinātha Temple represents the *kuṇḍalīnī-śakti* as a material image (*arca*) at the feet of the central image of Lord Śiva as *paraliṅgaṃ*.

In the Taleju Temple complex at the site of the old Malla royal palace in Kathmandu, Taleju is depicted as the eighteen-armed slayer of the buffalo demon, Mahiṣāsura-mārdinī. Taleju’s iconic form suggests that hers is a body of total power—royal and yogic alike—linked simultaneously to the root, center, and apex of each of the tri-cosmos. As Kathmandu’s civic *bindu*, the city’s esoteric heart, Taleju—she whose transcendent aspect (*parā-kalā*) is embodied in Śrī Vidyā and whose foundational aspect (*mūla-kalā*) is embodied in the Kubjikā Vidyā<sup>47</sup>—is the ultimate goal of any quest to track Nepal’s Devī. In her awesome supreme form she is the eighteen-armed slayer of all the enemies of the tri-cosmos: those microcosmic enemies who cause illness and hinder spiritual growth; those mesocosmic enemies who might attempt to dethrone the king either from within or without Nepāla-Maṇḍala, and those macrocosmic forces who would seek to cause harm to Devī and her infinite universe. Ultimately Taleju conquers death, granting eternal liberation to those who awaken her from her divine slumber and excite her to leave the foundation—the *mūlādhāra-cakra*—in search of Bhairava at the transcendent heights of the cranial-vault—the *sahasrāra-cakra*—which is Mount Meru’s sacred peak, situated at the transcendent center-point of the universe.

Of course, from the perspective of post-structuralist critical theory, such discourse of a transcendent center-point of the lord of the *maṇḍala* (*maṇḍaleśa*) points to the earthly ruler who propagates such discourse for the purpose of self-legitimation. Taleju, in this perspective, shines as another icon of institutional bondage, reflecting those discursive strategies by which a nation becomes bound to its own geospecific constructions of nation and selfhood. And so we return to where we started: face-to-face with paradox. Taleju is the bottom and Taleju is the top—the beginning, the means, and the end. From the emic perspective of the *tāntrika*, she embodies the subcontinent’s great quest for freedom from all forms of bondage, even the bondage of the cycle of birth and death. From the etic perspective of the critical theorist, she is inseparable from the causes of bondage. She is the epistemic icon whose state-sponsored discursive formations<sup>48</sup> become *habitus* through the network of rituals that transmit the logic of practice. Can these two apparently opposite perspectives be reconciled? Can Taleju, who is the supremely powerful (*anuttama-śakti*) Mahādevī, be at once the cause of bondage and the means to its transcendence? Can Śākta Tantra

ideologies and practices perpetuate the institutions that are characteristic of any political system while also serving as a means for release from all shackles (*sarva-paśa-muktopāya*)?

To answer this question, I turn to an examination of the institution of the Kumārī, that ritualized government-sponsored worship of pubescent girls as the virginal yet sexually-charged embodiment of Parāśakti. The fascinating history and intricate complexities of this institution reflect the nuances of Nepalese constructions of selfhood and the relationship of these constructions to the multiple dynamics of power operating simultaneously at the individual, civic, and national levels of Nepāla-Maṇḍala.

#### THE KING AND THE KUMĀRĪ: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

“The Kumārī institution,” writes Slusser, “is of special interest.... It underscores the remarkable religious syncretism characterizing the Valley.”<sup>49</sup> To probe into the institution of the Kumārī is to probe into the soul of the complex multi-ethnic nation of Nepal. Just as the current Kumārī spends most of her days in the dark, sequestered Newar home built especially for the Kumārī in the seventeenth century, so the institution’s history is largely veiled. However, just as the Kumārī occasionally reveals herself even to non-Hindus, so there are critical junctures in Nepal’s history in which the Kumārī institution has stepped onto the national stage and revealed the multi-leveled structures of power that sustain it. If the institution of the Kumārī dies, then the idealized vision of Nepāla-Maṇḍala will die with her. Hers is the microcosmic body through which the entire sociopolitical system orients and regenerates itself. Kings bow before her. A nation awaits her every gesture, seeking in each a sign of fortunes to come.

The Kumārī is celebrated as the Viśvarūpa Devī of the *paddhati-s*, the goddess of the universal form, in whose virginal body is contained the entirety of being. In her inner courtyard, to the Hevajra shrine where Kumārī reveals her identity as Nairātmya Yoginī, the selfless *yoginī* whose ultimate form transcends description resides in the space of realization, where words dissolve into the stillness of a mind trained in the arts of conquering the inner enemies. The Kumārī is often identified with Kālī, the warrior goddess who is capable of killing any enemy that threatens her power-wheel. And so too she is Kālī’s secret self, Guhyakālī, Kālī of the hidden place, which is the *yonī*, the seat of sexual and spiritual power, worshiped on the Kumārī as a Śrī Yantra. As Guhyakālī, the Kumārī is ultimately identified with Tripurasundarī, the goddess of the three cities, patroness of the Trika Śāstra, which has been cultivated in Nepāla-Maṇḍala since at least the twelfth century, the date of the earliest *Vāmakeśvara-Tantra* manuscripts.<sup>50</sup>

The links between the institution of the Kumārī and Nepalese kings can be traced back to as early as the beginning of the twelfth century. According to the *Gopālarāj-Vaṃśāvalī*, in 1192 C.E., King Lakṣmīkāmadeva, “thinking that his grandfather had acquired so much wealth and conquered the four quarters of the world through the aid of the Kumārīs, resolved to do the same. With this intention he went to the ... [palace] of Lakṣmī-barman, [where] he erected an image of Kumārī and established the Kumārī-pūjā.”<sup>51</sup> This important passage from the Nepalese dynastic chronicles highlights three important aspects of the relationship between the king and the Kumārī. First, the Kumārī is to be worshiped for the acquisition of material gain (*artha*). Second, King Lakṣmīkāmadeva, a king of Hindu descent, strategically selected a girl from a Buddhist Newar case to be his Kumārī. Third, worship of the Kumārī empowers the king to conquer the “four quarters of the world.” With respect to the first point, that a king would worship the Kumārī for the procurement of wealth, clearly points to the association of the Kumārīs with the attainment of material ends. With respect to the second point, from a certain perspective the king’s choice of a Buddhist girl was an effective political strategy since the majority of his subjects were Buddhist. The institutionalized relationship between an elite-Indian-Hindu-male-king and a lower caste-Newar-Buddhist-female-virgin-girl clearly exemplifies what Catherine Bell calls “redemptive hegemony” in that such an institution serves to perpetuate asymmetrical relations of power.<sup>52</sup> The Kumārī thus serves as the locus for social productions of power. However, in her links to the esoteric traditions of Tantra she also becomes, for the adept, the instantiation of transcendent power. This aspect of the Kumārī’s role is highlighted in Lakṣmīkāmadeva’s proclamation that the Kumārī is to be worshiped in order to conquer the four quarters of the world. This important statement conveys a double entendre that alludes to both political and spiritual aims. The metaphor is clearly drawn from political conquest. Yet Lakṣmīkāmadeva’s grandfather, although successful, was no Alexander the Great—his conquered domain was only the relatively small territory of Nepāla-Maṇḍala. This statement also alludes to the spiritual conquests attained through worshiping the goddess, which enable the *sādhaka* to conquer the four quarters of the world in internalized visualizations.<sup>53</sup> Śākta texts such as the *Devī-Māhātmya* often use the metaphor of conquest to describe kings who are both world emperors (*cakravartin*) and spiritually awakened (Buddha/Siddha).<sup>54</sup>

After the reign of King Lakṣmīkāmadeva we continue to find inscriptions mentioning the worship of Kumārīs by kings. Both the *Kaumārī-Pūjā* (1280 C.E.) and the *Kumārī-Pūjā-Vidhana* (1285 C.E.) describe the worship of the Kumārī by the king<sup>55</sup> and equate the Kumārī with the king’s *iṣṭa-devatā*.<sup>56</sup> This equation of the Kumārī with king’s “chosen deity” is critical, as it reveals that the Kumārī was both the king’s political servant and his revered deity.

Trailokya Malla, who reigned in the independent kingdom of Bhaktapur from 1562–1610, is credited with establishing the institution of the Kumārī in each of the three Malla kingdoms. The accounts of this historical event are illuminating, as they highlight the institution's links to mystico-erotic traditions of Tantra, which view sexual union (*maithuna*) as an integral aspect of the tantric path. Paralleling the classical mythology of Śiva and Pārvaṭī, we are told that Trailokya and the goddess were playing dice. The king longed for intimate contact with his *iṣṭa-devī*, who consequently scolded him and said that he could only communicate with her through a girl of low caste.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps the most significant historical example is King Pṛthivī Nārāyan Śāh (1723–1775). In the historical accounts of his life, we find the intimate relationship of Tantra to kingship and the ways in which the institution of the Kumārī, while clearly embodying an anthropo-contingent power dimension, also comes to symbolize theo-contingent power. While king of Gorkha, a region in western Nepal, Pṛthivī Nārāyan arduously practiced the tantric yoga of Bālā Tripurasundarī. After he had practiced tantric *sādhana* for twenty-five years, this child goddess appeared to him and granted him the boon that he would conquer and unite the Kathmandu Valley.<sup>58</sup> Pṛthivī Nārāyan and his troops entered Kathmandu on the day of Indra Jātra, the occasion when the Kumārī bestows her divine approval upon the king. At the time of Pṛthivī Nārāyan's surprise attack, the then-king of Kathmandu, Jayaprakāś Malla, was preparing to receive the Kumārī's blessing. Swiftly, and unexpectedly, Pṛthivī Nārāyan rode into the royal courtyard and bowed before the Kumārī, who unhesitatingly blessed him. In that moment, popular legend goes, the king of Gorkha became king of Nepal in a swift act of power that was the result of both political strategy and divine grace won through years of arduous devotion to the goddess.

Turning to an examination of the events that preceded this historic event, we again find elements that suggest a conjoining of anthropo-contingent and theo-contingent forms of power. As king of Gorkha, Pṛthivī Nārāyan placed himself under the protection of the eponymous saint Gorakhnāth, who was held to be an incarnation of Śiva and founder of the Kānpaṭā sect.<sup>59</sup> In addition to taking refuge in a powerful semi-divine being, Pṛthivī Nārāyan also sought the assistance of a living member of Kānpaṭā tradition. This was Bhagavantanāth, whose yogic prowess is described in the *Yogī-Vaṃśāvalī*.<sup>60</sup> Bhagavantanāth was recognized as a *siddha*, or perfected master of tantric yoga, who was endowed with psychophysical powers (*siddhi-s*).<sup>61</sup> In this way, Bhagavantanāth placed his spiritual powers in the service of his king's political agendas. Bouillier writes:

We see Bhagavantanāth using the prestige proper to a holy man, the magical powers gained through his practice of Haṭha Yoga, and

his strategic knowledge, in support of, or even as a means to inciting the conquests of Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ. He represents the spiritual element in the quest for power, and is thus a guru whose field is *artha*. He does not follow the dharma of the brahmin or the Sannyāsi renouncer, but acts in accordance with the aim of *artha*, of power and worldly success.<sup>62</sup>

By aligning himself with a tantric *siddha* and appointing Bhagavantānāth his political advisor and tantric *guru*, Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ sought to realize both spiritual and worldly pursuits. Even before his meeting with the powerful, mysterious Bhagavantānāth, there were signs that Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ was no ordinary king. His father was considered to be a great *siddha*, and his mother Kauśalyavatī was held to be an incarnation of the goddess Mānakāmanā.<sup>63</sup> As a young boy, Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ was visited by the great *siddha* Gorakhnāth, who gave him initiation by dropping curds onto his feet and claiming that he would become a great ruler of all lands that he walked on.<sup>64</sup> As a young man, Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ spent time in Bhaktapur. Even then his tantric *sādhana* was already bearing fruit, as one day, instead of blessing the king, the Kumārī gave *prasāda* to Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ—an event that was later interpreted to be an indication that Pṛthivī would one day conquer the Kathmandu Valley.<sup>65</sup>

Through his final conquest of the valley Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ demonstrated that his twenty-five years of internalized worship of the Kumārī through tantric yoga was the means to conquering and uniting Nepal. In his historical account of Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ, Śrī Prasād Ghirmire writes, “Conquering the world within through internalized union with his chosen deity, he was thereby empowered by her to transform this mystical power directly into the political domain.”<sup>66</sup> In the moment that he entered the royal courtyard of Jayaparakāś Malla and bowed before the Kumārī, thereby usurping the throne, Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ became the locus for the conjoining of anthropo-contingent and theo-contingent power—for in that pivotal Janus-faced moment, marking as it did both death and birth, the goddess Tripurasundarī bestowed her grace in the context of a sociopolitical conquest that had been so carefully constructed by this tantric king.

#### KUMĀRĪ AS A CONTRADICTIONARY SYMBOL OF POWER

Although functioning ideologically as immortals, Kumārīs inevitably return to the realm of mortals. On an average, Kumārīs serve their post for approximately eight years, from about age four until their menses. During this time, the Kumārī is considered the multi-leveled embodiment of Devī. Before and after this time she is simply a female human being from the Bud-

dhist Newar Śākya caste. Her brief term as the goddess does not eradicate the reality of her humanness. And, from a certain perspective, she remains human even while divine. In this light, the Kumārī, although a goddess, has always been little more than a servant to the king. She is a citizen in his kingdom, a young girl of Newar descent in a position of subservience to an elder Hindu man of Indian descent.

The process of selecting a Kumārī is extensive. The selection committee is composed of the royal astrologer (*rāj-jyotiṣa*), the king's religious adviser (*rāj-guru*), and several Newar Buddhist and Hindu priests. Their function is to ensure that the humanity of the selected girl will not be a hindrance to her functioning as a divinity for the king and his subjects. Her body must be in perfect condition. All parts are examined. A single blemish can result in the dismissal of an otherwise worthy candidate. The present Kumārī was chosen in 1991 at the age of two. At that time the royal committee investigated her to ensure that she had the thirty-two physical perfections of a goddess, which include everything from clear skin to perfectly formed genitalia.

Apart from her family, the little girl goddess has lived over two years in isolation in the ornate, recently restored eighteenth century Kumārī *Ghar*. Her daily schedule varies little. Attendants set her hair in a ritual bun, her eyes are rimmed with kohl, extending like a Zen painter's stroke to her temples, while her forehead is distinctively painted with a vermilion red, black, and golden all-seeing "fire-eye," and each day she sits on her lion throne for two or three hours. At this time a priest from the nearby Taleju Temple performs a purification rite using objects said to cleanse each of the five sensory organs: flour for the ears, rice for the mouth, incense for the nose, a lamp for the eyes, and red powder for touch. The Kumārī receives up to a dozen faithful devotees every day. "Many people come to see the Kumārī," the Kumārīma, a small elderly woman explained. "Some come with medical problems, especially illnesses related to bleeding. Many government officials visit, hoping her blessings will ensure promotion."

She must remain solemn and silent, sitting cross-legged in her gilt-canopied lion throne while the line of worshippers shuffles through her private chamber, each person touching the floor with his or her hand and laying down offerings of money, fruit, and flowers. To her followers, every movement the child makes is deemed a sign from the goddess Taleju. If she receives a petition in unmoved silence, it will be fulfilled; should she laugh, cry, or rub her eyes, the supplicant will fall ill or even die. Anita Sakya, now in her early twenties, was the royal Kumārī seven years ago. Shy and reserved, as most ex-Kumārīs are known to be, she told me a sad story. "I was just a little girl. Once a sick man came to be blessed. He was so sick he coughed and a touch of spit landed on my toe. My attendants gasped. He died the next day. I felt very sad. I believed I was responsible for his death."<sup>67</sup>



This revealing testimony by an ex-Kumārī reveals the human element beneath the façade of the institution, while also pointing to a kind of transmundane power that is often spoken of in association with the living Kumārīs. The living Kumārīs are a paradox. They are servants of the state, filling an institutional position whose function is to provide a focal point for the legitimation of state power. As such, they are encoded with the elaborate symbol systems of Śākta Tantra. They become servants to a state-sponsored ritual structure that transforms them from little Śākya-caste girls into the living repository of the king's chosen deity. Their mortal frames become the sight of the joining of both horizontal and vertical axes of power. Herein lies a paradox and a conflict.

In her daily *pūjā* the Kumārī's body is worshiped as the abode of all the worlds. In her reside all gods and goddesses. She is the receptacle of all, the infinite being of time (*ananta-kāla-rūpinī*) in whom all beings meet their end, the place where sky meets the earth, beyond all opposites as the ultimate source of existence.<sup>68</sup> As such, she is the king's *iṣṭa-devatā*, his chosen divinity, the supreme form of Taleju, who is the object of his longing for all forms of power and enlightenment.<sup>69</sup> In this context she inverts the hegemonic order and turns the king into a servant of the goddess (*devī-dāsa*), just as the Kumārī chose Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ Śāh to be her royal servant and thereby initiated him into the center of Nepāla-Manḍala.

As Taleju's incarnate-form (*avatārisvarūpinī*), the Kumārī is linked at all levels to the daily events and annual rituals of the king.<sup>70</sup> As Kubjikā she wears a serpent necklace symbolizing the *kuṇḍalinī-śakti*. As Guhyeśvarī she receives worship of her genitalia, the site of her lower-mouth and the medium of divine wisdom. The fact that the Kumārī's *yonī* is worshiped as Śrī Yantra reveals that the place of secrecy is a virgin's sexual organs, the microcosmic site of purity and its transcendence inscribed with a nation's self-identity.

In this function, the Kumārī becomes the king's lover, Rājarājeśvarī, who unites with him for the purpose of shattering the illusions of duality and exchanging the liberating fluids born of union. Secrecy is the abode of power. The secret of the virgin's relationship to the king is that she is his consort and lover. What makes the Kumārī powerful is that her virginity is blended with the raw sexuality of the goddess. It is for this reason that she wears the passionate colors of red. How ironic, then, that Kumārīs are removed from their position at the time of their menses.

In the final analysis, the symbolism of the Kumārī as the king's goddess and the symbolism of the Kumārī as the king's consort are intimately connected, for the king himself is viewed as a divinity and hence the Kumārī is his female divine counterpart, his consort. The king and Kumārī unite as a god uniting with his goddess. The sexual imagery associated with this relationship, in which the king receives *prasāda* from the worship of

the Kumārī's *yonī*, evokes the multi-layered history of sexual imagery and sexual transactions that characterize tantric traditions.

The final stage of the king's *sādhana* is his permanent cognition (*nityāvṛṭṭi*) that the Kumārī is his inner self (*antarātman*, *antarsvabhāva*, *svarūpinī-devī*). In addition to his extensive training in Western institutions,<sup>71</sup> the current king of Nepal, Birendra Bīr Śāh Deva, is a Śrī Vidyā Śākta *tāntrika*. It is for this reason that he daily receives the *prasāda* generated from the construction of a Śrī Yantra on top of the uppermost face of the central *liṅga* at Paśupatināth Temple. And this is also the reason that his wife, Queen Lakṣmī Devī, has the Śrī Yantra as her regal insignia. The wisdom (*vidyā*) of the *Vāmakeśvara-Tantra* informs his political, social, and religious activities. It is for this reason also that Sthanesvar, a Parbatīyā Brāhmaṇa and initiate of Śrī Vidyā, holds the chair of Tantra Studies at Balmiki Sanskrit College. In Nepāla-Manḍala, Tripurasundarī, the goddess of the three cities, stands at the elevated center of a cultural power web that derives its life breath from the ideologies and practices of Śākta Tantra. In Nepal Śrī Vidyā maintains the position of the most revered school of esoteric knowledge. Nepalese Śākta *tāntrikā*-s regard the Śrī Yantra as the totality of tantric revelation and the Kathmandu Valley as the "field of the three cities" (*tripura-kṣetra*), that is, the instantiation of the Śrī Yantra.

This does not mean that the Kubjikā and Guhyeśvarī *sampradāya* are any less significant than that of Tripurasundarī. The interlocking triangles of the Śrī Yantra all equally embody the power and wisdom (*śakti-vidyā-sa-masta-rūpinī*) of the supreme godhead, and each of these triangles is linked to a particular goddess with her own name and attributes.<sup>72</sup> For this reason, contemporary *sādhaka*-s often laugh when asked whether Tripurasundarī, Kubjikā, Guhyeśvarī, Kālī, or Durgā is in reality Taleju. At the end of my last stay in Nepal in 1997, Siddhi Gopal Vaidya referred again to his discourse on Taleju.

Listen, when you first asked me about Śrī Vidyā I told you that you were like a climber who wanted to reach the summit without actually ever making the earlier stages of the journey. In the meantime, I've demanded that you study the scriptures and spend time with Sthanesvar. Your time here is limited. So although you are not ready, I am going to tell you a great secret. Its true meaning will not come to you until you are finished with this project, which, as you have noted in previous conversations, will be several years from now.<sup>73</sup> Even then you won't really understand. If you want to understand as Sthanesvar understands, then you will have to return and you will have to live here, with this land, her people, and her gods and goddesses. Until then your understanding of Nepāla-Manḍala will be limited. Nevertheless, I will tell you the secret: all *āmnāya*-s are

united. Just as the base of Mount Everest is united with its peak, so Bhīvaneśvarī [in the *mūlādhāra*] is united with Tripurasundarī [in the *sahasrāra*]. The foundation and the summit are one. Both are pervaded by the energy of the supreme goddess (*parāśakti*), who has been called by many names....

Listen little brother [*hernos bhai*], I call god Mā Kālī. This is because I am an initiate of Kālī Vidyā. However, Sthanesvar is an initiate of Śrī Vidyā, and so he calls god Mahātripurasundarī. Kālī and Tripurasundarī are not distinct. The lineages are distinct, but the being who is the focus of these traditions is not different. Many different trekking expeditions climb Mount Everest. But for all of them the goal is the same, the mountain is the same. They may take different routes. They may call the mountain by different names, but the mountain still is what it is. So Devī is one. Taleju is Devī. Taleju is Kālī. Taleju is Kubjikā. Taleju is Guhyeśvarī. Taleju is Siddhīlakṣmī. Taleju is Tripurasundarī. Taleju is Parāśakti. All of these are names for that one reality that is, as Śaṅkarācārya so beautifully states, beyond all names. Those so-called pandits who quibble over the “true identity” are missing the point. They are lost in political tensions and don’t understand what our own *pad-dhati*-s make so evident: all of these belong together in one system because all of these goddesses are ultimately the same.... And there is one more thing to say. You and Sthanesvar talked to me about the perfect I-consciousness (*pūrṇa-ahantā*), which is mentioned in the *Nityāśoḍaśikārṇava*. This term captures the secret of our Sarvāmnāya system. Think about this deeply. And remember, the Kumārī lies at the heart of this secret.<sup>74</sup>

The Kumārī is Taleju; she is considered the human embodiment of the king’s chosen goddess. Taleju has been the patron deity of Nepalese kings since the time of Jayasthiti Malla in the thirteenth century. Architectural, epigraphical, and textual evidence demonstrate that this goddess is identified with Tripurasundarī, Kālī, Durgā, Tārā, and the other goddesses of non-dual Śākta Tantra. She is then a meta-symbol comprising the multiple discursive representations that constitute these other goddess traditions. In Nepal Taleju is an ocean of meaning fed simultaneously by the multiple streams of the Sarvāmnāya. As Nepalese *tāntrika*-s have historically favored practice over discourse, there is an absence of philosophical treatises housed at Nepal’s National Archives. However, paradoxically, this fact demonstrates precisely the opposite of what it appears to indicate. The absence of such texts is a cultural display of dissemblance: in Nepal *tāntrika*-s have veiled their knowledge of non-dual Śākta traditions behind the ritualized institutional structures that are themselves the culmination of such a discourse.

The evidence for this claim lies in at least two significant places: the oral traditions of contemporary Śākta *tāntrika*-s, and the numerous versions of the *Nityāṣoḍaśikārṇava* and related non-dual Śākta texts found throughout the Kathmandu Valley, many of which date back to the thirteenth century. Several Nepalese brahmin *tāntrika*-s expressed to me that Devī is perfect I-consciousness. Each of them made this assertion to me on separate occasions. And for each of them this understanding is rooted in the classical textual sources that inform their practices.

Nepal was largely unscathed by the Muslim invasions that spread across the subcontinent from as early as the eleventh century, and Nepāla-Maṇḍala thus offered a safe haven for the numerous cultural and religious traditions of the inhabitants of its borders. Kashmir, Benares, and Bengal were the primary entry points through which Śākta traditions were carried into Nepal in the form of texts, deities, and the traditions of worship associated with them. The very presence of these traditions in Nepal, particularly in the form of the institution of the Kumārī, testifies to the presence of the doctrine of perfect I-consciousness (*pūrṇa-ahamṭā*) that is central to Śākta Tantra theology and practice. As Lakoff and Johnson have powerfully articulated, when the symbol is embodied, the philosophical system is inherently implied.<sup>75</sup> We would be mistaken to conclude that Nepalese *tāntrika*-s are unaware of the subtle metaphysics developed by the exegetes of Kashmir and other regions of India. Instead, we must read these metaphysics back into the symbol system that is so intricately mapped out within Nepāla-Maṇḍala.

Doing so, we return to our focus on the institution of deifying virgin girls and the rich web of ritual practices—at the heart of Nepāla-Maṇḍala—that daily demonstrate the divinity of these girls to the king and his people. This cultural nexus is, at its esoteric core, the ritual demonstration of the apex of Śākta Tantra theology: namely, the radical claim made so eloquently by Abhinavagupta that all of existence is the internal projection of I-consciousness within the infinite body of the godhead. The final stage in the tantric King's *sādhana* is the realization that the Kumārī whom he worships as Taleju ultimately resides within him as his innermost Self, the continuum of perfect I-consciousness. Perfect I-consciousness is the culmination of non-dual Śākta tantric practice. As the *Nityāṣoḍaśikārṇava* explains, when the *kuṇḍalinī-śakti* is established in the *sahasrāra* at the apex of the central channel, the *sādhaka*'s mind becomes permanently established in the awareness that there is only one subject, the goddess of the three cities, whose infinite Self is present everywhere, in all things and at all times. Perfect I-consciousness is the *sādhaka*'s realization of his or her identity with the goddess, the *mantra* that is her vibratory essence, the *yantra* that embodies her, the teacher who awakened this realization, and the universe at large, which are all seen as the Self. Having encoded the semiosis of *kuṇḍalinī*'s ascent, having returned all symbols to their ultimate source, the realized *sādhaka* has encoded himself

as the locus for the transmission of all powers (*sarvāmnāya-śakti-śthāna*). In this condition of embodied liberation (*jīvanmukti*), he or she views the multiple levels of reality dissolving and reemerging within the continuum of Devī's ever-present *maṇḍala*.

#### CONCLUSION: WORSHIPING THE UNIVERSAL FORM OF THE VIRGIN

The current Ha Bāhā Kumārī comes from a lineage of Kumārīs who once served as royal mistresses for the kings of Patan. Although no longer recognized as a royal Kumārī, the Ha Bāhā Kumārī carries tremendous symbolic power as the Taleju of Patan. On the day I visited the Patan Kumārī, I was, thanks to Mukunda Aryal, able to witness, photograph, and record the daily worship (*kanyā-nityā-pūjā*) performed to her by the Ha Bāhā Kumārī priest, Bajracarya Sharma. During the thirty-minute ceremony Mr. Sharma read from his own copy of *Kumārīpūja-Paddhati*. This text, which he let me see but not photograph or copy, was filled with important textual references that linked Taleju to Tripurasundarī and Vajrayoginī and a host of other Hindu and Buddhist equivalents of Parāśakti, the feminine embodiment of supreme power who is the ritual lifeblood of Nepāla-Maṇḍala. All of these deities were equated with Kumārī, this seven-year-old girl, as the living embodiment of the Viśvarūpa-Devī. In the inner sanctum of Ha Bāhā, Bajracarya did as he had done every day for nearly all of his adult years: he worshiped a prepubescent girl he understands to be the microcosmic embodiment of the universal form of the goddess.

From the moment that he rang his Tibetan bell (*ghaṇṭa*) and formed a *mudrā* with the *vajra*—a Tibetan Buddhist symbol of the adamantite yet empty self—Bajracarya was in the presence of the supreme form of the goddess, according to his own testimony. “To the eyes of the non-initiated,” he explained, “she still looks like just a girl; but, to us [referring to himself and Mukunda Aryal] she becomes Viśvarūpa-Devī.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, the ritual is the medium of transformation. Through ritual a human girl becomes the microcosmic embodiment of the goddess. However, the veil of illusion, the façade that makes her seem like just a girl, is removed only if the ritual is linked to initiation (*dīkṣā*). In this way, as Sanderson has noted, ritual makes the impossible possible.<sup>77</sup>

The Tantras, Āgamas, and *paddhati*-s that constitute the Nepalese Sarvāmnāya Śākta Tantra canon all emphasize that without ritual practice there is no possibility for production of knowledge and power. Such production is body-based. Without inscribing the body with the ritual mechanisms that disseminate Śākta Tantra wisdom (*vidyā*), there is no way for the *maṇḍala* to encode itself within the individual. The *maṇḍala* is

the synthesis of Nepalese cultural values, which have been developed and transformed over centuries of fermentation and exchange with the multiple Asian cultural traditions that have passed into the Kathmandu Valley from one of the many intersecting routes of the Silk Road. The *maṇḍala* is at once Newar and Parbatiyā, Hindu and Buddhist, folk and classical. Despite strict caste restrictions that have preserved distinct ethnic and racial identities, the bodies of the inhabitants of Kathmandu Valley have been inscribed with multiple value systems that are synthesized, organized, and hierarchized by the *maṇḍala*—a symbol of the esoteric traditions of Tantra that has been preserved and disseminated by the royal and religious elite in the valley for at least the last twelve-hundred years.

When Bajracarya worshiped the Kumārī that day, as he had on every other day for more than twenty years, he affirmed through ritual that he acknowledges this tantric discourse, that he lives in it as it lives in him. Through the symbolic power of ritual he brought into the microcosmic body of a virgin the macrocosmic Śakti for deployment at a mesocosmic level. The Kumārī is a medium through which Taleju disseminates herself throughout Nepāla-Maṇḍala, which is her body writ large as geopolitical space. For the *tāntrika* who has been initiated into the system of the *maṇḍala*, the entire country of Nepal is Devī's body. This is because Nepalese *tāntrika*-s operate according to a kind of inside-out logic that situates the origin-point of "objective" space within the consciousness of the witnessing subject. Consequently, the initiated *sādhaka* does not have to wait for the Devī to reveal herself within the body of the Kumārī. Rather, projecting onto the Kumārī the *maṇḍala* constructed within his own mind during elaborate stages of ritualized meditation, the *tāntrika* wields the power to see the Kumārī at all times as the cosmic embodiment of the Śrī Yantra—the very image the virgin sits upon during her daily worship.

For this purpose, Bajracarya—established in correct posture (*āsana*), breath controlled through the proper breathing regimen (*prāṇāyāma*)—began his daily worship of the Kumārī with the construction of an internalized image (*dhāraṇā*) and meditation (*dhyāna*). The image he constructed in his mind was the Śrī Yantra. Once constructed, he meditated on the *bindu* in its center, witnessing *śakti* flow out from each of the points of the triangle and fill the entire *maṇḍala* with grace. Then, through *nyāsa*, he began to instill the beings and powers of this internalized *maṇḍala* in his own limbs, inscribing himself with the wisdom of the *maṇḍala* (*maṇḍala-vidyā*) and making himself a worthy vessel to worship the goddess. After thus encoding his body, he opened his eyes and received the *darśana* of the Kumārī as Taleju-Mahiṣāsura-mārdinī-Tripurasundarī-Kālasaṃkarṣinī, the beautiful one who is the supreme power of the three cities. In this moment the flow of transformation was bi-directional. The ritual agent projected onto the Kumārī his own ritually transformed vision, and in the same moment she



was possessed (*āveśa*) by Taleju and thus transformed. Her transformation, made possible through the ritual, was considered real. Yet the priest had constructed it through the regimen of an internalized vision that he controlled entirely.

From that point the priest Bajracarya proceeded to worship the feet of the goddess, receiving from them the *prasāda* that was once carried daily directly to the Patan king for his consumption. Here the tradition of transmitting sexual fluids, at the basis of tantric practice for at least twelve-hundred years, has been displaced onto an eating ritual that links ingestion to a supreme power whose source is identified as the vulva of Nepal's virgin goddess. After visually mapping the Śrī Yantra across the entire body of the Kumārī, the priest then, without disrobing her, focused this image specifically on the genital area. This is the site of secrecy, the place of ultimate feminine power, where Taleju reveals herself as Guhyeśvarī, the mistress of the secret place. And here, as the place of supreme power, the goddess's *maṇḍala*-body is the Śrī Yantra—the preeminent symbol of Śākta tantric traditions, the emblem of Nepal's queen, and the model of territorial organization and spatial construction that links Nepalese citizens directly to a transcendent goddess whose ultimate abiding place is within their own bodies. Having transformed the Kumārī into Taleju by projecting his internalized vision of the Śrī Yantra onto her microcosmic form, the tantric priest received the blessings of her transformed divine presence. The consumption of *prasāda* in the form of eggs, sweets, and other food items was the ritual documentation that this reciprocal transformation had indeed occurred.<sup>78</sup> Through this blessed food, the power generated by this inside-projected-outside transformation of perceptual space is disseminated into social space as the mesocosmic conduit of a power rooted in the yogic realization that the “objective” world is simply an external projection of the internal continuum of consciousness.

Through this process of ritual consumption the goddess creates a stirring, or vibration, within the microcosmic bodies of the ritual participants as well as within the mesocosmic plane of social space. This stir is her *spanda*, the subtle vibratory pulse that is manifested as the acoustic body of the *maṇḍala*. As the power of cosmic emission (*visarga-śakti*), this pulse makes possible the projection of the goddess onto her own screen as the Śrī Yantra. As the power of individual-awakening (*śakti-pāta*), this pulse stirs the dormant *kuṇḍalinī-śakti* and brings about the internal ascent of the goddess within the body of the *yogin*. As the power that stabilizes and invigorates the social-*maṇḍala*, this pulse stirs through the various ritual performances and musical traditions that serve as conduits for disseminating the goddess's acoustic body. This is why Bajracarya sings his ritual litany with the accompaniment of a small drum. This is why all of Nepal's festivals are accompanied by music. This is why classical musicians play in

the court of the king and why their musical tradition is guarded through initiation and secrecy. This is why Tantras are not philosophical treatises but rather guides for instilling *mantra*-s within the body. Finally, this is why Taleju is the patron goddess of the Kathmandu Valley, for it is through her subtle vibratory pulsations that she transmits her supreme power, awakening and enlivening simultaneously the tri-cosmos, causing all aspects of the *maṇḍala* to tremble with the rhythms of her innate bliss-power. Through her rhythmic sound body, the goddess enlivens the *maṇḍala*.

The Thami shamans of Dolakha worship Tripurasundarī as Taleju, seeking possession by the goddess through the sounds generated by their drumming and the repetitive chanting of her many sacred names. The Ha Bāhā priest of Patan, Bajracarya, worships the Kumārī as Taleju, seeking the divine blessings of the goddess through the ritualized sounds of his litany accompanied by drumming. In this way, the priest at one of the three primary centers of Nepāla-Maṇḍala links himself with Thami shamans situated at the *maṇḍala*'s periphery. He links himself with people whose orientation towards Taleju is disassociated from the *Nityāṣoḍaśikārṇava* and the other canonical works of the Śākta Tantra canon. The link is a pan-Asian technology of producing deity-possession through the ritualized production of sound. In Nepāla-Maṇḍala the classical canonical traditions of Tantra intermingle with indigenous healing traditions, interconnected through technologies of deity-possession rooted in the ritual performances that harness the transformative power of sound.

In the end, then, Nepal's divine Kumārī is many things at once, a foundation in many senses. As a servant to the state, her work symbolizes commitment to the nation's institutional complex, embodied concretely by her master, King Gyānendra Śāh Deva, whose initiation into Sarvāmnāya Śākta Tantra qualifies him to channel, control, and distribute power from the center of the *maṇḍala*. For this end, the Kumārī instantiates a semiotics of power that links the symbolism of the Nepalese goddesses into Taleju, the goddess on high, who ultimately resides within the king himself as his innermost self, as that I-consciousness that underlies, constructs, and unites his world.

## NOTES

1. Along with the *Ritual Guide to the Worship of the Kumārī* (*Kumārīpūjā-Paddhati*), Nepal's National Archives contains over several hundred *paddhati*-s dedicated to the worship of Kumārī, and thousands more that describe tantric ideology and practice. Primary among these are the *Kumārī-Tantra*, Nepal National Archives (Kathmandu, Nepal; hereafter, NNA) E 28/7; *Kumārītarpaṇātma*, NNA E 50/07; *Kumārī-dhyāna-Paddhati*, NNA E 2029/17; *Kumārīpūjāṇabalidānavidhi*, NNA E 2770/12; and the *Kumārī-Pūjā*, NNA D 31/35.
2. Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), p. 147. See Mark Dyczkowski, *The Canon of the Śaivāgama and Kubjikā Tantras of the Western Kaula Tradition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 66.
3. David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 15–19.
4. Ronald Inden, "Hierarchies of Kings in Early Medieval India," *Contributions in Indian Sociology XV* (New Series): pp. 117–121.
5. Vishwanath Prasad Varma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought and Its Metaphysical Foundations* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1954), p. 31, n. 2; see also G. P. Singh, *Political Thought in Ancient India: Emergence of the State, Evolution of Kingship and Inter-State Relations Based on the Saptāṅga Theory of State*, *Reconstructing Indian History & Culture*, no. 2 (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld [P] Ltd.), pp. 121–122.
6. Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the First-Millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 156.
7. Inden, "Hierarchies of Kings," p. 120.
8. White has argued convincingly that tantric ideology was imbedded in the political mainstream by the twelfth century. See David G. White, "Tantra in Practice: Mapping a Tradition," in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David G. White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 3–38.
9. Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
10. Sthaneswhar Timalisina, "Time and Space in Tantric Art," in *Nepal: Old Images, New Insights*, ed. Pratyapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 2005), p. 24.
11. Far earlier than Foucault, Indian scholars had conceptualized their own version of an all-seeing panopticon, embedded at all places within the so-

ciopolitical matrix. As the king's body, inseparable from the governing unit that is its emanation, the omni-present *maṇḍala* instills the watchful eye of power within all levels of society. However, we should not be too quick to read the *maṇḍala* simply as an institution of power in a neo-Marxist sense. Rather, we should take seriously the emic position that the moral order (dharma) of a socio-political zone functions not solely for the maintenance of political power (*artha*) but also for the pleasure (*kāma*) and liberation (*mokṣa*) of each and every citizen within that domain.

12. White, "Mapping a Tradition," p. 26.

13. Jeffrey S. Lidke, *Vishvarupa: A Study of Changu Narayan, Nepal's Most Ancient Temple* (New Delhi: Nirala Publications, 1996).

14. According to Mukunda Rāj Aryal, who has seen the inner image, the cut at the neck is too smooth to have been produced by some antecedent causes. He is certain that the image was designed in this way by King Haridatta Varma in the third century C.E. An inscription by Amśuvarman in 607 C.E. verifies with certainty that by this time the head was already severed. See Lidke, *Vishvarupa*, p. 188.

15. Lidke, *Vishvarupa*, pp. 134–138.

16. Fols. 20b–21a.

17. Mary Slusser, *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*, two vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 317.

18. This is a disputed assertion. However, Professor Aryal has done over twenty years of research on the Changu Narayan temple site and is confident that his dating is accurate.

19. Lidke, *Vishvarupa*, pp. 58–62.

20. Oral Communication, Kathmandu, Nepal, September 4, 1997.

21. *Nityāṣoḍaśikārṇava* (hereafter, NṢA) 4.17–18a:

*Vāgīśvarī jñānaśaktirvāgbhave mokṣarūpiṇī |*  
*Kāmarāje kāmakaḷā kāmārūpā kriyātmikā | | 4.17 a–b | |*  
*Śaktibīje parā sāktiricchaiva śivarūpiṇī | 4.18a. |*

22. Douglas Renfrew Brooks, *Auspicious Wisdom: The Texts and Traditions of Srīvidyā Śākta Tantrism in South India* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 90.

23. Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 178.

24. Ibid. Slusser notes in footnote 86 on this page that the historian G. Vajracarya dates an important Licchavi inscription from this temple as early as 450 C.E. Both Mukunda and Sthanesvar assert that the central image is the original one and that it has, since its origin, been worshipped as Vāgīśvarī. The inscription itself only reveals that its patron was a woman who "desired no longer to bear the suffering of [being] a woman..."

(D.R. Regmi, *Inscriptions of Ancient Nepal*, 3 vols. [New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1983], p. 8). As Slusser notes, this shrine was also one of the last stops for Satis who up until only a few decades ago made their way to the burning *ghāt*-s of Paśupatinātha Temple.

25. *Artharatnāvalī* on NṢA 1.8.

26. Axel Michaels, in collaboration with Nutan Sharma, “Goddess of the Secret: Guhyeśvarī in Nepal and Her Festival,” in *Wild Goddesses in India and Nepal: Proceedings of an International Symposium Berne and Zurich, November 1994*, eds. Axel Michaels, Cornelia Vogelsanger, and Annette Wilke (Bern: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 303–342.

27. An event that is described at some length in the chronicles. See Daniel Wright, *History of Nepal, With an Introductory Sketch of the Country and People of Nepal*, trans. from the *Pabatiya* by Munshi She Shunker Singh Pandit Shri Gunanand (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1993), pp. 21–218.

28. *Gopālarāj-Vaṃśāvalī*, fos. 17a–b. Dhanavajra Vajrācārya and Kamal P. Malla, trans., *The Gopālarājavanṣāvalī*, Nepal Research Centre Publications 9 (Weisbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985), p. 121.

29. While Dhanavajra and Malla’s edition of the *Gopālarāj-Vaṃśāvalī* reads *śrī bhṛṅgareśvara bhaṭṭāraka*, suggesting a male deity, Michaels argues that it should be read as *śrī bhṛṅgareśvarī bhaṭṭārikā*, meaning “goddess in a flask,” which is a common ritual vehicle for Guhyeśvarī. See Michaels and Sharma, “Goddess of the Secret,” p. 315.

30. As Michaels notes in footnote 17 on page 316 of “Goddess of the Secret,” Abhinavagupta makes several references to this important Tantra in his *Tantrāloka*.

31. *Nīśaiñcāra-Tantra*, ninth *paṭala*: fols. 31v–32r. Quoted by Michaels, “Goddess of the Secret,” p. 316:

*Nepāla samsthitam devaṃ paśunāṃ patir iṣyate |*  
*guhyeśvarīsāmāyuktam sthānapālasamavitam |*

32. *Ibid.*, p. 315.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 319.

34. *Nepālamāhātmya* 1.38:

*tavāṅgaṃ patitam guhyaṃ vāgmatītaṭinīṭate |*  
*mṛgasthalyām udīcyāṃ tu tat pīṭhaṃ paramaṃ mahat ||*

35. Robert I. Levy, *Mesocosm, Hinduism and the Organization of Traditional Newar City in Nepal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 231.

36. NNA, Śaiva Tantra 164, reel no. B 28/2. 34 folios.

37. Anne Vergati, “Taleju, Sovereign Deity of Bhaktapur,” in *Gods, Men and Territory: Society and Culture in Kathmandu Valley* (New Delhi: Manohar

Centre de Sciences Humaines, 1995), p. 85. See also Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, pp. 316–320.

38. Vergati, “Taleju,” p. 86.

39. Ibid.

40. Sylvain Lévi, *Le Népal, Étude historique d’un royaume hindou*, Vol. I (Paris: E. Lerous, 1905), pp. 378–379. Quoted in Vergati, “Taleju,” p. 86.

41. Lévi, *Le Népal*, pp. 378–379.

42. Brownen Bledsoe, “An Advertised Secret: The Goddess Taleju and the King of Kathmandu,” in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 195–205.

43. *Sarvāparādhastotra*.

44. Mark Dyczkowski, *Kubjikā, Kālī, Tripurā, and Trika* (Kathmandu: Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 2000).

45. An interpretation not noted by Blesdoe.

46. Blesdoe, “An Advertised Secret,” p. 199.

47. Nepalese Śrī Vidyā *tāntrika*-s view Kubjikā and Tripurasundarī as the inseparable poles of the supreme goddess, Mahā Devī, linking Kubjikā with the power of initiation and Tripurasundarī with the power of realization. Personal communication with Dr. Sthaneshwar Timalsina, May 1998.

48. For *tāntrika*-s, no discursive formation is more powerful than the mantric proclamation that Self=Devī. In Tantra, the answer to the question, “Who am I?” is synonymous with the question, “Who is my deity?” Ultimately, the *tāntrika* is to learn that the vibratory essence of his deity is pure I-awareness, reverberating as that consciousness that pulsates within his initiation-*mantra*. In this context, Taleju, the chosen deity of Nepalese kings since at least the fourteenth century, is the esoteric identity of Nepal’s kings. As the king is the lord of his Nepāla-Maṇḍala, so his I-identity stamps and permeates all sections of his *maṇḍala*. From an esoteric perspective, all citizens within Nepāla-Maṇḍala are logically non-distinct from Taleju, she who is both the power of the foundation (*adhaśakti*) and of the transcendent heights (*parāśakti*).

49. Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 311.

50. These manuscripts form a central textual basis from which Nepalese Śakta *tāntrika*-s construct through praxis a triadic episteme on power. This triad links individual agents to an intermediary set of interconnected social spheres that are in turn linked to an overarching interpretation of reality that makes each of these realms mirrors and containers of each other. *Maṇḍala*-s within *maṇḍala*-s, replicas of a divine template, all contained within the principle of I-awareness, the power of self-identity invigorates the nation and its citizens through establishing an identity of transcendence



that can be actualized by any citizen who operates according to the means of wisdom (*vidyopāyaktā*) crafted by the architects of the *maṇḍala*.

51. Wright, *History*, p. 157.

52. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 114–117. Viewing Nepalese Tantra through the lens of social-constructivism, a culture-critical analyst like Bell could quickly and deftly identify the ritualistic procedures by which power relations are inscribed upon the bodies of not only the king and queen, but all those inhabiting the discursive fields in which the institution of Nepalese kingship plays itself out.

53. In the earliest literature on the Devī we find this term “conqueror of the four regions of the world,” highlighting an early connection between the goddess and the politics of warfare. See, for example, White, *Alchemical Body*, esp. pp. 15–23.

54. Thomas B. Coburn, “Devī: The Great Goddess,” in *Devī: Goddesses of India*, eds. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 31–48.

55. Michael Allen, *The Cult of Kumārī* (Kathmandu: Tribhuvan University Press, 1975), p. 16.

56. Allen, *Cult of Kumari*, p. 16. See also Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 311.

57. Several Malla kings equated their deity with the long-held tradition of Śākya Kumārī. According to this tradition, Jayaprakāś Malla built an official Kumārī residence in Basantapur and worshipped the goddess to fend off impending Gorkha attack. See Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 136, n. 28.

58. *Dibya Upadesh*. Translated by L. F. Stiller as *Prithvīnarayan Shah in the Light of the Dibya Upadesh* (Kathmandu: Himalayan Book Centre, 1989), pp. 40–41.

59. Veronique Bouillier, “The King and His Yogī: Prithvi Nārāyaṇ Śāh, Bhagavantānāth and the Unification of Nepal in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Gender, Caste, and Power in South Asia* (Delhi: Manohar, 1991), pp. 3–21.

60. Bouillier, “The King and His Yogī,” p. 4.

61. Here, the relationship of tantric *yogin* to (tantric) king highlights a fusion of political and spiritual power not found in the classical model of king and brahmin priest in which the brahmin’s ritual purity stands in dialectical opposition to the king’s secular power. See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System*, trans. Mark Sainsbury (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). See also J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

62. Bouillier, “The King and His Yogī,” p. 16.

63. The equation of queen with mother goddess is also found in South Indian traditions. See Dennis Hudson, "Madurai: The City as Goddess," in *Urban Form and Meaning in South Asia: The Shaping of Cities from Prehistoric to Precolonial Times*, eds. Howard Spodek and Doris Meth Srinivasan (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1993), pp. 125–142.
64. Śrī Prasād Ghimire, *The Life of Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ Śāh* (forthcoming). See also White, *The Alchemical Body*, pp. 310–311.
65. During his military outings Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ would consult the *Svarodaya*, a Tantric manual that correlates the rhythms of the king's breath with potential for military success. Understanding his own body to be inseparable from the body of his deity, and by extension, his army, Pṛthivī Nārāyaṇ proceeded into battle according to the rhythms of his breath.
66. Ghimire, *Life and Rule*.
67. V. Carroll Dunham, "Nepal's Virgin Goddesses," in *Hinduism Today* (June 1997): p. 27.
68. *Kumārīpūjaṇabalidānavidhi*, NNA Reel no. E 1406/2, fol. 24–27.
69. *Bālasundarī-Kavaca*, NNA Reel no. E 207/19, fol. 6.4–8.2.
70. Mukunda Aryal, *The Kumārī of Kathmandu* (Kathmandu: Heritage Research, 1991), pp. 23–35.
71. King Birendra's Oxford degree was a well-known fact among Nepalese literati. For some it was viewed as a sign of the King's betrayal of traditional values. Others interpreted it as an example of the warrior engaged in the skillful deployment of his art. For some *tāntrika*-s, King Birendra was regarded as the receptacle of power through which the goddess disseminates her seeds of power (*śaktibīja*). This same regard is rarely felt towards the current king.
72. Each line of the *yantra* resonates uniquely as a particular sound vibration. There is distinction. Yet, every line, intersection, pulsation, and vibration of this cosmogram is non-distinct from the center-point that generates it. Similarly, the high goddesses of Nepal's royal pantheon are all equal manifestation of the one, supreme consciousness that is the goal of Śākta Tantra practice.
73. *Timro pahile boleko re ki yesko kām siddhaunlai ailebāta dherai samāy lagcha*.
74. Oral Communication, Patan, Nepal, October 1997.
75. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
76. Oral Communication, Patan, Nepal, November 1997.
77. Alexis Sanderson, "Maṇḍala and Agamic Identity in the Trika of Kashmir," in *Mantra et Diagrammes Rituels dans L'Hindouisme*, ed. Andre Padoux (Paris: CNRS, 1986), p. 210.

78. This “ritual documentation” states that the Nepalese *tāntrika*-s have understood clearly Abhinavagupta’s dictum that the stages of ritual mirror the stages of unfolding consciousness. For just as Parāśakti brings forth creation by projecting within herself the wheel of power that is her true being (*śakticakra-sadbhāva*), so the *tāntrika* internalizes himself to his own projection by viewing the Kumārī as the embodiment of the goddess-*maṇḍala* he worships and views within himself during the course of his own meditation practice.

