



## Twilight Zones and the Cultural Production of Violence in Nepal

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### *Author's contribution*

*The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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### ABSTRACT

In 1988, Hyonju, an ex-M.P. (Member of Parliament) was dragged through the streets of his home town in Bhaktapur, Nepal, to eventual death following accusations that he was misappropriating relief items in the wake of natural disaster. Rumors of corruption were common features of political life in Nepal, however the ritual killing of the accused was not. The purpose of the following study is to investigate the historical preconditions to Hyonju's death, beginning with the emergence of the Nepali nation-state in the late 1700s and concluding with the country's growing disenfranchisement and seeds of political discontent prior to the dissolution of the absolute monarchy in 1990. The article reveals how the city of Bhaktapur differentiated itself from the capital and royal family through the evolution of a distinct social, political and religious identity. Special attention is paid to the role of Tantric rituals, a key component of this process of self-differentiation and a source of legitimacy for Bhaktapur's deposed rulers and political elites. The paper's major finding is that Hyonju's positionality placed his life at risk by situating him within and between the previously described historical divisions in a Foucauldian twilight zone. The article concludes that the murder of a community leader was the byproduct of identity politics and cultural norms going back centuries.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: TWILIGHT ZONES AND ACTS OF VIOLENCE

*Visit this enchanted and peaceful Himalayan Kingdom where villagers greet one another by saying Namaste or 'I respect the God in you.*

(Invitation taken from a tourist brochure to Nepal)

The crowd's accusations grew louder and Hyonju was dragged from the podium.

Brothers! Sisters! Little ones! The King and the Queen protect us all! Everyone is happy, everyone is peaceful in Nepal.

(Lyrics from a popular folk song)

The ordeal lasted some ten to twelve hours as Hyonju was beaten, ridiculed and dragged through the streets until his death late that night.

How beautiful is my country. Everyone is dancing. Everyone is singing. Everything is peaceful. And we are all content.

(Cover page taken from a Mahendra Malla reader, a textbook series found in most Nepali schools before the dissolution of absolute monarchy)

In 1988 an ex-M.P. (Member of Parliament) was dragged through the streets of Bhaktapur to his eventual death following accusations that he was misappropriating the relief items he had been entrusted to distribute in the wake of one of Nepal's most devastating earthquakes. Reports of his death spread quickly as news frequently does in Nepal, propelled by friends, coworkers, cousins, and bus drivers across city and village arteries, eventually traveling west towards Kirtipur where I was a university student. Not surprisingly, initial reactions to the event evinced a combination of shock, horror, and disbelief: Hyonju's death, by most accounts, was extraordinary and incomprehensible.

Representations of the event were being shaped in the hands of various speakers, different bits and pieces being carried away by diverse audiences, who relayed yet another version at village tea stalls or to neighbors at local water taps. News of Hyonju's death was debated late into the evening and acquired new meanings amidst the shadows of kitchen hearths. Predictably, every retelling was embedded in a

matrix of kin, communal, political and other relationships and each version reflected these various alliances and special interests. By daybreak, these multiple and competing versions could be broadly divided into two camps according to whose interests they most closely represented, that of the state or that of a small political party headquartered in Bhaktapur.

This research paper draws on participant observation conducted in the Kathmandu Valley in the wake of Hyonju's death. I focused my fieldwork efforts on the towns of Kirtipur, where I was a student at university, Patan, and Bhaktapur, the last being the site of Hyonju's ordeal. These three fieldwork sites had the additional benefit of being predominantly Newar, the ethnic grouping to which Hyonju belonged and a defining feature in the construction of his political identity. I also utilize discursive analysis to examine different narrative accounts of Hyonju's death, in particular, and that of nation-building, in general, to reveal underlying socio-political objectives in the reconstruction, deployment and strategies of representing the death of a former M.P. and also the nation-state that produced him [1]. In so doing I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of Hyonju's death and its relationship to nation-building and identity politics, an approach List and Valentini refer to as "social ontology" which seeks to "investigate [sic] the nature of phenomena such as joint intentions, collective actions, social norms and ... group agency" [2].

Clearly any version of an event is indexical, and more so if that event involves murder [3,4]. While unearthing different narratives of this event, however, it was not along the clearly demarcated special interest lines that I found understanding but rather in the spaces between versions, or better yet the gray areas where versions overlapped, the "twilight zone" as Foucault calls it, in which "various significations could be inscribed" (1975:280). Paradoxically, it was within these spaces of ambiguity, ambivalence and contradiction that I found insight into the circumstances of Hyonju's death; these insights, however, were both clarifying and frightening, the latter because it made sense that a man could be murdered for over ten to twelve hours in front of family, neighbors, and friends in the place of his birth and ultimately his death.

## 2. PAPER OVERVIEW

Was Hyonju's death as extraordinary as initial responses might indicate? If not, what factors could have possibly created the conditions for its occurrence? The search for answers begins with Bhaktapur's past and the manner in which the city's development is intimately tied to larger processes of nation-state formation spanning two centuries. Specifically, the city of Bhaktapur defined itself largely in opposition to and distinct from the royal family and the political locus of power in Kathmandu. The paper begins by detailing the process of consolidation and unification that led to the establishment of the Kingdom of Nepal, including the narrative of diversity and inclusion invoked by the Shah rulers which framed their political aspirations. While the ruling Shah family pursued national unification, the city of Bhaktapur sought self-differentiation, and the next section of this article recounts how the city developed its own unique identity distinct from the center through a combination of religious rituals, politics and cultural practices. This section underscores the pivotal role that Tantrism played in both the socio-cultural development of the city and also in the ongoing legitimization of the city's elites and political leadership who were deposed in the wake of modern nation-state formation [5]. The emergence of Nepal's Panchayat system is then analyzed to demonstrate how this new system of representation, created to devolve central governance and decentralize authority to the grassroots level, in fact replicated and perpetuated many of the deficiencies of previous forms of governance through corrupt and exclusionary practices [6]. The article concludes by illustrating how a combination of factors converged to create the conditions of Hyonju's death. Specifically, the shortcomings of the Panchayat System, as well as Hyonju's positionality within the cleavages separating Bhaktapur from the dominant political culture in Kathmandu, left the former M.P. in a twilight zone whose shifting polyvalence left the former M.P. unprotected.

## 3. KING PRITHVI NARAYAN SHAH AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF NEPAL

From his vantage point on the outlying ridges rising above the valley floor, King Prithvi Narayan Shah surveyed the Newar kingdoms of Kathmandu, Patan, Kirtipur and Bhaktapur sprawled below. The year was 1744. Was the Valley as he had remembered it during his

boyhood visits to Ranjit Malla, King of Bhaktapur and a mentor with whom he enjoyed a *mithabuwa* relationship, or fictive father-son relationship? The young boy had obviously learned his lessons in ruling and leadership well, for only the defeat of the Kathmandu Valley stood between King Prithvi Narayan and his dream of a Nepalese nation. Operating from his own kingdom in Gorkha in central Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah's military campaign had resulted in the consolidation of some forty-odd kingdoms and principalities nestled in the Himalayas, fanning out into the Gangetic plain, totaling over 150,000 square kilometers.<sup>1</sup>

Though King Prithvi Narayan was literally only a valley away from the establishment of a Himalayan Kingdom that would stretch from the Mahakali River in the west to the Mechi along the southern border, his years of military experience would be confronting centuries of indigenous rule and a thriving and sophisticated urban civilization that far outstripped both the cultural and material achievements of the surrounding principalities that had already been defeated at the hands of Shah's Gorkhali army. Historical evidence indicates the existence of previous rulers, the Kirant and Licchavi Kings, during the Valley's ancient period (900 B.C. to 880 A.D.). The Valley's medieval period (880 A.D. to 1768 A.D.) witnessed the rise of the Malla kings, under whose patronage and participation Newari culture developed and flourished.<sup>2</sup> A wealth of natural resources, fertile agricultural land, thriving trade with Tibet and India, and a hardworking populace of artisans and entrepreneurs enabled the Mallas to establish prosperous and powerful cities not easily prone to outside attack and whose penetration would require a military campaign commensurate in strength and persistence.

King Prithvi Narayan's conquest of the Kathmandu Valley was a coordinated attack spanning twenty-five years. Campaign phases one and two involved first sealing off the valley's northern and western passes and secondly those to the south, thereby isolating the area

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<sup>1</sup>Nepal's current area stands at 147,181 square kilometers, the most significant territorial losses suffered at the hands of Tibet in 1790 and British India in 1814. Some land losses notwithstanding, Nepal's contemporary borders still closely approximate those established by King Prithvi Narayan Shah over 200 years ago.

<sup>2</sup>For a comprehensive overview of different monarchs and ruling families in Nepal, see Bajracharya's and Michaels' three-volume set *History of Kings of Nepal: A Buddhist Chronicle* [7].

completely and reducing its inhabitants to total dependence on their own produce. Phase three involved actual physical encroachment as the “Malla Kings were forced to watch in morbid fascination as the Gorkhali troops pushed their outposts right up to the walls of their capitals and finally to see them breakthrough [to] victory” [8]. Kirtipur, Kathmandu and then Patan fell in relatively quick succession, their defeat expedited by in-fighting as well as the timing of King Prithvi Narayan's surprise assault on Kathmandu during the festival of Indra Jatra. The stronghold of Bhaktapur, however, held-out for more than one year, providing refuge for the fleeing Valley kings who had already suffered defeat. King Ranajit Malla's sponsorship of the young Gorkhali prince many years before ultimately proved fatal, for there was little strategizing left to this ruler that would contain an element of surprise sufficient to confound the advancing troops. Bhaktapur fell on November twelfth, holding out for two days after the “Gorkhals burst through the eastern gate and poured into the city” on November tenth under the cover of darkness [8]. In 1769, King Prithvi Narayan Shah inaugurated his Himalayan kingdom, deeming it a “garden for all types of people” [9]. Consolidation of the new nation was pursued in part through language, with Nepali replacing Newari as the official state language in the Kathmandu Valley and providing a *lingua franca* for the vast array of languages and dialects spoken elsewhere in the kingdom and that today numbers over one hundred.<sup>3</sup> In order to legitimize his absolute authority over the fledgling kingdom, Shah invoked Vedic-Puranic conceptions of kingship which sanctioned the divine right of kings by virtue of their incarnation as Lord Vishnu [11]. It should be noted, however, that while invoking more orthodox Hindu conceptions of kingship, monarchy in Nepal has traditionally attempted to maintain its populist base by coexisting with and assimilating features of Nepal's rich and varied religious traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, shamanism, etc.).

Also in keeping with Vedic conceptions of *varna* or caste, King Prithvi Narayan's administration was primarily comprised of Chhettris, and also a few Brahmins whose primary caste duties were that of warrior (and by extension statesmen and kings) and priests, respectively. Since the Shah kings were also Chhettri, recruitment from this

warrior class also stabilized the nascent monarchy with an element of personal loyalty reinforced by marriage alliances and ritual ties. Though justified in terms of things spiritual, the performance of one's caste duty was not without material gain, for the Shah's Chhettri military allies and Brahmin priests received gifts of *jagir* (land) for their loyalty and service, a custom prompting one scholar to observe that caste was actually a “system conceived by and for the protection of their [the Brahmin and Chhettri castes] own interests” and whose legacy continues to be reflected in contemporary patterns of land ownership [12]. Already entrenched in the practices of the ruling elite, caste stratification was nevertheless formally institutionalized by the state in 1854 when the legal code of *char varna chhattisjat* officially fixed these social groupings into four *varnas* and thirty-six castes, whereby the status of the former Malla rulers was further diminished by virtue of the label *matwali*, a caste designation signifying the consumption of alcohol, a practice regarded as ritually impurifying according to Vedic tradition.

King Prithvi Narayan Shah's monarchy rapidly became routinized into a tradition of succession by primogeniture. The seat of power moved from Gorkha to its current residence in Kathmandu. Subsequent reigns were characterized by a blatant disregard for the general populace since the sole goal of the state apparatus was the continual extraction of the agricultural surplus for the ruling elites [13]. During this period, control of state machinery first passed into the hands of various other Chhettri families of military fame before falling under the full control of the Rana Prime Minister-ship in the 1860s.

Under the Ranas the state attained new heights of corruption and exploitation. Various forms of bonded labor, regressive taxes and exploitative landlord-tenant relationships were a few of the repressive institutions sustaining this agrarian bureaucracy, imprisoning most of the populace in a cycle of indebtedness for the affluent lifestyles of a few [14]. One of the most visible markers of the Rana regime that can still be seen in Kathmandu today was the construction of sprawling European style palaces, whose lateral expansion ate-up valuable agricultural land in addition to the blatant extravagance they symbolized. The Ranas (*vis-a-vis* the state) brooked absolutely no opposition to their rule, imprisoning or killing-off enemies, even shedding blood amongst family members competing for

<sup>3</sup> According to the most recent census data from 2011, there are 123 languages identified in Nepal (Government of Nepal National Planning Commission Secretariat Central Bureau of Statistics [10]).

power [15]. Although the judicial, legislative and executive power established by Prithvi Narayan Shah was clearly in the hands of other ruling elites from the 1820s until 1951 with the Shahs relegated to figurehead status, the king's divine right to rule continued to be invoked to lend whoever was actually exercising state power legitimacy, and the Nepalese monarchy was still lauded as a symbol of national unity embodying the common emotional relationship of a nation" [10].

Clearly this "imagined community" of the modern nation-state of Nepal was not the garden for all types of people that King Prithvi Narayan Shah had envisioned [16].<sup>4</sup> Nation-building, in fact, represented an ongoing process of political and economic disenfranchisement for the many Nepalese people falling outside of the boundaries of patronage networks through which resources were channeled. Ruling monarchs did not always exemplify the virtues informing Vedic-Puranic conceptions of kingship, or the protective function of the Chhettri caste to which they and many of their political appointees belonged. Rather than the emotional bonds and sense of loyalty generated from the benevolence and justice of a ruler who was a deity incarnate, many of the Nepali people felt disconnected, alienated and socioeconomically marginalized, much as they would decades later with the advent of the Panchayat System, described later in the paper.

Additionally, the modern nation-state of Nepal, though externally united by territorial boundaries, was crisscrossed internally by boundaries of caste, class, ethnicity, language, and religion, to name a few. Nowhere were these multiple strands of difference more dense and intertwined than in Bhaktapur, and this was surely one of the contributing factors enabling this Newari kingdom to hold-out against the advancing Gorkhali army for so long, albeit without supplies. Bhaktapur's resistance to the imposition of King Prithvi Narayan Shah's monarchy, moreover, lasted far longer than the year during which they thwarted the Gorkhali King's military campaign. Bhaktapur demonstrated a cultural sovereignty that continues to demarcate and protect most but not all of its residents from external influences.

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson conceptualized "imagined community" as a means of better understanding nationalism, which he regarded as a modern enterprise. Anderson argued that nations are socially constructed and imagined political communities (2006).

#### 4. CULTURAL SOVEREIGNTY IN BHAKTAPUR: SACRED GEOGRAPHY, SACRIFICE AND SOLIDARITY

It is commonly said that in her daily life Bhaktapur (sic) resembles the outlying and, to Europeans, unknown parts of Nepal more than does any other town in the Valley. She rests upon the fold above her curving river cliff adjusting herself to its couch-like shape, and cultivates her well-watered fields below, remote-willingly remote- from her neighbors, and one of the most picturesque towns of the East [17].

Perhaps it was the physical beauty, in addition to the rich farmlands and possibility for trade expansion that originally lured Ananda Deva from a nearby kingdom and the amenities of urban life to settle in this area nineteen kilometers southeast of Kathmandu. Ananda Deva Malla founded Bhaktapur as a royal city approximately in 1150 A.D., over a century after the fall of the Licchavi dynasty and at the beginning of the Malla dynasty which was in power until the arrival of King Prithvi Narayan Shah. Having unified and incorporated many of the surrounding villages and erecting 12,000 houses, Ananda Deva constructed a palace and established a court. Finally, having received instructions from the Navadurga or Nine Durgas, Ananda Deva housed the images of these dangerous deities as they were known in their proper and designated place to protect the town from internal and external forces. Later King Harisimhadeva, added Taleju and her associated Tantric cult to this pantheon and as the official lineage goddess of the Newar kings [18].

Migratory streams from India and Tibet commingled in Bhaktapur's Newar population and was reflected in their language (evincing both Sanskrit and Tibeto-Burman elements), ethnic stock (a mixture of Indo-Aryan and Mongolian strains), and religion (predominantly Hindu as well as aspects of Buddhism).<sup>5</sup> Well situated between Lhasa and northern India,

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<sup>5</sup> Newar religion reflects elements of both Hinduism and Buddhism to extremely varying degrees. In this paper the Hindu aspects, and in turn the tantric elements are emphasized as they are in actual ritual practice in Bhaktapur. Had I shifted the site of analysis slightly northwest into Patan, another Newari town, the Buddhist elements would have received more emphasis. However, as Gellner stated, "the definition of 'Buddhism' and 'Buddhist' as opposed to 'Hinduism' and 'Hindu' is far from simple in the Newar context" [19].

Bhaktapur also boasted a thriving business and trade community. The city's geographic location was enviable in other ways as well, surrounded as it was by some of the richest farmland in all of Nepal. Unfortunately, temples, palaces and other signs of Bhaktapur's prosperity were wiped out at the hands of Muslim invaders who burnt much of the city to the ground during the fourteenth century, an invasion which "shook the foundations of the kingdom" and "laid waste the whole Valley of Nepal" [18].

Bhaktapur had been leveled, and if any single ruler possessed both the vision and political will to rebuild it, it was Jayasthiti Malla, who came to power six years after the devastation in 1355 A.D.

Jayasthiti Malla revived, extended, and codified an order that built on preexisting forms and forced them into Hindu ideals of the proper form for a little kingdom, a city-state... This order was the mesocosmic order of the Newar cities, which was to last for some 600 years [18].

Levy defines this Newar mesocosm as a way of life that permeates both city "and individual resident alike, an organized meaningful world intermediate to the microcosmic worlds of individuals and the culturally conceived macrocosm, the universe, at whose center the city lies" and it is largely to his notion of mesocosm that we now turn to sort out the rich and dense ritual life of Bhaktapur (1990:2). Urban space, civic life and culture contribute to the ongoing drama of ritual life in Bhaktapur upon whose stage resident actors, including the deities, fulfilled certain roles according to time (of the ritual and festival cycle), place (where in the city they were located), and activity (the ritual or festival they were participating in) [20]. In this way space defines and derives meaning from the individual actors located within it [18]. Bhaktapur, then, is a complex exercise in the boundary maintenance of both public and private space:

... what is peculiar about Bhaktapur is the sheer quantity of such boundaries, the richness of the conceptions, emotions and operations associated with them and their particular problematics. For not only are there many of them, not only are they problematically anchored in the more fixed qualities of perceivable nature, not only are objects and events located in shifting classes and hierarchies, but there is, ... a traditional

and frequently used emphasis on their openness under certain conditions and on their illusoriness to a higher knowledge. Bhaktapur as a symbolically constituted social order must always strive through action to keep these boundaries and the categories they bound from dissolving, to protect though constant vigilant action an order that is not otherwise guaranteed in seemingly hard reality or in codes of laws [18].

That which lay outside Bhaktapur's boundaries or were clearly not of Bhaktapur were considered especially suspect. Thus, in addition to the multiple boundaries defining particular contexts within Bhaktapur, broader city boundaries were maintained to "push people back within the civic boundary" by symbolizing the potential dangers of the outside [18].

Jayasthiti Malla and subsequent rulers defined these city spaces and boundaries according to the precepts of Hinduism, whose mandala layout, plans, street patterns, squares and housing ordered residents' thoughts as well as their physical space:

The diagrammatic town layouts were believed to have the same cosmic-magic effect on the initiated town dweller that the mandala (a graphic reproduction of the universe used for contemplative thinking) had on the yogi [21].

Preeminent in the planning of these Hindu cities was the axiom that spatial arrangements should reflect caste relationships [22]. Prestige decreased both secularly and ritually from center to periphery. Sweepers, executioners, butchers and other outcastes-impure from their ritually polluting occupations-were relegated to the periphery of town while the center was reserved for members of high castes [23]. These boundaries also organized kinship groups within castes according to prestige, authority and especially purity.

Without an understanding of the opposition between purity and impurity, the division of space in Hindu cities above makes little sense. "Preoccupation with the impure and impure", states Dumont, "is constant in Hindu life" [24]. Purity exists within a hierarchy primarily determined by one's caste (*varna*), however it must be maintained through a lifestyle appropriate to one's *jati* or caste determined

status/functional roles expressed through rules of marriage and commensality, occupation and rituals, to name a few [25]. Just as actors can assume different identities according to their activity in time and space, so too can individuals move in and out of varying states of purity and impurity depending on the ingestion of particular foods, contact with specific substances or participation in various rituals. Selfhood is shifting and context dependent, an “ontological status”, according to Kondos, defined by its mutability, capacity for transformation and subsequent state of constant flux [26].

Such a phenomenology has profound implications for social structure in light of conceptions about defilement and degradation within a Hindu community. Boundaries and the symbolic orders they define must be vigilantly protected given their problematic anchoring in shifting and open natures or qualities [18]. Hence, while there is much at stake in this ordering of social hierarchy according to purity, there are no guarantees that one's position is guaranteed, given a person's mutability or vulnerability to change. “It is precisely this open interactive aspect between pollution and social structure,” says Levy,

... that motivates action in that order insofar as it must constantly struggle actively to maintain the congruencies between the ways of life and the order-constructing states of pollution of its members' (1990:397).

Individuals, then, are alternately included or excluded from certain associations within a social hierarchy based on evaluations of purity and pollution. The city likewise utilizes these concepts to determine proper relations and positions and to “motivate adherence to the public system of relations” [18].

Though Bhaktapur's urban form gives physical testimony to the religious foundation it is constructed upon, the type of Hinduism espoused by its residents is noticeably different in both emphasis and expression from the Hinduism practiced by the conquering Shah dynasty and the broader *parbatiya* (hill population). While much of the *parbatiya* population propitiates Siva, Vishnu, Ganesha and more of the deities from the Hindu Puranic tradition, residents of Bhaktapur, though not ignoring these gods, incorporate Taleju, the mandalic goddesses, Navadurga and far more

Tantric deities into their ritual life, with attendant differences in gender, offerings, goals and ritual expression between the two subgroups [18].<sup>6</sup> The central divinities in the former ordinary group (as referenced in everyday speech) are predominantly male, while the dangerous deities of the Tantric group are predominantly female. While ordinary deities are offered gifts of fruit, sweetmeats, and *dhaee* (yogurt), the dangerous deities can only be appeased with alcohol and meat. This meat is presented through rituals of blood sacrifice.

Certainly, the appearance of these dangerous deities in story and art is worthy of their ritual offering, with

... features that escape from the constraints of ordinary everyday reality. They include fangs, cadaverous bodies, bulging eyes, garlands of decapitated heads or skulls, mantles of flayed human skin, and multiples arms. The arms carry human calvarias (understood to be drinking cups full of human blood) and various destructive weapons [18].

Not surprisingly, while rituals incorporating the ordinary deities are mimetic of “respectful behavior”, “tolerant understanding” and everyday “moral performance”, the dangerous Tantric rituals involve acts of power through blood sacrifice which challenge the ordinary “moral order of the city” (even as they act in service of this structure) and must be carefully orchestrated and monitored by trained practitioners [18]. Understandably, Tantric priests receive training that differs from their Brahmin counterparts, lest the power of the amoral forces that they are unleashing escapes its ritual boundaries and causes chaos and harm within the community.

Tantric deities are largely defined by their protective functions and by the rituals of blood sacrifice associated with them. Astamatrkas (eight mothers) and Tripurasundari (the central goddess also featured in the Upanishads), or the nine mandalic goddesses are situated on Bhaktapur's periphery and city core, respectively, and oversee the boundaries of the city [18]. As the political goddess, Taleju's special responsibility is to safeguard and empower the Malla kings, whose lineage she continued to

<sup>6</sup> These subgroup divisions represent major tendencies rather than mutually exclusive categories. For instance there are certainly rituals in which a Newar family worships Ganesha, just as there are instances when *parbatiya* Hindus supplicate Tantric goddesses.

legitimize even after their defeat by Prithvi Narayan Shah and continues to commemorate the Malla dynasty today as though they are still alive [18]. Navadurga or the Nine Durgas, in turn, “protect the city by helping to assure the proper relation of individuals to the city’s dangerous’ divinities” [18].<sup>7</sup>All aspects of tantrism, be they spatial, temporal or performative, assist in the maintenance of Bhaktapur’s symbolic order. There is a well-known Newari saying, that states “If the city is in proper order, the country can be frightened off” [18]. It should come as no surprise, then, that during the nine weeks of the lunar calendar in which the Nine Durgas are absent from Bhaktapur, evil spirits freely enter the city, increasing risk of disease, disaster, or “other qualities and dangers of the outside” [18]. The Nine Durgas, meanwhile, roam the city in search of the human skullcaps they take from living men and use as drinking vessels [18].

In addition to their protective functions, the dangerous deities are characterized by their need for blood sacrifice. Blood sacrifice is a dramatic performance believed to empower its actors- tantric practitioner, spectators and deities alike - through an encounter with the sacred or, for the goddesses themselves, through fortification from the blood offering. From the sprinkling of water to the stroke of a knife or to merely serving as a spectator, any degree of participation in a killing can be empowering. The most graphic manner in which to partake of the forces unleashed in blood sacrifice, however, is through the ingestion of bloodstained Prasad (a sacrament) or by consuming the sacrificial animal itself at a communal feast [18]. Furthermore, ingestion is transformative because one’s very being is mutable and capable of shifting between states of purity and impurity, between power and weakness, etc. simply through contact with substances.

Despite its extremely high profile in Tantric ritual life as well as the number of precepts and training surrounding it, a surprisingly fine line exists between blood sacrifice as ritual and such killings as murder. The distinction between appropriate ritual and murder is entirely context-bound and dependent upon time and space, who is conducting the sacrifice, the manner in which it is being carried out, and the reasonable limits imposed upon it. There are designated times

within the ritual cycle such as Dashain when blood sacrifice is not only appropriate but expected; similarly there are designated locations such as the Durga temples throughout the city that are proper sites of sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> Again, only specially trained Tantric priests should conduct blood ritual or the power unleashed may prove uncontrollable and wreak havoc. This guideline is altered in public settings, however, in which lower castes conduct the actual killing in order to protect the “highest groups... from the possible stigma of slaughter” [18]. Additionally, there is a special Newar manner of blood sacrifice that differs from other Nepalese methods of simply decapitating an animal quickly. That is, Newars typically slit the throat and exsanguinate the animal, for “the animal should have life in him to witness the sacrifice he is making as his gift to the deity” [18]. Lastly, persistent and unnecessary sacrifice beyond the precepts of the ritual cycle is considered evil [18]. In short, the morally questionable and potentially stigmatizing act of killing is transformed by context and the various markers that signify its appropriateness [18].

Entrenched though it may be in the ritual life of the community, residents of Bhaktapur must nonetheless be socialized into the acceptability of blood sacrifice, indicated by some of the following quotes from men recalling their perceptions of sacrifice during their youth:

It is a kind of cruelty. Someone is doing something cruel to the animal and he may do something cruel to me. Every man is also like an animal. A man can kill with a knife, that’s why I used to feel troubled. But afterward I got used to the religion and to all kinds of sacrifice.

Killing is not good. Killing causes something to happen to your mind.

I had pity for the goat, and I felt some sort of uneasiness which came into my mind. What if I were killed and given as sacrifice in that way, what would happen to me? If I were, you know, given as sacrifice, you know, with my head turned up like that and a knife blade being up on my throat... I used to get that kind of feeling, but these days I don’t [18].

<sup>7</sup>It is ironic, as Levy points out, that even though men are the critical actors in the public social organization of Hindu communities, nearly all of the deities that protect the city are mother goddesses [18].

<sup>8</sup>Dashain celebrates the triumph of good over evil through the Durga Goddess’ slaying of the demon Mahisasura and thereby assisting Lord Rama in liberating the earth which had been terrorized by this evil god of the underworld [27].



These quotes express an obvious and direct association between one's self and the sacrificial animal. Such reactions are understandable given the nature of the activity as well as the informant's age, however the remarks cannot simply be written off as youthful fears and fantasies. Interestingly, there are past and present references in Bhaktapur to actual human sacrifice, which are as difficult to disprove as they are to prove. Levy argues that ultimately individuals are motivated towards sacrifice through a genuine desire to become full members in the community and that such solidarity is "urged by a sort of forced choice between an identification with the community of sacrificers and an identification with its sacrificial victims" [18]. In other words, the choice is between solidarity with a collectivity and the protection that it provides, or to suffer whatever consequences befall those who are not identified as members. Expressed slightly differently,

The dangerous deity, usually a goddess, in concert with the meanings of blood sacrifice offered to her, represents the destruction that will overtake members of a group if they violate adherence to the moral system and moral solidarity of the group. She binds members into the group as well as defending the group's boundaries and representing it as a whole. [18].

Communities, argues Victor Turner, become "fully intelligible only in the light of values embodied and expressed in symbols at ritual performances", condensed as they are with multiple and "disparate referents" to the social structure they are signifying [28]. Multiple meanings and referents similarly converge in the Newar ritual of blood sacrifice. To reiterate, the symbolic order of Bhaktapur is maintained primarily through boundaries constructed according to precepts of purity. These boundaries, in turn, are protected and enforced by a pantheon of dangerous Tantric deities, who are propitiated and fortified through blood sacrifice. It is not simply the deities who are being appeased through this ritual, but the boundaries of purity and pollution they maintain and hence the hierarchies created through these bounded oppositions. Blood sacrifice, like any effective ritual, condenses and exaggerates ordinary behavior and "freezes (sic) it into poses" [29].

As useful a point of entry blood sacrifice provides into Bhaktapur's cultural milieu, it can be as mystifying as it is clarifying, for many of the

meanings it is packed with are paradoxical, such as the notion of castes whose level of purity is fixed by birthright, and yet, at the same time, is mutable and subject to change. Or the questionable morality of blood sacrifice, which is necessary for the protection and solidarity of the community, yet is contestable enough that high ranked priests will not conduct it in public. These paradoxes, in turn, create tension, arguably the greatest of which exists at the demarcation between the community and the outside world. This boundary is maintained by dangerous deities capable of great protection to those identified as community members; conversely, these same deities with flayed skin and blood-filled skullcaps severely punish individuals who cross these borders into the outside world. It is a delicate balance made even more fragile by the multiplicity of roles an individual can fulfill as they move between activities and across time and space. And even when one is momentarily fixed in a context, their state of being is mutable, and hence their identity.

As elucidated by Bloch, Moore and Myerhoff, and many others, in addition to the religious, mythical and various other belief systems they evoke, rituals must also be examined as political processes or theatrics of secular power [30,31]. Similarly, political strategies intertwine with ritual life in Bhaktapur that must be contextualized within the broader project of nation-state formation. In addition to the loss of political sovereignty suffered by Bhaktapur in 1769, there was an accompanying sense of economic dispossession and threats to Newar identity. The burden of tribute to the new Shah dynasty and later under the Ranas was heavy, and probably more difficult to evade given Bhaktapur's proximity to the capital, Kathmandu. Newar caste status was reinterpreted in 1854 and demoted to the ritually impure designation of *matwali*. Newari was replaced as the language of state, though it continued to be spoken in Bhaktapur. Even the landscape changed and began to be dotted with expansive western-style palaces that consumed valuable agricultural land instead of the vertical pagoda palaces designed by Newar artisans.<sup>9</sup>

Although political opposition was not tolerated, the Shahs and even the Ranas had a reputation for religious tolerance, if for no other reason than to expand their political influence by assimilating

<sup>9</sup>It should be qualified, however, that Kathmandu suffered much more architectural and agricultural losses that affected the Newar community than Bhaktapur.

aspects of indigenous traditions. Tantrism provided Bhaktapur with an acceptable expression of independence from the state. Instead of the Puranic deities emphasized by the monarchy, Bhaktapur residents prioritized the worship of the dangerous deities, whose primary function, coincidentally, was to protect the city from outside influence. Within Tantrism, Bhaktapur even found a vehicle for treason insofar as the series of rituals involving the goddess Taleju were performed to protect the Malla dynasty and not the ruling Shah family. For centuries Tantrism was utilized to subvert national narratives supporting the Shah dynasty's divine right to rule by legitimizing the Malla's. As demonstrated in the section that follows, the institution of a new system of decentralized governance did little in Bhaktapur to instill allegiance to the absolute monarchy nor to its representatives, including the ill-fated Hyonju.

## 5. CONTEMPORARY NEPALESE POLITICS AND THE PANCHAYAT SYSTEM

As previously stated, though the Shah monarchs were the titular heads of state, the Ranas wielded tremendous power through the hereditary office of the prime minister from the 1860s to the 1940s. By the early 1920s, opposition to the corruption and exploitation of the regime was so strong that efforts to contain it proved increasingly futile. For the first time, the country witnessed the growth of political parties and an attendant rise in political consciousness. The Arya Samaj, Prachand Gorkha, and Praja Parisad and other emerging political parties and organizations were dealt with ruthlessly through incarceration, execution or both [32]<sup>10</sup>. Most of the nascent political parties that survived this purge moved their base of operations outside the country and to the south, such as Banaras (Nepali National Congress) or Calcutta (Nepal Communist Party).

Back in Nepal, King Tribhuvan was reinstated as acting head of state after having fled the palace in search of political asylum. An ideologically

untenable alliance between the Ranas, Nepali Congress and King Tribhuvan was devised after the monarch's return at the behest of Jawaharlal Nehru. This shaky alliance was followed by a brief experiment in constitutional monarchy under King Tribhuvan with a Nepali Congress-controlled parliament that was ultimately dissolved in 1959 by King Mahendra (now in power after the passing of his father King Tribhuvan in 1955). The state continued to search for a political structure that embodied both the stabilizing and unifying traditions of monarchy envisioned by King Mahendra with increased demands for political participation and the accommodation of pluralism demanded by many constituents.

Established in 1962, the Panchayat System was a four-tiered system of *panchayats* (village councils or assemblies, literally 'council of five') with absolute authority residing in the king. The National Panchayat was an administrative and legislative body, however its actual decision-making power had "more the character of a consultative body whose opinion was solicited by the king and his ministers than that of a real legislature" [33]. This consultative body had the same caste distributions that had characterized Nepali politics since the eighteenth century, with Chhettris guarding their monopoly over the cabinet, army and police posts and Brahmins and some Newars joining Chhettris for civil service positions [34]. In descending order, the Rastriya Panchayat (National Assembly) was elected from members of the *Anchal Sabha* (Zonal Councils), who were elected in turn by members of the *Zilla Sabha* (District Councils), who had been elected by members of the *Gaon Sabha* (Village Council). Adult franchise extended to both men and women over twenty-one.

The Panchayat System was created to decentralize authority to the grassroots level in a structured manner. In addition to elected officials, the National Assembly included seats appointed by the king. There were innumerable benefits to panchayat membership, with officials at every level enjoying varying degrees of privilege and perks, including salaries well above the national average and, most importantly, increased access to decision-making power which enabled one to both do and receive financial and political favors. According to Upadhyaya, since neither panchayats nor the cabinet of ministers possessed any extensive political power, they were more aptly characterized as "institutions of public opinion" disguised in a democratic

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<sup>10</sup> As elucidated by Devine, not all of the popular opposition efforts were explicitly political or 'anti-Rana', e.g. the Arya Samaj was a Hindu reform movement promoted in Nepal by Madhavraj Joshi, however its 'democratic and egalitarian ideals were seen as threatening to the political and religious establishment' (1993:16). The Prachand Gorkha and Praja Parisad, on the other hand, wanted nothing short of the overthrow of the Rana government [32].

framework; moreover, the public opinion being advocated was usually that of the high caste elites who circulated among these offices [35] The 1962 Nepalese Constitution clearly defined the power distribution (or lack thereof) as follows: “The sovereignty of Nepal is vested in His Majesty and all powers - executive, legislative and judicial - emanate from him” (His Majesty’s Government [36]: Article 20[2]).

The king further protected his sovereignty by building legal provisions into the 1962 Constitution issuing directives which defined the boundaries of permissible forms of association and expressions. These and other directives also provided the government with maximum interpretive latitude when assessing what constituted a violation of law and were further bolstered by a legal system offering little recourse to journalists, political party leaders and others perceived as opponents to the crown and panchayat. Foremost among these provisions were the Public Security Act (PSA) and the Treason Act. The PSA provided for administrative detention without trial or legal counsel for up to three years for any group or individual jeopardizing the security, peace and tranquility, and amicable relations within Nepal and also with other states. Article 11 stated that “... no political party or any other organization, union or association motivated by party politics shall be formed or caused to be formed or run” (His Majesty’s Government [36]: Article 11[2]a). Hence, it was illegal to form political parties under the Panchayat System. The *Raj Kaj* or Treason Act was also passed in 1962 and curtailed the expression of “foments, malice, or contempt... directly or indirectly, by letters, words or signs or postures” which might be damaging to his Majesty and the royal family or to the government, (His Majesty’s Government [36]: Treason Act Article 6[1,2]). These and other directives significantly expanded what constituted the legitimate use of force in Nepal during the panchayat era even as the system was extolling the virtues of peaceful coexistence.

Finally, the 1962 constitution declared that Nepal was a Hindu Kingdom.<sup>11</sup> Despite the centuries of

divine right sanctioned by the Hindu credo of Raj Dharma, the monarchy had never officially declared Hinduism the state religion. The figure of the king, in turn, legitimized the Panchayat System as the embodiment and guardian of national unity. Throughout the panchayat era the divine authority of the king was underscored through rituals like *Machendranath* and public displays of “sacra” in festivals like *Indriani Puja*.<sup>12</sup> As the cornerstone of national unity, the king was commemorated in panchayat slogans such as “*Jai Desh, Jai Naresh*” (“Hail country, hail monarchy”) and “*Raja Sabaika Saja*” (“King is common to all” or the “King Belongs to One and All”) [38]. These and other messages were broadcast over Radio Nepal, painted on billboards, printed in the ubiquitous *Mahendra Maalaa* reading primer series distributed throughout the public school system, lauded in *rastriya geet* (national/patriotic songs) and otherwise enshrined in collective memory. Not unlike their founding father several hundred years before, contemporary monarchs also used language as a tool for national unification by making Nepali the official language of instruction in the school system and a compulsory component of the S.L.C. examination and a required college course.<sup>13</sup> “One language, one custom, one country” (“*Ek Bhasa, Ek Bhesh, Ek Desh*”) had replaced Prithvi Narayan Shah’s diverse garden concept, and the Panchayat System, under the benevolent guidance of the king, was the vehicle of unification.

While the king was the touchstone for national unity, national development goals were the point of reference for the Panchayat System. Development goals and ambitious plans for their implement at were launched in 1956 through a series of Five Year Plans. By the 1970s, most Nepalis had become familiar with the language of development such as “people’s participation” and

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not engaged in proselytizing but simply practicing their own faith.

<sup>12</sup> During *Machendranath* the king is invoked as the patron saint of the Kathmandu Valley. On the tenth day of *Indriani Puja* the king’s sword represents the king himself and is carried in procession around the town of Kirtipur (Newari village outside of Kathmandu) until its presentation to the goddess *Indriani* [27]. The term ‘sacra’ is borrowed from *Tambiah*’s designation of ‘palladia, regalia, and other sacra which are enduring sedimentations of power and virtue’ that ‘remain with their possessors for as long as these rulers are deserving’ (1985:327). *Sacra* is the ‘second basis for claiming royal legitimacy’, the first being the possession of charisma [37].

<sup>13</sup> S.L.C literally means ‘School Leaving Certificate’ and signals completion of high school (class ten) and eligibility to apply to college.

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<sup>11</sup> With respect to other religions such as Buddhism and Islam Article 14 of the 1962 Constitution somewhat ambiguously states that ‘Every person may profess his own religion as handed down from ancient times and may practice it having regard to the traditions’(His Majesty’s Government [36]:Article 14). Converting others to another religion was also prohibited at this time, however this seemed to be selectively applied only to Christians converting Christians, or even to Christians

many had participated in “back to the village” programs or belonged to various class organizations that had been instituted. The 1980s was the era of “basic needs” with the goal of achieving a minimum standard of living (such as clean water, food and shelter) for all citizens. National development plans posited that foreign aid and the socioeconomic initiatives subsidized therein would “trickle down” to the local level through elected panchayat officials (national, zonal, district and village) and grassroots development projects.

Approximately half-way through this experiment in national development, however, Nepal was not just poor, but “daily becoming poorer” and in a “period of crisis” marked by overpopulation, ecological collapse, food shortages, an increasingly monetized economy with negligible scope for wage employment, and “widespread unrest in both rural and urban areas” [39]. Mishra and Sharma argue that a significant percentage of the foreign aid received by Nepal during the 1970s and 1980s did not trickle down to local development projects but was instead used to support panchayat officials and traditional power structures, which were often one in the same [40]. The ownership, use and disposal of land was especially tendentious since the 1964 Lands Act which was designed to place ceilings on both landholding size and rent fees (usually extracted from crop yields) was largely ineffective [14]. Archaic systems of tenure and bygone ownership patterns persisted despite scarcities of arable land and increasing population pressure [12].

By 1981 over half of the country was incapable of subsistence farming on their average landholding of less than half a hectare, while 6% of the population owned nearly half of the cultivated land (Central Bureau of Statistics 1982). Peasant farmers who could not read didn't fully understand their new rights as tenants or were tricked or bullied into non-enforcement. Landlords re-registered their excessively large holdings under relatives' names or bribed local enforcement agencies into overlooking infractions [41]. Rather than redistributing basic rights through people's participation and the enforcement of new legislation, the tiered Panchayat System was actually enabling “wealth and political leverage (to be) concentrated much more effectively” [42]. From the local to the national level, politics had become a patronage network outside of which it was virtually impossible to survive. The corruption was so

entrenched that terms were incorporated into everyday language describing its operation, such as *ghoos* (bribery) and *natabad kripabad* (nepotism), to name a few. While the majority lived in abject poverty, a minority of elites enjoyed the privileges of wealth, often begotten or maintained corruptly at the expense of a politically and economically disenfranchised. Several events in 1975 and 1980 only intensified the sense of disenfranchisement, and, in turn, the increasingly violent response from different opposition factions

In 1975, King Birendra, who had come to power in 1972, abolished the handful of seats that comprised the graduates' constituency of the National Parliament. Though small in number (four), the graduates' constituency provided a forum for grievances; in fact, the graduates' constituency was “almost invariably (sic) characterized by anti-panchayat overtones and ideological encounters” [9]. Having alienated Nepal's growing educated electorate, King Birendra proceeded to estrange many of the rest through the controversial 1980 referendum. In response to increased agitation for multi-party politics, King Birendra unexpectedly announced in 1979 that a national referendum would be held within one year. The referendum would allow voters to choose between a partyless but reformed Panchayat System or multi-party democracy. On May 2, 1980 and amidst rumors of vote-rigging, the option of multi-party government was defeated by a vote of 54.7% in favor of Panchayat rule and 45.2% in favor of multi-party politics. Not only did the final tally indicate that nearly half of the country was dissatisfied with the Panchayat System, the year preceding the vote was a taste of political freedom where the ban on political parties was lifted and grievances against the crown were more openly articulated. Many of the underground political activists that had been residing in India since the last exercise in multi-party democracy twenty years prior returned to Nepal, contributing to the country's political unrest.

Having exercised their political voice for one year, the population was not to be easily silenced. Compared to previous decades, the 1980s witnessed an increase in more overt illegal political activity through *satyagraha* (national civil disobedience movements), bombings and journalism exposes. In 1985, underground parties led by the Nepali Congress launched a *satyagraha* which was immediately squashed

with several hundred arrested under the PSA. Additionally, the United Liberation Fighters and the People's Front claimed a series of bombings throughout Nepal - including at the Royal Palace and the National Panchayat buildings - responsible for killing five people and injuring at least twenty others as an attempt to destroy the monarchy, abolish private property and install a democratic republic [43]. The government responded by interrogating 1,750 people, detaining 101 of them (sixty of which were held incommunicado), sentencing four of the accused to the death penalty, and passing the Destructive Crimes Act [35,43]. By 1986 the government had utilized the Treason Act, the PSA and also the Freedom of Speech and Publications Act to shut down nineteen newspapers and was holding six high-profile journalists (one of whom had escaped an assassination attempt) without trial for revealing corruption and/or publishing other inflammatory statements [44,35]. Many of the detained as well as those who were interrogated reported being tortured. The earthquake that occurred towards the end of this tumultuous decade only exacerbated the gap between the people and elected officials, and also between Bhaktapur, which was heavily, damaged and the center of power in Kathmandu.

## 6. CONCLUSION

When Hyonju began overseeing the distribution of relief items in Bhaktapur in 1988, the fault lines he stepped into after the earthquake were historical, cultural, and political, as well as physical. As previously discussed, much of Bhaktapur's history is a response to Nepal's central governing authority, beginning with the nation-building enterprise initiated by Prithvi Narayan Shah. Though framed in the language of inclusivity of diversity and unification, it was a legacy that left much of the population socioeconomically marginalized, more so during the Rana regime whose excesses were underwritten by labor and resource extraction in the hinterland.

Years later, the Panchayat System embarked on a mission of national development similarly framed in the language of unity under the auspices of the monarchy, and articulated through a series of ambitious socioeconomic goals launched by the Five Year Plans. Despite rallying cries of unity, basic needs and people's participation, the Panchayat System represented social, economic and political

disenfranchisement for many Nepalis. Brief experiments in political freedom were followed by years without, albeit with the persistent threat of arbitrary arrest and detention. Periods of economic security for the majority of citizens were rare, the broken promises of an administration largely regarded as corrupt were plentiful. As opposed to Prithvi Narayan Shah's nation-building, however, by the late 1980s the growing sense of disenfranchisement was occurring with an electorate harboring expectations for a greater role in governance and socioeconomic opportunity nurtured by the administration's development campaigns as well as the modernizing influences of education and increased exposure to values and systems of governance outside of Nepal. Civic discontent was also playing out in a broader context of population pressure and depleting resources, the latter often extracted by *panchas* and elected officials designated to protect and uplift the people, much the same as the exploitative Rana regime.

Bhaktapur had been challenging the central governing authority and its narrative of national unification for centuries, beginning with being the last kingdom to hold out against Prithvi Narayan Shah's nation-building campaign. Bhaktapur's quest for sovereignty extended beyond the political, and much of the city's history is a story about self-differentiation through the evolution of distinct cultural practices bolstered by language and ethnicity and invigorated by religion. As discussed, Tantrism in particular played a key role in defining and maintaining the boundaries within the city and also between Bhaktapur and the outside world. Paramount to boundary maintenance was the preservation of purity and protection from harm through elaborate rituals, including blood sacrifice. Since a state of purity was mutable and interactive, the cycle of rituals and festivals that animate the city played a vital role in perpetuating the natural and supernatural order of life.

Hyonju, for his part, was likely selected by governing authorities to distribute relief aid to the residents of Bhaktapur since he himself was a native of the community as well as an ex-Member of Parliament. While this duality may have made Hyonju an obvious candidate for such an important undertaking, it also placed him in the position of overseeing the distribution of vital resources to his neighbors in a space where he was responsible to both officials within the Panchayat System as well as the tight-knit

community of Bhaktapur. Accusations of misconduct likely emphasized this duality by reinforcing the longstanding distrust residents of the city had for the monarchy and later the Panchayat System.

Much of Bhaktapur's creative force is borne of the constant need to maintain the balance between the moral and the amoral or the potential chaos of blood sacrifice with its powerful capacity to order and protect. Arguably the greatest tension in Bhaktapur exists at the boundary between the community and the outside world. Not only was Hyonju straddling this divide, he was doing so in a manner perceived by some members of the community to be polluting or amoral, or at least was accused as such. As previously discussed, in order to be safe from the dangers of impurity and amorality one must be safely ensconced within the boundaries of the social order or engaged in ritual practices that recreate it, as social life and the different roles played by each community member are inherently mutable.

Hyonju was inhabiting a space where multiple significations could be inscribed by the state as well as the local community. As stated at the beginning of this article and in the words of Foucault, it was a twilight zone, a space whose ambivalence and polyvalence ultimately left him unprotected.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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