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# From Darbar to Sangrahalaya: Creating New History in the Narayanhiti Palace, Nepal

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on a particular time (the post-monarchy Nepali present) and site (the Narayanhiti Palace Museum in Kathmandu, Nepal), which I argue offers a compelling space for understanding the negotiation of Nepal's recent past, particularly the transition from royal to republican Nepal. Acknowledging that the social and historical location of the museum means that it bears the imprint of social relations beyond its walls, I ask how Nepal's royal past is now understood and who it is that authorizes this understanding.

I explore the relationship between Nepal's political transformations and the spatial transitions the palace has undergone through an analysis of three processes: the conceptualisation and construction of Narayanhiti (1963-1971); its recent transformation into a museum (2008-2016); and the construction of a Republic Memorial in the palace grounds (2009-2016).

The core of the thesis is an ethnographic inquiry into the politics of display at the Palace Museum. Three chapters examine the actions, attitudes and negotiations of those involved in both constructing and visiting the museum. Together they explore the paradox embodied in the Narayanhiti Palace Museum: of discarding a national identity built around the Shah monarchy, whilst simultaneously maintaining a connection to the culture from which this identity was derived. I argue that once the monarchy was placed firmly in an idyllic past within the Palace Museum, the former national identity embedded in the monarchy was retained, in an awareness of it having been surrendered.

The thesis ends with an examination of the design competition and memorial-making process of the *Ganatantra Smarak* (Republic Memorial), which inscribes a new interpretation of the past onto the national landscape. I suggest that it is not just the consigning of the monarchy to the past through the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, but also the fact that Nepal's

monarchical past can be forgotten at all, that is in part constitutive of the new republican identity. As a final attempt at dissociation from the monarchical past, the *Ganatantra Smarak* is intended to mark the adoption of a new national identity and the beginning of a new phase in the meaning of the palace.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to start by offering my sincere thanks to my lead supervisor, Professor Michael Hutt, whose patience, encouragement, and generosity has kept me going over a period of seven years and whose insight has contributed significantly to the quality of this thesis. His dedication to scholarship that pays attention to Nepali literary production engendered in me a commitment to listen closely to the local discourse.

Each member of my supervisory team at SOAS has had an important role to play, Dr Crispin Branfoot whose formative conversations gave me encouragement in the development of my research and introduced me to the work of authors such as Clare Harris whose work has stayed with me throughout. Whilst our time together has been limited, Dr Stephen Hughes' focused questions both honed my theoretical approach in the crucial moments before my upgrade and gave me the confidence to return to my museum studies roots.

I have been fortunate to present early findings from this doctoral research at several conferences, and I thank the organisers of The Annual Conference on Nepal and Himalaya in Kathmandu for welcoming me to present my initial research, on the Palace Museum in 2014 and on the Ganatantra Smarak in 2016. The opportunity to discuss my findings in a local context was crucial and drew my attention to the presence of the Narayanhiti Palace in the memories of everyone I met. In 2013 I was a recipient of a Design History Society student bursary, which enabled me to travel to Ahmedabad in 2013 and present the early findings on the design process of the Narayanhiti Palace in the context of other work on post-colonial design history and thank both the DHS committee and the organisers of that conference. I am grateful to Heather Hindman and Andrew Nelson for co-ordinating the joint panel on Spaces of Kathmandu at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin in 2014 and for their help in nurturing my subsequent paper for the journal HIMALAYA into existence. Questions asked by one anonymous reviewer of that paper informed the development of the second part of this thesis, and I wish to record my grateful thanks for the time they took to respond to my submission in such detail. I would also like to thank Professor David Gellner at the University of Oxford for his co-ordination of the Britain-Nepal Bicentenary Workshop on behalf of the Britain Nepal Academic Council in 2016 and to both John Whelpton and Professor William Sax at the University of Heidelberg for their subsequent co-ordination of the publication of a special issue of the European Bulletin of Himalayan Research. I have been welcomed into the community of the Britain Nepal Academic Council and the annual Nepal Study Days have formed a wonderful opportunity to position my research within the wealth of contemporary scholarship on Nepal.

Throughout my period of doctoral study, I have worked full-time at the University of Portsmouth and I am grateful to both my employer, and

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Any factual errors in this thesis, or errors of interpretation are mine, and mine alone.



# Contents

Title page	1
Declaration	2
Abstract	3-4
Acknowledgements	5-8
Contents	9
List of Illustrations	10-11

## Part One

Chapter One	Introduction	12-41
Chapter Two	The ascent of the monarchy	42-71
Chapter Three	The construction of a new royal memory	72-105
Chapter Four	The decline and fall of the monarchy	106-143

## Part Two

Chapter Five	Transforming the Palace ( <i>Darbar</i> ) into a Museum ( <i>Sangrahalaya</i> )	144-175
Chapter Six	Remembering Nepal's royal past	176-206
Chapter Seven	Behind the Scenes at the Palace Museum	207-241

## Part Three

Chapter Eight	<i>Ganatantra Smarak</i> (Republic Memorial): The politics of memory	242-275
Chapter Nine	Conclusion	276-289

Bibliography	290-313
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Illustrations	314-348
---------------	---------

## List of Illustrations

- Figure 1 Narayanhiti Palace Museum, Kathmandu
- Figure 2 Nasal Chowk, Hanuman Dhoka Palace
- Figure 3 Map of the Narayanhiti Palace and the Hanuman Dhoka Palace
- Figure 4 South elevation of the Narayanhiti Palace (c.1888)
- Figure 5 Narayan temple, south east of the palace compound
- Figure 6 Newar *Hiti* (water spout) temple, south east of the palace compound
- Figure 7 East elevation of the Narayanhiti Palace (c.1968), showing construction
- Figure 8 Sketch plan by Robert Weise (1960)
- Figure 9 First floor plan by Chatterjee & Polk (c.1961)
- Figure 10 Design sketch by Robert Weise (1960)
- Figure 11 Drawing by Chatterjee & Polk, (c.1961)
- Figure 12 Design drawings by Emily Polk (1962-3)
- Figure 13 Kaski Baithak by Porteous Wood for Asprey (c.1967)
- Figure 14 Lamjung Dining Room by Porteous Wood for Asprey (c.1967)
- Figure 15 Narayanhiti Palace Museum, Kathmandu
- Figure 16 Gaurishankar Entrance to the Narayanhiti Palace
- Figure 17 Map of Nepal highlighting districts that correspond to the Museum route
- Figure 18 Schematic floor plan highlighting rooms open to the public
- Figure 19 The Narayanhiti Palace Museum (showing the position of the building at the head of Darbar Marg)
- Figure 20 Cover page for the 1993 visitor's guide to the Palace
- Figure 21 Mugu Room, as displayed in the Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 22 Image from staging of Ghanchakkar at Gurukul Theatre (2008)
- Figure 23 Rani, by Ragini Uphadyay-Grela (2007)
- Figure 24 National Museum, Chauni
- Figure 25 Art Gallery at National Museum Chauni
- Figure 26 Police guarding southern gate of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 27 Copy of organisational chart for Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 28 Preparation of the Tribhuvan Sadan foundations (2009)

- Figure 29 Pushpa Kamal Dahal's preview of the Palace Museum
- Figure 30 Visitors entrance to the Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 31 Visitors handing in their belongings on arrival
- Figure 32 Kaski Baithak (main reception room), Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 33 Myagdi Drawing Room, Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 34 Rolpa Drawing Room, Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 35 Gorkha Room (throne room), Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 36 Gulmi Room (official office), Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 37 Dhankuta Room (the royal bed room), Narayanhiti Palace Museum
- Figure 38 Palace Museum visitors discussing the remains of Tribhuvan Sadan
- Figure 39 Author with Joint Secretary for Culture, Jay Ram Shrestha
- Figure 40 Reverse of ticket for all Nepali visitors
- Figure 41 Posters promoting Gyanendra's birthday celebrations (2013)
- Figure 42 Map of Narayanhiti Palace Compound
- Figure 43 Sri Sadan, Birendra's residence within Narayanhiti
- Figure 44 View through palace compound wall to the Ganatantra Smarak construction site
- Figure 45 Ganatantra Design Concept Drawing, John Sanday Architects
- Figure 46 Ganatantra Design Concept Drawing, John Sanday Architects
- Figure 47 Ganatantra Design Concept Model, John Sanday Architects
- Figure 48 Ganatantra Smarak, Auditorium Level (2016)
- Figure 49 Map showing location of the Ganatantra Smarak
- Figure 50 View across the Ganatantra Smarak memorial plaza (2016)
- Figure 51 Ganatantra Smarak Landscape Design
- Figure 52 Ganatantra Smarak Design Competition Entry, Sarosh Pradhan
- Figure 53 Walls around the Narayanhiti Palace Compound

## Chapter One | Introduction

### *An Empty Palace*

The Narayanhiti Palace Museum stands prominently in the centre of Kathmandu. Situated at the front of a bounded complex at the end of a broad and straight avenue called Durbar Marg (literally ‘Palace Road’, and notably referred to by many Nepalis as ‘Kings Way’ when speaking in English).<sup>1</sup> Once the centre of royal power, and the target of the rallying cries of protest during the people’s movements [*jan andolan*] of 1990 and 2006, the high walls that separate the quiet and overgrown grounds of the palace from the crowds and chaos of central Kathmandu, lend it an aura of mystery, suspense and to some, obsolescence.<sup>2</sup>

Its opening as a museum was announced on May 28 2008, following the end of a ten-year internal conflict (*jan yuddha* or ‘People’s War’), as Nepal was redefined as a secular republic, ending the 239-year-old monarchy. The doors of the palace opened to the public on 26 February 2009. One July afternoon in 2010, I walked through the gates of the Narayanhiti Palace compound for the first time, expecting that my visit to the museum would inform my understanding of the political transition underway in Nepal. What I found was an abandoned palace still guarded by soldiers, with preserved spaces that felt empty and unreal, and brought me no closer to understanding the events of Nepal’s recent past.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Planning regulations impose a height restriction around the perimeter of the palace to ensure its prominence (Kai Weise. Personal Communication. 8 July 2013).

<sup>2</sup> It was common throughout my research for people (Nepalis and foreigners alike) to ask why I was researching at the site of the palace, or to demonstrate a lack of interest. One researcher visited the palace after a presentation I had given at the Social Science Baha Annual Conference on Kathmandu and the Himalaya, and remarked “It’s so uninteresting that it is interesting”.

<sup>3</sup> I spent nine months working in rural Nepal as an education volunteer for the INGO then called Students Partnership Worldwide (SPW) between September 1998 and June 1999. Mine was a personal realization that I did not understand the reasons for the political transitions that had impacted on Nepali friends who had since 1999 lived through what seemed to be an un-ending series of significant and violent political and social events: civil

The palace's status as part of Nepal's public history was evidenced in the moment of its transition. I was not alone in visiting the Palace Museum as part of an attempt to piece together an understanding of the sequence of violent and disruptive events that had led Nepal to its newly democratic, secular, republican present. Published accounts by prominent intellectuals of their own visits to Narayanhiti used their own experience of the past to trace the contours of absence on display (Subedi, 2009b; M. Thapa, 2011; Uprety, 2009).<sup>4</sup> They questioned the lack of information on the brutal suppression of the People's Movements of 1990 and 2006, the absence of any explanation of the royal massacre of 2001, and the omission of any reference to the People's War of 1996-2006, thus echoing the dissonance I too experienced when visiting the Palace Museum. After a period of such political change, how could the royal palace of Nepal's erstwhile monarchical regime reveal so little? It was this gap between lived historical experience and what was on display that led me to consider the practical and ideological work of the Palace Museum. I developed the notion that what it was actually doing was promoting the adoption of a specific perspective on an imagined royal past as a marker of collective identity. All visitors become part of remembering a royal past that legitimizes the political, cultural and historical authority of the new republican state.

This thesis is about a particular time (post-monarchy Nepal from 2012 to 2016) and a particular location (the Narayanhiti Palace Museum) that I believe offers a compelling space for understanding the negotiation of Nepal's recent past, thereby revealing as much about the Nepal of which it forms a part as the Nepal it institutionalizes (See Figure 1). It focuses in particular on efforts to reinterpret the country's royal past and to memorialize the recent trauma of the civil war in light of the political transition. These processes are analysed for what they tell us about the

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war, the murder of a king, a royal coup and state of emergency, a people's movement and then the abolition of the monarchy.

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter Six for further discussion based on the accounts by Abhi Subedi, Manjushree Thapa and Sanjeev Uprety.

relationship between shared historical experience and present-day political action in Nepal. Whilst the immediate aim of my study is to explore the contestation and coercion that has occurred over the proper interpretation of that historical experience, I propose to present the example of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum in the context of wider debates about the impact of political transformation on the negotiation of history and memory in public space.

### *Why the Narayanhiti Palace Museum?*

The Narayanhiti Palace Museum presents an interesting case study because the Constituent Assembly decided to transfer the site into the public sphere as a museum at the same time as it was agreed to transform Nepal's state structure from a constitutional monarchy to a federal republic. The Constituent Assembly's decision marked a consensus amongst Nepal's politicians about the need for the institution of the monarchy to be abolished.<sup>5</sup> That they also decided to transform the Narayanhiti Palace to a Palace Museum at the same time is reflective of the redefinition of the unifying factor of the monarchy as one of their key challenges in the creation of a new Nepali national identity. It is also demonstrative of the symbolic power of the palace, a power that was important for them to command. This was a key site for Nepal's new government to assert state hegemony over the construction of a new Nepali past.<sup>6</sup> As the focus of this study, the Narayanhiti Palace Museum offers a particular example of the relationship between shared historical experience and political action.

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<sup>5</sup> On the 28<sup>th</sup> May 2008, at the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly, the motion to abolish the monarchy was passed by a landslide, 560-4 votes.

<sup>6</sup> One example of the symbolic nature of this act is the country's philately. In 1975 the Narayanhiti Palace featured on a 1.25 NRs stamp as part of a series commemorating the coronation of Birendra as king. The palace featured again in 2014, this time as the Narayanhiti Palace Museum for 20 NRs.

Despite its prominent location in Kathmandu, in its life as a royal palace Narayanhiti was much mythologised but has been little studied. This is an absence from the literature on Nepal that can be explained by the codes of deference and secrecy put in place by the monarchy. The ‘things that should not be said’ about the palace in public space (Hutt 2006: 360) illustrate the complicity of the architecture of the palace with social order, specifically the role of the monarch who until 1990 had near-complete control of the public sphere.

The fate of the Nepali nation has been linked to that of the Narayanhiti Palace since the Shah monarch Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah was moved to the site in the mid 1880s. While he was forced initially to live behind the walls of the palace compound built by the Rana regime, after the monarchy took back control during the 1960s the palace became a focus for the construction of a new national memory alongside the Panchayat system of autocratic governance. The Panchayat system was in place for three decades and secured the central position of the Shah monarchy and model of Hindu kingship in the progressive construction of a Nepali national identity.<sup>7</sup> The central position of the Shah monarchy in modern constructions of Nepali nationalism led to the institutionalisation of unequal structures of power (Malagodi, 2013), and a legacy that has helped to shape the ways that many Nepalis, across caste, class, gender and ethnicity, imagined the nation (Burghart, 1996; Onta, 1996b; Whelpton, 1997). Factors that ultimately led to disaffection and active resistance to the state and the rationale for the museum’s creation. Work by postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Anderson (2006) reminds us that nations are bound together by imaginative, narrative and symbolic means and the importance of museums that convey a shared past to imagining a nation and restoring a sense of unity to otherwise heterogenous societies.

The first main research question of this thesis is: How has the institution of the museum been used to represent and reconstitute the nation? How is

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<sup>7</sup> Please see Chapter Two for a more detailed historical account.

collective memory reconstructed in this fragile social context? What role does it play in reconstructing the inclusive rhetoric of nation? The institutional choices regarding the museum made during the transition process in 2008-2009 are analysed in the context of a return to democracy and in relation to the dominance of the Shah monarchy both in terms of the formation of national identity and also the legitimisation of cultural production. The Palace Museum naturalises relations between the state and a public narrative of Nepal's royal past. In doing so it is firmly sited within today's world (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 39), and invested with a new set of meanings. Through an exploration of the social construction of memory, this line of enquiry acknowledges the museum's role in the construction of social realities (Kaplan, 1994, p. 4; Macdonald & Fyfe, 1996, p. 13). It focuses not just on the museum, but on the museum as part of a historically determined "system of rituals in which the "naturalness" of the demarcation establishing the original and "legitimate" patrimony is periodically ordered, remembered and secured." (Canclini, 1995, p. 112).<sup>8</sup> In this way it draws attention not just to the construction of the patrimony but on its credibility to visitors. This analysis takes place in the context of the dynamics and eventualities of the historical relationships between the institution of the Shah monarchy and the construction of a Nepalese national identity framed by the palaces it occupied.

Second, this thesis aims to show how memory is created through the way that the Palace Museum orchestrates space and the part it plays in the generative processes of both individual and collective memory. Nepal's transition from monarchy to republic created a moment within which new historical narratives were being created. The use of the public institution of museum in order to transfer one of the monarchy's key privileges and sources of power into public hands was intended to both fix memories of Nepal's royal past at a time when the country's politics were inchoate and uncertain, and legitimize the nascent republican state. Yet the more time

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<sup>8</sup> What Canclini defines as patrimony, is defined by Bennett as an exhibitionary complex (1995, p. 59) and Bouquet as a museumscape (2001, p. 79).



has passed, the more effort is needed to maintain an official narrative that continues to resonate with the wider population. This analysis takes a longer view (2009 – 2016) and draws from an ethnographic approach that took me behind the scenes at the palace over a period of three years (2013 – 2016). As the palace was transformed into a museum, the staff of the Palace Service were retained within it. The structure of my interpretation is drawn from time spent with them examining the “social life” of the Palace Museum (Handler & Gable, 1997, p. 11), the internal organisational and institutional dynamics, and the ideas that motivated practice.

Finally, this thesis examines the impact of political transformation on the negotiation of history and memory in public space. My period of research has been paralleled by the process of designing and constructing a republic memorial (*Ganatantra Smarak*) within the grounds of the palace.<sup>9</sup> Research on the political transition in Nepal has focused on transitional government structures (D. Thapa & Ramsbotham, 2017; von Einsiedel, Malone, & Pradhan, 2012b), truth and reconciliation processes where they exist (M. Sharma, 2017), and disputes over the redistribution of political and economic resources (Lawoti, 2005), raising fundamental questions about how societies reemerge and stabilize after periods of intense conflict. History and memory as public issues, whilst tenacious (Robins, 2013; Subedi, 2009a), have not been placed in high relief.<sup>10</sup> Whilst this line of enquiry is not restricted to my analysis of the ‘memory work’ (Young, 1993) involved in the processes of producing the *Ganatantra Smarak*, it is influenced by a ‘memorial approach’ (Rademacher, 2009; Winter, 1995; Young, 1993) which has the advantage of both perceiving no conceptual difference between the past and present, and bringing into focus alternative and parallel memories, essential for any attempt to consider the interaction between individual memories and collective memory.

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<sup>9</sup> At the time of writing, the construction of the *Ganatantra Smarak* is complete, but the site has not yet opened to the public.

<sup>10</sup> With the notable exception of work by Simon Robins, referenced in Chapter Eight whose work on local the silencing and attempted erasure of unpleasant memories of past violence and injustice is focused on local memory practices. In 2009, Subedi also wrote a number of opinion pieces in the national press on the need for a site of memory.

The thesis is structured in three sections, presented chronologically that each adopt the three interrelated analytic strategies outlined above. The chronological presentation is not intended to imply that the history of the palace has developed progressively or unilinearly, but to help trace its shifting meaning through time. Following Michel Foucault's concept of genealogy, I present a history of the Narayanhiti Palace that results from the contradictory and the contingent, rather than the providential (1984). I adopt key political events as anchoring points to explore the relationship between Nepal's political transformations and the spatial transitions the palace has undergone, focusing on an analysis of three processes: the original conceptualisation and construction of the palace (1963-1971); its transformation into a museum (2008-2016); and the design and construction of the Ganatantra Smarak in its grounds (2009-2016). My decision to take a historical approach is justified by the importance of understanding Panchayat era politics and constructions of national identity in order to understand contemporary Nepal (Lakier, 2009; Malagodi, 2013; Onta, 1996b).

While the thesis is organised chronologically, the analysis of the palace that takes place within its chapters is framed synchronically through processes of collective and individual memory formation and disruption. Spatializing memory-work through the frame of the Narayanhiti Palace enables me to do two things. Firstly to identify the palace as a place where past, present and future imaginings of nation collide through the actions of people. Second to reveal the instability of the meaning of the palace at any given moment: the meaning of the Narayanhiti palace was presented first by the monarchy and then by Nepal's post-monarchical state as securely fixed in time, but under certain conditions, it slips through from one temporal domain into another. This approach that intends to weave together the layers of experience of the palace, both real and imagined, is informed in particular by the work of a number of architectural historians who adopt postcolonial perspectives in their analysis of urban space (Chattopadhyay, 2006; Hosagrahar, 2005; Kavuri-Bauer, 2011; Kusno, 2010). Ultimately, we all follow the work of

Dipesh Chakrabarty in placing the space of the palace firmly in the context of Nepal.<sup>11</sup>

### *Museums as spaces of social practice*

The work of this thesis is situated within the field of museum studies, a burgeoning interdisciplinary area that has increased in popularity since the late 1980s. In addition to research conducted on the history, character and function of museums in general, numerous studies have been dedicated to particular institutions and their collecting and exhibition practices. Current research looks at both the cultural production of the museum (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1992; Kaplan, 1994; Knell, 2010; Macdonald, 1997) and the social agency of the museum (Duncan, 1995). Museum studies has always been a fundamentally practice-based field that blends theory, method and practice to inform new ideas and approaches (Hudson, 1987), and in Chapter Six we see this play out in the context of 1970s Nepal when the then Director of the National Museum wrote a treatise covering everything from educational programming to practical conservation tips (Dwivedi, 1976). My starting point is the work devoted to demonstrating that museums are a domain of cultural practice (Bennett, 1995; Canclini, 1995; Kwint, 1999; Malraux, 1978), that treats them as physical spaces that visitors and staff quite literally enter and move within (Annis, 1986; Bouquet & Porto, 2005; Duncan, 1995) and that explores their role in constructing social realities (Handler & Gable, 1997; Harris, 2012; Kaplan, 1994).

Concerned with the emergence of the museum as just one of a set of related institutions in the nineteenth century (galleries, panoramas, department stores, arcades, etc.), Tony Bennett defined what he called the 'exhibitionary complex'.

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<sup>11</sup> Although Nepal avoided direct colonization, its experience was intimately connected with British colonial power in the subcontinent and it is now widely accepted that the country's experience is semi-colonial (Des Chene, 2007; Seddon, Blaikie, & Cameron, 1979) and hence also in part postcolonial. Nelson argues that this conditioning force made certain practices and logics of the state and monarchy possible, including the quest for a homogenous Nepali national identity (2011, p. 4).

Linked sites for the development and circulation of new disciplines (history, biology, art history, anthropology) and their discursive formations (the past, evolution, aesthetics, man) as well as for the development of new technologies of vision ... which might be productively analysed as particular articulations of power and knowledge. (1995 59)

Recognising the museum's dependence on an audience, Bennett's work marks a paradigm shift, from museums being defined by their relationship to objects, to being defined by their relationship to visitors. For Bennett, museums form a specific conjunction of representation, conventions of understanding and particular narratives to be experienced. In the case of museums funded by the state, his 'exhibitionary complex' is by nature governmental. Kaplan goes on to argue that museums are complicit in the construction of social realities, that they are "products and agents of social and political change which a nation can use "to represent and reconstitute itself anew in each generation." (1994, pp. 4–5). Whilst the Narayanhiti Palace Museum might not be coterminous with current political ideology in Nepal, as a state sponsored institution it is possible to seek evidence of its imprint.

Canclini writes about the role of state-sponsored visual organisations of knowledge within societies with high illiteracy rates, providing the scenography and motivation for a set of rituals that naturalise the patrimony (1995, p. 115). He describes museum visitors as being deceived by the illusion that the museum's authority rests upon its objective representation of the nation. It is certainly true that at the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, no effort is made to admit the artifice of the displays and visitors are encouraged to believe that they are experiencing the reality of royal life. This thesis positions the Palace Museum as a public space where the backstage political, economic, institutional and ideological work of creating and maintaining that space is both benignly assumed and, in some instances, actively concealed.

Carol Duncan questions the ritualistic nature of museums and they function they served for society by looking at public programming and forms of

engagement. Duncan sets out the museum as a ritual space, viewing the role of exhibitions in literate societies as reiterating the underlying constituents of national hegemonic mythologies and upholding the current power structure in society (1995). She acknowledges, however, that her model is both theoretical and political and not based on the experience of visitors. In the 1970s Malraux criticised the authority of art galleries for not taking account of the personal recollections of works carried in a visitor's mind, thus opening the definition to that of a museum without walls (1978). Guha-Thakurta highlights the curatorial time and effort invested to mould the behaviour of Indian museum visitors in order to curb what was seen as the "wonderment" mode of visiting museums in India in the mid-nineteenth century (2015). In trying to prevent it, India's nineteenth century curators understood the museum as an intensely social space that opens up the possibility of discussion, thus complicating the view that museum narratives are simply produced and consumed. The popular discourse, prevalent within Nepal's museum professionals takes its cue from the nineteenth century Indian curators committed to the educational value of the museum.<sup>12</sup> Historical museums are viewed as transmitters of information about the past, revealed through the distillation of complex scholarship into narratives for display. Yet, the fact is that visitors do not passively accept official narratives on display.

Visitors construct their own meaning in the space of a museum, their memories activated by the objects and spaces on display and threaded together by their experience of moving through the space.<sup>13</sup> With the museum as a "a theatre, a memory place, a stage for the enactment of other times and places" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 48), rooms in the Palace Museum become scenes or *in-situ* displays (where decisions have been made both about what to display and how to interpret) scripting

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapter Five for a historical account of the institution of museum and its moral positioning in Nepal.

<sup>13</sup> Marius Kwint has explored the importance of objects for their capacity to invoke memory and sensory engagement (1999). Objects are therefore productive forces that trigger memory and carry meaning. See also the work of Susan Stewart who argues that objects have the power to move, to summon something else (1993).

visitors performances, “museums shape and transform people through their own activity (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, pp. 20, 39).<sup>14</sup> The relationship between performance and identity is well established in Butler’s work on the performance of gender identity. For Butler, gender is an identity constituted in time, and instituted in space through a series of repeated bodily performances that imitate those that have gone before (1990). By January 2017, the Palace Museum had received over two million visitors since it opened and provided a stage to script individual performances in significant ways, the resulting collective memory becoming a reality through the way it is perpetually enacted. It is because these visitors treat the performances of palace staff and tour guides, as well as less visible actors such as government bureaucrats, as somehow distinct from the ones they encounter in their everyday lives that the Palace Museum is an ideal site for studying the stories told about Nepal’s royal past (Bouquet, 2001, p. 15; Harris, 2012, p. 7).

The interaction of visitors’ individually held memories with the official, consciously held idea of the past constructed at a time of political change highlights the uncanny nature of the space of the Palace Museum, because all disjunctions between them expose silences in the official narrative. This thesis is less interested in the historical accuracy of the official narrative on display at the Palace Museum than the nexus between the museum as a space where decisions are made about what stories are told, thus sanctifying some forms of remembering and endorsing forgetting (Kavanagh, 2000, p. 173) and a space experienced by visitors, who bring the past to mind, combining their imaginations and memories with the theatrical space of the museum (Annis, 1986).

Whilst the museum as an institution has its origins in western democratic societies, there has been a growing recognition that museums all over the

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<sup>14</sup> Bouquet and Porto look at the way publics use museums for their own performances and consider how these performances relate to curatorial agency. For them, museums are about the social networks that bring things to the centre of a signifying process, a term they coin “museum magic”, yet it is not magical to everybody all of the time (Bouquet & Porto, 2005).

world are not the same. Knell reflects on the origins of the museum in democratic western societies, and observes that they are underwritten by elite world views and legitimised through their “claim to moral authority derived from its fostering of education, knowledge, cultivation, professionalization, and so on.” (2010, p. 5) He emphasized the importance of understanding the social, cultural and political context within which each museum operates, reminding us of the challenges in drawing comparisons between institutions. This thesis offers an account of struggles over how a nation should be remembered, as a contribution to the internationalisation of this field of study.

### *Remembering and forgetting*

Museums blur the line between the individual and the collective. In her comparative study of the life of public memory in museums within the United States and South Africa, both countries with a troubled racial past, Robyn Autry notes that “the power and efficacy of the collective story is the extent to which we take it on as our own story, our own memory, our own identity.” (2017, p. 21) She suggests that this is evident in the use of identity narratives, particularly in a post conflict setting where consensus is premised on the acceptance of a common way to contextualise the past. In 2008-9 the question of how Nepal’s past should be remembered turned on the change that took place in the polity – from a monarchy to a democracy. In his inauguration speech, the Prime Minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the former leader of the Maoist insurgency, claimed the palace as “a symbol of the Nepali citizens’ fight against feudalism” and staked a claim for the re-evaluation of the site as a symbol for the struggle of the people. He avoided any references to recent conflict and used the same speech to announced an official investigation into the massacre of the king and most of his family at the Narayanhiti Palace on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2001.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> When the king, Birendra and almost his entire family were killed, allegedly by the Crown Prince, Dipendra.

On this historic occasion, with my authority as the first prime minister elected by the people of a united folk-led republic, I wish to express one wish - we talk about conflict in Nepal. The biggest conflict started here. There will be a full investigation of that, truth will be revealed and put forth in front of the citizens. It is the citizen's right to know what happened here and who was the real culprit and this right will be fulfilled. ("Narayanhiti Opens as Museum," 2009)

The transfer of historically significant buildings and sites that were the property of elites is of course not unique to Nepal, and museums are a potent force in forging self-consciousness.<sup>16</sup> Kaplan describes such actions by revolutionary movements as asserting the connection between museums and the political processes of democratisation (1994, p. 1). In the case of Narayanhiti, the palace itself was transformed into a museum as a symbol of national unity (in the face of ethnic diversity) and as such is a particular instance of the reconstruction of a Nepali national identity, no longer dependent upon a Hindu monarch: unity based on openness and transparency.<sup>17</sup>

As the symbolic centre of the state, appropriation of what had been royal space was deliberately designed to position the *Janata* [people] at the head of the nation and shift the order of power. Dahal's suggestion that opening the palace to visitors as a museum would reveal the truth of the past comes head to head with the reality of a space that had been the centre of power of the Shah monarchy and remains embedded in constructions of Nepal's national imagination (Subedi, 2009b, 2016). It is a central contention of this thesis that the Narayanhiti Palace Museum embodies a paradox of the construction of the past in the modern state: the need to sever the monarchical past from the republican present whilst maintaining a sense of connection to and continuity with the cultural institution from which national identity has been derived.

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<sup>16</sup> See Aronssen on Musealising of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul on the official date of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in Turkey (Aronssen, 2010, p. 37). Think also of the Hermitage in Russia, the Norbulinka in Tibet, and Saddam Hussain's Basra Palace in Iraq.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter Five for a fuller discussion. Those who have written about the response of the press to the massacre of the king and most of his family at the Narayanhiti Palace on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2001 and the censorship that followed, show how distrust and disbelief were generated by the media in response to the problem of a political identity organised around a Hindu monarch (Hutt, 2006; Lakier, 2009).



The history of the Shah monarchy is deeply intertwined with the construction of Nepali national identity and the Palace Museum is a site in which socially and culturally embedded views of the monarchy are performed. The Shah kings came to the throne of the hill kingdom of Gorkha in the mid-sixteenth century and ruled the country from the mid-eighteenth century following their conquest of the Kathmandu Valley when they made the city of Kathmandu the political centre of their expanding empire. They used an uneven but continuous system of cultural strategies to reproduce monarchical rule. These strategies, which persisted through the twentieth century, included the promotion of ideas of divine kingship, networks of patronage, royal land grants and the development of a state apparatus that favoured high-caste Hindu men. Even after the 1990 transition to a democratic model of governance, the state retained its constitutional status as a “Hindu Kingdom” (Malagodi, 2013).

The Narayanhiti Palace was one of three palaces that had clear roles to play in rooting, upholding and legitimizing the Shah monarchy until its demise in 2008.<sup>18</sup> Built between 1963-1970 as a public statement that spoke loudly of the character of the Nepali state, or at least of how Mahendra Shah wished it to be perceived, the palace was the most important centre of political power for the modern Shah kings. It framed, literally and metaphorically, the formation of the kings’ contemporary status as head of state. As no king now rules from the Narayanhiti Palace and the state does not use the palace to conduct its affairs, the Palace Museum is as much a site of forgetting and self-censoring as a site of remembering; it is the space to which memories of the royal past were relegated and removed from everyday life and forgotten even as they are memorialised.

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<sup>18</sup> The Hanuman Dhoka Palace as location of his coronation, with the tutelary goddess of the Malla kings, had enabled the king to socially construct his position in the kingdom since its ‘unification’ in the late eighteenth century. The palace-cum-temple at Gorkha served as the source of kings’ divine power, a mountain shrine to the origins of the Shah dynasty.

Pierre Nora's classic definition of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), provides a useful theoretical springboard for analysing the production of memory at the Palace Museum. Nora argues that *lieux de mémoire* are created at points where there is a conscious break with the past.

*lieux de mémoire* – moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned: no longer quite life, not yet death, like the shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded. (1989, p. 12)

As an anti-historicist, Nora presents the equation of memory with history as problematic.<sup>19</sup> He believes that memory as a primitive notion has been destroyed by a historical consciousness and suggests that history constructs sites of memory. It is helpful to acknowledge the way in which political events have the power to reshape the historical meanings we impose upon, or derive from, a site of memory (Knauer & Walkowitz, 2004). At the Palace Museum "history continues to rework and transform in its attempts to subject experience of the intimately lived past to the interests of an emergent democratic, mass future." (Shelton, 2006, p. 486) Scholars have generally moved away from Nora's strict dichotomy. If memory is in the hands of individuals and history in the hands of the professionals, as argued by Nora, then when history is laid out in the museum, it is the visitors' performativity that affirms new historical narratives. History is therefore intertwined in a complex way with memory. Historically structured narratives or nationally consecrated memories intertwine with the multiplicity of potential meanings they are capable of generating, creating an uneasy coexistence of original intention and re-articulation within memory (what Nora refers to as double self-referentiality).

Visitors make sense of the Palace Museum through the process of remembering. Memory is described by Susan Crane as 'thinking things in their absence', therefore activated by present concerns, taking a bodily form in the brain. Memory is invisible, becoming visible through imaginative recollection. It is not passive, is unreliable and subject to revision. It is not

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<sup>19</sup> For Nora, memory is both primitive and intuitive and history a conscious, uniform method of organizing the past – even so, both definitions are somewhat slippery.

static, but can be made to seem so (2000, p. 1). Memory functions at an individual and group level, with a single event having many different meanings for different individuals, meanings that can often be contested. The process of constructing memories at the Palace Museum reflects power structures within society. I ask how Nepal's royal past is now understood and who authorizes the understanding.

Collective memory is a commonly used term for describing the construction of memory within groups. For the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, the line between our personal and collective memories is imagined because our present identities and social positions shape how and what we remember (and forget) (Marot, 2003, p. 30). Memories are constructed from specific socially situated positions in the present and by extension embedded in and productive of power relations. Memory that is socially grounded and collective is constituted through discourse and practice and necessarily involves both remembering and forgetting. In paying attention to memory work, I aim to identify its integration with other structures and the mechanisms responsible for its ideological inflections.

Jan Assman reminds us that the past is never remembered (or forgotten) for its own sake, and that the main function of memory work is to bridge the gap between an experience and its expression as a memory in order to drive development (2010). Nepal's politicians' ability to fashion a shared past hinged on the people's abilities to come to terms with the violence of the ten-year long People's War in which more than 13,000 lost their lives. James Young's study of holocaust memorials demonstrates that the commemoration of violent histories is complicated by the desire to neither ignore nor celebrate pain and trauma (1993). This is a paradox that takes centre stage at the site of the Narayanhiti Palace, where practices of remembering and forgetting have been institutionalized. The museum and Ganatantra Smarak together position the People's War as regrettable but having paved the way for the current (assume improved), state of affairs.

The transformation of the palace into a museum froze it at a particular moment in time in order to precipitate the creation of a new state (Crane, 2000, p. 93).<sup>20</sup> The illusion of social consensus created by the presentation of the idyllic view of the monarchy that developed in the aftermath of the royal massacre is revealing of the political need to hark back to the unity created in its aftermath. In the weeks after the palace opened as a museum, numerous pieces by contemporary columnists described the experience of Nepalis, who were drawn to the palace by the opportunity to bear witness to the demise of the monarchy, to visit their inheritance and search for their own meanings in the bedrooms and dining rooms occupied by the former royal family (“Narayanhiti Museum sans crowning glory,” 2010). The Palace Museum’s particular rendering of the monarchical past was intended to create a cultural memory based on a narrative of openness.<sup>21</sup>

### *Past, present, future*

This study is concerned with the construction of the present, through the re-articulation of the past and in particular the relationship between memory and space. It is therefore worth pausing for a moment to consider Nepali understandings of constructions of the past. The Panchayat system was at its height when the palace was constructed, but then became progressively delegitimized, and ended in 1990. From 1990 to 2006, Nepal experienced multiparty democracy, violent insurgency, royal massacre, royal coup and the abolition of the monarchy. Since the 2006 comprehensive peace agreement and subsequent elections in 2008 and 2013, Nepal has been undergoing yet another transition as a secular republic in the midst of negotiating the implementation of a new constitution (2015+). Whilst this

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<sup>20</sup> This metaphor has been used by Nepali authors. For example, Prashant Jha (2014, p. 66) and Kanak Mani Dixit (K. M. Dixit, 2011, p. 142).

<sup>21</sup> Assmann has distinguished between different types of collective memory in order to emphasise the significance of the institutionalisation of memories that enables them to be carried between generations. According to Assman, groups make cultural memories from things that act as reminders because they carry past memories invested in them (2010).

changing landscape places us in a unique position to question the social and historical frameworks that have dictated how we perceive the palace and the processes and ideologies that have given it meaning, it has also placed some of those who have experienced it into a default position of distrusting the state.

The Nepalis I spent time with during my period of research have all lived through at least one democracy movement. Living through constant turmoil and a state being made, un-made and then made again has been the backdrop to their lives. It is a well-established assumption, built on a critique of the brutal forces of modernity in the early twentieth century, that the production of history intensifies in times of change (Nora, 1989). What does this mean in the context of a society where the production of history was actively censored until 1990? (Onta, 1996b)<sup>22</sup>

Manjushree Thapa articulates the impact of this lived experience of change on her understanding of the nation's past:

I am the ... kind of person [who] ... passes the days in a lost-in-the-trenches daze about the present moment, piecing together shards of history and references and facts, none of which comes together to offer the overall picture, the panoramic overview, the concise analysis, the meaning of it all. This person is haunted by the realization that much knowledge is incomplete in Nepal, that the truth has been lost many times to speculation and can easily be lost again. (M. Thapa, 2005, p. 51)

Thapa's account, written in response to the confusion many felt in the aftermath of the royal massacre of 2001, suggests that there are Nepalis for whom every experience of political change serves to further reveal the lack of a history they can rely upon. Kunreuther's description of the discourse of history [*itihās*] in Nepal is associated with cultural heritage [*sanskriti*] and she suggests its use as a term to discuss objects, artefacts and buildings that have recently acquired cultural significance and that people often fear

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<sup>22</sup> The Panchayat education system promoted a jingoistic vision of a brave nation led to victory by the Shah monarchy (Onta, 1996). As the authoritative source of cultural production, until 1990 all museums were opened under the auspices of the monarchy.

have been or will be lost (2017). Thapa's particular awareness of the subjective nature of narrating of the past is borne from a distrust of the state. Kunreuther describes a more general fear of loss, perhaps unsurprising in periods of such change.

Halbwachs wrote about the built environment as a tool for organising past experiences (1992), an understanding used by Sanjeev Uprety as a narrative device to structure his 2012 novel *Ghanchakkar* in which he transformed the period after the royal massacre into an imaginary labyrinthine world, set in Kathmandu. Uprety used an unreliable narrator to suggest that the Narayanhiti Palace was the place where the ultimate truth, the roots of his insanity, could be found. Insanity here is intended to be read as a metaphor for the contemporary condition of Nepal's democracy, dominated by the monarchy. The protagonist, a University Professor, visits the palace, where he seems to pass through the scene of the massacre as presented in the official report. Yet the more he searches, the more confused he becomes.<sup>23</sup>

I felt there must be invisible power inside the royal palace like someone, a strange life or very dreadful thought? Perhaps the same invisible powers are pushing me inside the palace – to the scene which is impressive and frightening at the same time.

Perhaps my search will find the destination in the rooms of the palace. Perhaps that will resolve the curiosity of my mind and will make me calm and relaxed again. (Uprety, 2012)

Uprety's literary representation of the space of the palace is discussed in chapter four in order to illustrate the way in which the event of the royal massacre punctuates the story of this thesis. I reference it here because of the way he uses time as a "creative force" (Tiwari, 2017) to construct meaning. Kathmandu's inhabitants understand the city as being built up of layers of meaning (Bell, 2014), layers that are accessed through ritual, and

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<sup>23</sup> Uprety's was not the only artistic representation of the palace during this period. For example, in Ragini Uphadyay-Grela's 2007 painting *Rani*, the queen is seen in a period of darkness, looking back towards the romantic vision of an earlier age. The short print runs typical of Kathmandu made it impossible to track down any contemporary poetry dealing with the palace at the time of the massacre.

that frame the ways in which everyday activities are undertaken and understood. Described as a “living urban heritage” (UNESCO, 2015), life in Kathmandu slips between present, past uses and layers of meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Lefebvre’s work brings together the social construction of space with the importance of lived experience emphasising the productive possibilities of space (1991). His conception of space as a series of dialectics between space as practised, conceived and lived are essential to the understanding of this thesis that the meaning of place is continuously constructed and reconstructed. Theorised like this, the palace is constituted in discourse as a storehouse of memories, always haunted with a myriad of possibilities for meaning and behaviour.

In order to begin thinking of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum as a dynamic space I ask the reader to consider the Nepali visitors’ act of queuing to cross the threshold of the palace compound. Open to the public all year round, five days a week, queues start to form at the southern gate to the palace compound from around half past nine in the morning (the museum opens at eleven).<sup>25</sup> This daily spectacle is reminiscent of the long queues that would form when during its life as a royal palace, the king would grant the public access to Narayanhiti, to pay felicitations to the king on his birthday; to receive the king’s blessings on the annual festival of *dasain*; or to visit the palace’s state rooms on the weekly opening during the 1990s.<sup>26</sup> This continuity of practice is not lost on those in the queue or those who witness it. Nepalis in the queue reflect also on the palace as the target of

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<sup>24</sup> Seven monument zones were inscribed in 1979 and UNESCO established offices in Kathmandu in 1998. Although none of the Rana style palace complexes within the Monument Zone boundaries were considered listed monuments in the nomination document, the understanding of authenticity in respect to the Kathmandu Valley was reviewed when preparing the Retrospective Statement of Outstanding Universal Value in 2011. ‘The authenticity of the property is retained through the unique form, design, material and substance of the buildings, displaying a highly developed traditional craftsmanship and situated within a traditional urban or natural setting. Even though the Kathmandu Valley has undergone immense urbanization, the authenticity of the historic ensembles as well as much of the traditional urban fabric within the boundaries has been retained.’ (UNESCO, 2015)

<sup>25</sup> In the months after the palace gates first opened on 26 February 2009, visitors could wait for over two hours to gain entry.

<sup>26</sup> This continuity of practice was reflected upon by a number of my interviewees when hearing about my project.

resistance during the two *jan andolan* and its place at the heart of public rituals of mourning in the weeks after 1<sup>st</sup> June 2001 when thousands queued to sign a book of condolence.<sup>27</sup>

In her work on present-day Berlin, Karen Till describes a memory structure that creates a relationship between past, present and future, highlighting the process of individual imaginative recollection.

Through the act of recalling and situating the past through place-based images, the presence or endurance of imagined futures is made possible ontologically. Places are remembered in one's imagination and through that memory the future is located in the past. (Till, 2005, p. 39)

To acknowledge the relationship between memory and space is to recognise the importance of the context in which visitors to the Palace Museum make sense of the displays. Visitors to the Palace Museum recall and situate the past, their memories making possible Nepal's post-monarchical future.<sup>28</sup> Abhi Subedi wrote of the potential of the ghosts of the past to haunt the space of the palace (ghosts being social figures through which something lost can be made to appear) (Subedi, 2009b). If the Narayanhiti Palace is understood as a palimpsest of layers of meaning (Machado, 1976), that can be accessed simultaneously and haunt the present (Till, 2005), this thesis is committed to peeling the layers back in order to both identify them and the processes of their construction.<sup>29</sup>

### *Fieldwork Reflections*

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that it is only usually Nepalis in the queue, because foreign visitors are asked to come to the front and are allowed straight through.

<sup>28</sup> I observed this phenomenon in my conversations with those queuing to enter the Palace Museum.

<sup>29</sup> Rodolfo Machado uses the palimpsest or 'writing over' as a metaphor for building reuse; the text of the manuscript has been scraped off and the canvas or parchment used again, but inevitably a trace of the original text remains, a shadow that haunts and influences the author of the succeeding inscription. Whereas his interest is in design strategy, Karen Till's is in the politics of placemaking and how the past, present and future collide in particular urban spaces through the process of place making.



Focused on the rationale for, and the process of the transition from palace to museum, I started my field research by interviewing the museum director, and those civil servants involved in the palace's transition as well as other museum directors. It was by asking questions that sought to deepen my understanding of the current organisational structure, who had the authority to decide what to show and the Palace Museum's plans for the future that I was able to determine that the process of establishing and practice of running this museum was divergent from all existing museums in Nepal. This raised a whole new set of questions about the making and unmaking of collective memory narratives. Once representations are produced, how are they maintained over time, by whom, and with what resources?

At the Narayanhiti Palace, the monarchy was replaced by a new set of actors, and those involved in creating the official narrative did not speak with a single voice. This thesis offers an account that uncovers a broad social and political arena in which the past is made and unmade by numerous social agents including politicians, civil servants, museum professionals, historians and ex-palace employees, who all had something different to say. Amongst this range of counter narratives, none was as insistent, yet consistently masked, as that woven by the staff running the Palace Museum: the same staff who ran it as a palace. Transferred en masse from the Palace Service, these staff knew very little about how to run a museum and had not chosen to do so. They were neither conceived of as museum employees, nor did they identify themselves in this way. This was apparent from the number of people who, during their interviews, recalled celebratory events held for all staff on the occasion of royal birthdays, coming of age ceremonies, etc. Stories of these parties were relayed as examples of the positive way in which Birendra was perceived to have treated staff of the Palace Service (in comparison to Gyanendra), and served to re-perform their identity as a former member of the royal household. It is for these reasons that I refer to them throughout as 'ex-palace staff', rather than as the staff of the Palace Museum.

It became clear early on that my line of questioning resonated with the ex-palace staff. In a post-monarchical state, I suggest it provided a space for their story to be heard. The day after interviewing a Section Officer amongst the museum staff, he gave an interview to a student interested in chronicling the story of the museum in relation to what it revealed about the events of the royal massacre. In the resulting article in a national newspaper, he is introduced not by his role at the Palace Museum, but his role and length of service within the Palace Service. In addition to answering the student's questions about the number of visitors to the museum, the Section Officer referred to the widely held perception amongst the ex-palace staff that visitors to the Palace Museum exhibited both awkward and disrespectful behaviour.<sup>30</sup> He publicly adopted the position of a member of ex-palace staff, pitting the ex-palace staff, who were trying to open up more of the palace, against the government, which through its allocation of budget and resources limited what they could show (Upadhyay, 2014).<sup>31</sup> It was this resonance, and my persistent re-appearance, over three consecutive summers, that enabled me to spend day after day with ex-palace staff behind the scenes at the Palace Museum, and that made them prepared to share with me both their day-to-day challenges and long-term ambitions.

Whilst there has been comment on the Palace Museum's representational strategies (P. Dixit, 2010; Subedi, 2009a, 2009b), and the political implications of its establishment (Malagodi, 2015; Mocko, 2012), this thesis offers a more detailed, first-hand, account. It has been influenced by the work of Handler and Gable on Colonial Williamsburg (1997) that identified the coexistence of simultaneous interpretative projects at one institution, and of Sharon Macdonald, whose work behind the scenes at the Science

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<sup>30</sup> I interviewed the student following the publication of the article in order to ascertain his line of questioning. He was able to confirm that this information was given in addition to the questions he asked.

<sup>31</sup> At the time, I was struck by this article as the first public expression I had seen of the conversations I held inside the Palace Museum every day. After speaking with him about whether my presence had influenced what he had decided to share, it became clear that my questions had not only served to validate his position, but had revealed the potential to gain public sympathy for their position.

Museum (2002) in London revealed the importance of the political dimension of making an exhibition at a museum. A commitment to understanding the social life of the museum requires the researcher to pay attention not just to the production of cultural representations, but also to the mundane realities of operating a museum. Crucially, it adds depth to what can be said about the production of memory at a particular institution. I adopted an ethnographic approach in an attempt to examine the social life of the Palace Museum. I carried out open-ended interviews with those who ran the museum, from the Museum Director, to Section Officers, to gallery attendants, to tour guides, to those responsible for the inventory, the garden and the building's security and maintenance (over twenty individuals in total). I observed the daily conversation and routine of a particular group of Section Officers, repeatedly toured the Palace Museum with visitors, and attended whatever events I could.<sup>32</sup> I recorded (and transcribed) almost all interviews and tried to return copies of transcripts to interviewees to provide them with a record of what they had shared. In addition to my own semi-structured interviews with visitors, four Nepali research assistants joined me for a period of two weeks in July 2014 in order to further observe visitor behaviour and conduct further interviews. What the emic perspective of this part of the study achieves is an analysis based on a detailed understanding of the internal workings of the institution of the Palace Museum.

Studying the ex-palace staff from behind the scenes was not without its challenges as evidenced by one particular occasion in July 2014. I had the opportunity to walk around the Palace Museum with a member of the ex-royal family, Ketaki Chester, and did so along with the friend who had introduced us. The next day I was met with silence, and whilst I was accepted into the office space behind the scenes, there were no attempts to support my planned activities for several days. From the perspective of the ex-palace staff I spent time with, I had privileged access to a member of the ex-royal family with whom they identified, access I had not shared with

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<sup>32</sup> Whilst I was permitted to take recording equipment inside, I was allowed to take very few photographs and these were never of the spaces open to public view.

them.<sup>33</sup> From my own point of view, I had attempted to respect Ketaki's wishes, conscious of the fact she was re-visiting the scene where she had witnessed the death of close family members and had been injured herself. As members of ex-palace staff, I explain in Chapter Seven how they were impacted by the transfer from what were roles in the most powerful institution in the land to holding positions in an institution whose official *raison d'être* they found hollow. Their very existence was politically challenging and for this reason, they found it extremely hard to get their voices heard. My position as 'part spy, part voyeur, part fan, part member' (Van Maanen, 1988) was exposed and their reaction to my decision to exclude them from this tour amplified their current lack of status in relation to my own. I share this difficult episode from my field research in the interests of transparency, to place myself firmly in the picture of this thesis as a researcher from the UK. In doing so I wish to recognise the uncomfortable dynamic of holding multiple positions in one's relationship with those one is researching and of any attempt to represent the experiences of others. Where possible I try to represent participants on their own terms.

### *On Anonymity*

Chapters Five to Seven, in particular, rely heavily on what ex-palace staff told me during my time spent behind the scenes at the Palace Museum. At the time of writing, most of these people remain employed by the Civil Service and as such their livelihoods are subject to political action. As much of what we discussed concerned the politics of the place, whilst not everyone was concerned about anonymity, I have decided not to quote people by name in this thesis. Therefore, most of the quoted material in these chapters is not attributed to named individuals, except where I draw on any published writings by or interviews with the Palace Museum's

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<sup>33</sup> After the event, when I walked them through to share what Ketaki had relayed on her visit, some members of ex-palace staff emphasised her position as an estranged member of the family who had renounced her HRH title before the monarchy was abolished as a way of emphasizing their own proximity with 'real' members of the ex-royal family in comparison to my own.

administrators. Other interviewees are cited, and a list provided at the end of the thesis.

One risk of this strategy is that by introducing anonymity for this group of people, I imply that all ex-palace staff at the Narayanhiti Palace Museum think alike. As in the work of Handler and Gable, it was their place within the structure of the institution that was most salient in shaping our conversations. I therefore adopt a similar approach, identifying people by their rank at the Palace Museum. In this case study focused on a small community, this does not guarantee them full and total anonymity, but ensures that no individual can be identified with certainty.

### *Thesis Structure*

#### Part One

This part provides a historical framework for the thesis.<sup>34</sup> It is predicated on the belief that in order to understand the transformation of the royal palace into a Palace Museum, one must first locate the roots of that transition in the history of the institution of monarchy, the nature of kingship in Nepal and its relationship to the construction of a national identity. Structured in three chapters, it focuses on seven distinct phases in the history of the Shah monarchy, each framed within the spatial context of the palaces of the Shah dynasty. They offer one of several possible ways of framing and structuring a history of the Shah monarchy, in this case to highlight how the spaces of the palaces of the monarchy have been used to re-present and re-constitute Nepali national identity. As much of what takes place in subsequent chapters is behind the palace walls, the first part of this thesis

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<sup>34</sup> As is being openly challenged today (Des Chene, 1996; Hangen, 2005; Lawoti, 2007), much of Nepal's written history has been silenced in the conventional and dominant accounts upon which I rely here. My account of Nepal's monarchy is limited by the nature of the available sources, which contain the words of those with the power to have made their voice heard - until recently accounts of the monarchy have been notably positivistic (Onta, 1996).

presents the Narayanhiti Palace as part of the built environment of the city.

Chapter Two sets out the development of the institution of the Shah monarchy and its relationship to the construction of Nepali national identity. It starts with Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's analysis of the morphology of palaces associated with the Shah that identifies the "anchoring of [Shah] kingship in space" (2009, p. 198). The adoption of a long view from the origins of the dynasty provides the necessary background to Nepal's monarchy, the nature of kingship and the construction of the Narayanhiti Palace in the 1960s.<sup>35</sup>

Chapter Three introduces the Narayanhiti Palace through a detailed consideration of the discursive bases of the palace's design (representation), the process of its creation (practice) and its use as a theatrical backdrop to state events (experience) (Dovey, 2008). The adoption of Dovey's pluralistic approach is useful because it encourages the production and consumption of space to be considered as a whole (Lefebvre, 1991; Low, 2000) in order to reveal the processes of signification of the Narayanhiti palace in the 1960s and early 1970s. I refer to the work of Jan Assmann to show how these processes formed part of the construction of a new national memory (J. Assmann, 2002; J. Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). The detail of the design process outlined in this chapter was not published at the time of the construction of the palace and to date no in-depth study has been undertaken into the design process, the design itself or any contemporary interpretation of the Narayanhiti Palace.<sup>36</sup> I rely therefore, on the written word of the designers, archival research and semi-structured interviews with those involved in the design process. Re-visiting the processes of memory construction at the start of the Panchayat era is intended to foreground the discussion of the more recent de- and re-construction of national narratives that follow in the next chapter and the

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<sup>35</sup> For example, "Complex institutional transitions underlie the apparent stability of Gorkha [Nepal] having always been a Hindu Kingdom." (Burghart, 1996, p. 276)

<sup>36</sup> Except for an article published by Sushmita Ranjit in SPACES Magazine in late 2009, after the Monarchy was abolished and the king had left the palace (Ranjit, 2009).

contestation that occurs over the interpretation of the country's royal past in the second part of this thesis.

Chapter Four resumes the chronological account in 1980 in order to address the final three phases of the historical account, alongside the processes of inhabitation of the Narayanhiti Palace; its operation as a palace, as the site of the royal massacre, and its recent transformation into a museum. This chapter positions the latest political transition into a continuum that makes clear the fluidity of the palace's significance. It directly addresses the impact of political transformation on the construction of meaning within the space of the palace and asks how memory/power is constructed through the way in which the palace orchestrates space. Importantly, in contrast to Chapter Two, which demonstrates how the space of the palace as designed was shaped by the concerns of nation-making and ordered by power, Chapter Four introduces the ways in which the palace has been used as a site to challenge authority.

## Part Two

The three chapters in this section draw upon my ethnographic inquiry into the politics of display at the Palace Museum: the processes, actions, attitudes and negotiations of those involved in constructing and visiting the museum. Chapter Five looks at the period after the king left the palace in June 2008 to the opening of the museum in February 2009 and a few months beyond, in order to identify the logic of the museum's creation. It asks who had the right (or power, or authority) to transform the palace and how the institution of museum was deemed appropriate.

Chapter Six examines the relationship between the state-sanctioned representations of the Shah monarchy in the Palace Museum and the construction of collective memory. The palace's status as part of Nepal's public history was evidenced in the moment of its transition and reinforced as part of people's private and collective memories in the succeeding months by the thousands of ordinary Nepalis who passed through its gates.

They came to bear witness to the political change, to visit their inheritance and search for their own meanings in the bedrooms and dining rooms occupied by the former royal family. In questioning the ambiguities and contradictions that emerge from the remembering of Nepal's royal past in the artificial, curated spaces of the museum, this chapter deals with the ways in which the Palace Museum gave shape to a royal past that was absent.

Chapter Seven adopts a long view from behind the scenes at the museum during the period from 2009 to 2016, in order to further explore the institutional life of the museum. Following in the footsteps of the work of Handler and Gable at Colonial Williamsburg, I aim to relate the study of place making in the previous two chapters to the institutional context within those processes occurred (Handler & Gable, 1997, p. 10). Together, these chapters are as much about forgetting and the politics of erasure as they are about remembering – forgetting as a precursor to erasure of the royal past to enable entry into a new Republican world.

### Part Three

Chapter Eight examines the design competition and memorial-making process of the Ganatantra Smarak. I argue that the space of the palace is used to support the exchange of one national identity for another as the construction of the Ganatantra Smarak inscribes a new interpretation of the past into the national landscape. I suggest that it is not just the consigning of the monarchy to the past through the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, but also the fact that Nepal's monarchical past can be forgotten at all that is in part constitutive of the new Republican identity. As a final attempt at dissociation (from the monarchical past), the Ganatantra Smarak was to mark the adoption of a new national identity and the beginning of a new phase in the meaning of the Narayanhiti Palace in an attempt to legitimise the place of the politicians and political parties involved.



Chapter Nine draws together the role the Narayanhiti Palace Museum has played in the construction of a Nepali national identity in Nepal's post-monarchical period. Summarising the origins of the palace and its position as part of the key political events of the twentieth century, this chapter sets out the ways in which the Narayanhiti Palace forms part of the collective memory of Nepalis. Using the dimension of restorative/ reflective nostalgia set out by Boym (2001), this chapter sets out the tension between the official narrative presented at the Palace Museum's role, as a public site, and the impact of the actions of ex-palace staff on the experiences of visitors to the museum. It sets out the relationship between the Ganatantra Smarak and the Narayanhiti Palace Museum and their different, but interlinked ways of encouraging remembering. The chapter concludes with thoughts about the gradual disintegration of the official narrative and the potential for the Narayanhiti Palace to shift into a tourist site.

## Chapter Two | The ascent of the monarchy

### Phase One | The Shah monarchy and the Gorkha Palace (pre-1743)

*The origins of the Shah monarchy: a warlike and mobile form of kingship*

I begin this narrative with the obscure origins of the dynasty in India and its establishment in the foothills of the Himalaya during the fifteenth century, because of the importance that understanding this period has in understanding the formulation of the Shah model of royalty as distinct from any other. These were campaigning kings, whose militaristic origins led them to develop a unitary conception of kingship focused on the person of the king and the site he occupied (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 198) and later became synonymous with the palace.

The most dominant historical accounts of the period before 1743 are informed by the chronicles of the Shah kings. The *Rajvamsavali* and *Goraksaraja Vamsavali* chronicles were composed under the patronage of King Rama Shah of Gorkha (r.1614-36) and then incorporated into the later *Gorkha Vamsavali* written under the patronage of King Drabya Shah of Gorkha (d.1570).<sup>37</sup> They take the form of lineages, or genealogies that follow the movement of the dynasty through a series of conquests (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 99; Pradhan, 1991, p. 23).<sup>38</sup> Whilst the historicity of the chronicles is strongly debated by historians (Hamilton, 2007, p. 52; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 110), Lecomte-Tilouine's analysis of the origins of the Shah dynasty highlights their usefulness as "embellished

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<sup>37</sup> Atributed to Chitra Bilas and Dharanidhara Sharma (Goraksraja Vamsavali) respectively.

<sup>38</sup> The version offering the most extensive account of this period is in a chronicle brought to London by the British Resident Brian Houghton Hodgson and translated into English by Munshi S.S.Singh and Pandit Gunanand and edited by D. Wright in the History of Nepal (1972, pp.271-84).

histories”, that show us what the Shah kings wanted to be recorded of their past, both imaginary and real (2009, p.196).<sup>39</sup>

During the medieval period the Indian subcontinent was subject to waves of invasion from the Islamic world (Turks, Afghans, etc.) and a considerable amount of migration took place into the Gangetic plains. The chronicles all trace the origin of the Shah kings of Gorkha to Rajasthan, where they claim they are Rajput survivors of the kingdom of Mewar (Pradhan, 1991, p. 23), whose fortress at Chitaur (Whelpton, 2005, p. 10) was attacked by Muslim invaders.<sup>40</sup> The chronicles record their flight carrying their chosen tutelary (family) goddess [*ista devata*] with them (Wright, 1972, p. 276). They recount that following the attack on Chitaur, Manmatha Rava Ranaji fled to Ujayini where he had two sons. The eldest stayed there and the youngest left “for the mountainous countries of the North” (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 103). The Shahs were not alone in shaping their origins, providing themselves with noble (in this case royal) Hindu heritage. This creation of impressive phantom dynasties was common amongst the region’s many *rajas* (Hanige in Pradhan, 1991, p.19), an “archetypical model of the origin of kingship” that stresses the need for the royal person to move towards a wild region to save both his life and religion (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p.197).

The chronicles trace the Shah kings’ northbound progress from Ujayini to Ridi on the bank of the Kali Gandaki river, then guided by the wishes of their chosen tutelary deity [*ista devata*], to Lasargha on the opposite side (from where the lineage again split into two) (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p.103-105).<sup>41</sup> There they encountered the Khasa, whose kingdom centred in the

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<sup>39</sup> Rajput origins remained an important status symbol that may have been a factor in the royal massacre in 2001, owing to the perceived origins of the woman the Crown Prince wanted to marry (Whelpton, 2005, p.11).

<sup>40</sup> Subsequent histories demonstrate that three separate invasions of Chitaur in the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries are telescoped together in the chronicles (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p.103).

<sup>41</sup> *Manmath Rānā-jī Rāva went to Ujjain. He had two sons...the latter arrived at Ridi. When setting out from Ujjain, he took with him his Ishta-dēvatā (patron deity), who told him to halt and not to go beyond the place where he put him (the dēvatā) on the ground.”* (Wright 1972 275-6) “While leaving Ujjayini, his elected divinity (*ista devata*) told him: ‘Having taken me

Karnali river basin had commonality in language, culture and traditions across the geographic region under their control.<sup>42</sup> The immigration of Hindu chiefs into the hills at the time of expansion of Muslim power in India led to a rapid fragmentation of land and local, high-caste, Brahman families began to claim Rajput status as a way of shedding their original ancestry and aligning themselves with their new kings, part of a process of progressive sanskritization (Stiller, 1973, p. 71).

Whilst the Shah kings chose to play up their “escape from India” (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009, p.196), theirs was a story of military conquest. The geography of the Himalayan foothills encouraged the diffusion and decentralisation of political power and led to an emerging network of ‘statelets’, each holding a defensible position. In the area of the Khasa kingdom the network of statelets was known as the *baisi* (‘twenty-two’) and those in the Gandaki river basin as the *chaubisi* (‘twenty-four’) (Whelpton, 2005, p. 23). Each was ruled by a single *raja*, and their size meant they had limited resources (Tucci, 1962, p. 61). They launched occasional military campaigns into each other’s realms, but more often they used processes of infiltration (Stiller, 1973, p. 62), supporting one section of an existing population against another. This was a constant shifting landscape of territorial control and within it we can trace the movement of the Shah kings from Bhirkot (near Lasargha), where they then spread out on three occasions – in each case a junior royal brother left to found a new kingdom. First Micha Khan went to Pallo Nuwakot (exact location unknown), then Yasobrahma Sahi to Lamjung (above the river Marsyangdi) and finally his second son Drabya Shah was crowned king of Gorkha in 1559 (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p.198-9). The *Gorkhavamsavali* tells us that Drabya Shah separated from his brother, leaving the stronghold of Lamjung, moving westward until he fought with and conquered one of the Chaubisi Rajas (24

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away, we will settle on the empty soil (*khali bhaima*) on which you will set me.” (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p.103)

<sup>42</sup> Determined by analysis of stone inscriptions that record the genealogies of the Khasa kings (Tucci, 1962, pp.60-65). The area covered 142,000 square kilometres at its greatest extent (Whelpton, 2005, p. 22)

kings)<sup>43</sup> and established a stronghold on the ridge between the Daraundikola and the Burigandaki in 1559,<sup>44</sup> conquering an area of about 2,500 square kilometres (Regmi, 1995, p. 3).<sup>45</sup>

*The Gorkhali model of Hindu kingship: the anchoring of Shah kingship in space*

Drabya Shah was established as king in this new territory by anchoring himself in space. (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 198) He is described taking his seat on the throne [*gaddī*] upon which he received *tika* and was covered in vermillion powder.<sup>46</sup>

Drabya Sāh killed the Khadkā Rājā with his own hand, with a sword, during the battle that ensued. At the same auspicious moment Drabya Sāh took his seat on the *gaddī*, amidst the clash of music. (Wright, 1972, p. 278)

The body of the king and the place where he was consecrated was an indivisible representation of the kingdom that linked the body of the king to the whole of the kingdom, including its polity, referred to by the end of the eighteenth century by the term *dhungo* [stone] (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 199; Regmi, 1995, p. 15).<sup>47</sup> As the site of the coronation, the palace at Gorkha became the heart of the kingdom and was a stronghold to protect the person of the king (Witzel, 1987, pp. 420–422). Drabya Shah probably upgraded two fortresses, one on the hill used during the winter (*Upallokot*) and one below on the ridge used during the summer (*Tallokot*) (Gutschow,

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<sup>43</sup> Pradhan recounts two alternative accounts of the capture of Gorkha. In the first Drabya Shah kills the sitting Khasa Kharga chief whilst everyone is occupied by a festival. In the second, Drabya Shah is assisted into power by the conspiring of local Brahmans because they could not tolerate being subjugated by a Khasa ruler who was not of 'pure blood' (1991, p. 24).

<sup>44</sup> Archaeological evidence proves the existence of a settlement at this location as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 815)

<sup>45</sup> See William Tuladhar Douglas "Washing Your Neighbour's God: Royal Ritual in 14<sup>th</sup> Century Nepal" (2003) for discussion on performative and temporary military campaigning.

<sup>46</sup> See Witzel (1987, pp. 8-14) for analysis of the Vedic origins of the Nepalese (Shah) coronation ritual.

<sup>47</sup> Lecomte-Tilouine describes the consecration of the king 'on a large stone'. The word used in the chronicles is *gaddī* – earliest reference to *Dhungo* appears to be letter by Prithvinarayan Shah to a Brahman of Kaski in 1746 (Regmi, 1979, p. 21)

N; Assum, G; Joshi, D; Devpradhan, 1985). According to both the oral and written narratives, a part of the Shah dynasty's tutelary deity was taken from the original kingdom and established in the new palace, creating a new sacred realm around the king (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 198).<sup>48</sup> Physical markers of this realm were mapped in the 1980s by archaeological researchers funded by the German Research Council, who identified seven hilltop shrines of the sisters of Kalika (the Shah dynasty's *kula devatā*) around Gorkha (Gutschow, N; Assum, G; Joshi, D; Devpradhan, 1985).<sup>49</sup> Lecomte-Tilouine concludes that "[Shah] kingship is thus associated with the person of the sovereign and the place of his coronation, a summit or a stone, and is reinforced by the presence of the family goddess." (2009, p. 198)

The Shah kings' mode of rule was based on the extraction of rent from agricultural land (Whelpton, 2005, pp. 26–28) The King could either spend this revenue directly, or he could give varying entitlements to others, ensuring that they were obliged to him. This was done in two ways: first in the form of a grant of land (*jagir*) for those who served the palace, which was reviewed annually (in a ceremony known as *pajani*) and was therefore temporary and revocable. Second, the king gave permanent gifts of land (*birta*) to deities, Buddhist monks or Brahmans in a reciprocal gesture for their divine support.

The tenth edict attributed to King Rama Shah (r.1606-1636) describes the royal ritual that took place at the king's residence on the occasion of a *birta* gift, revealing the conception of the whole Gorkhali political system as a

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<sup>48</sup> Lecomte-Tilouine writes that the Gorakh *kula devatā* is from Lamjung and brought there from Bhirkot (interpreted by Nelson as a part of the goddess-rock (Nelson, 2013, p. 102)). I have not been able to corroborate this from reading those chronicles available in translated form (personal correspondence 27 May 2016). Lecomte-Tilouine does not distinguish between the *kula devatā* or the *ista devatā*. The *ista devatā* discussed in the chronicle translated/ edited by Wright gets left behind at Lasargha. Witzel locates the *kula devatā* at Palpa (at the Rudravani in Laskara Pradesh).

<sup>49</sup> The shrines are Annapurna, Chabdivarahi, Cimkesvari, Akaladevi, Manakamana and Namrungdevi (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 168).

“‘body politic’ in which the functions of government are royal limbs coordinated by the king” (Burghart, 1996, p. 203):

In endowing land for a god or pilgrim’s hostel or in gifting land to a Brahman, the purpose of the water jug [used for pouring water in the sacrifice] of the prince is this: the prince is one’s own brother. A brother is one’s principal limb. If one makes one’s limbs strong and gives gifts, one receives the fruits according to what has been said [in the Brahmanical codes of conduct]. This is the reason for the water jug of the prince. (Riccardi, 1977) in (Burghart, 1996, 202)

The persons who acted on the king’s behalf throughout the ritual were objectified as instruments of his rule; and by integrating these instruments within his body, the king subjectified everyone into a hierarchy with only one will – that of the divine king (Burghart 1996, pp. 193-225).<sup>50</sup> Through the privilege to gift land, along with the embellishment and construction of temples, the Shah kings constituted and structured relations with deities and ascetics and their subjects by asserting their agency territorially. The Shah kings’ claims of religious authority enabled them to capitalize on the resulting prestige both locally and in competition with other *rajās*. The performance of these claims took place locally in a variety of ways, for example Gutschow refers to a legend that describes Drabya Shah plunging his torch into the earth as a gesture to mark his claim to sovereignty on the ridge immediately above the important local shrine of Gorakhnātha, who was adopted as a patron of Gorkha.<sup>51</sup> The location of the palace on this ridge above the cave of Gorakhnātha established a powerful link to this local deity, which ensured protection and legitimacy (2011, pp. 815-6).

## **Phase Two | The military conquest of the Kathmandu Valley (1743-1775)**

*The Gorkhali conquests: fixing the Kathmandu Valley as the centre of an expanded kingdom*

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<sup>50</sup> The king’s constitution of the kingdom is also apparent in the coronation rituals, described in detail by Witzel (1987)

<sup>51</sup> Gutschow states that Gorakhnath was the chosen deity (*ista devatā*) of the Shah dynasty (2011, p. 167). Analysis of the coronation rituals by Witzel show the deity to have a close relationship to the Gorkha state as opposed to the Shah dynasty (1987, p. 23).

By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were three affluent and prestigious city-kingdoms ruled by related Malla kings in Nepal (i.e. the Kathmandu Valley); Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur.<sup>52</sup> In 1768, after a 25-year military campaign,<sup>53</sup> the Gorkhalis, under King Prithvinarayan Shah (1723-1775 – r.1743-1775) entered Kathmandu on the evening of September 25, the Indra Jatra festival.<sup>54</sup> King Jayaprakash Malla of Kathmandu (d.1769) fled to Patan and Prithvinarayan Shah moved his capital to Kathmandu and fixed the Valley as the centre of power and authority for the Gorkhali empire (Whelpton, 2005, p. 35).<sup>55</sup> Within the following year he consolidated control over the remaining kingdoms of Patan and Bhaktapur.<sup>56</sup> The conquest of the cities of the Kathmandu Valley is considered in histories of Nepal to mark the decisive beginning of both

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<sup>52</sup> What had been one kingdom, became three autonomous kingdoms after a complicated period of Malla succession following the end of the reign of King Yaksha Malla (1482 to 1619) (Slusser, 1982, p. 53). The term 'nepal' did not refer to the nation-state of Nepal until the 1920s when the British used it in reference to the entire country, previously known as Gorkha.

<sup>53</sup> He used diplomatic means to secure Gorkha's own borders and systematically isolated the Valley from its trade routes, eventually enforcing a complete economic blockade on the Valley. Stiller sees the desire to defend hills and unify a larger kingdom at least in part as a reaction to the British presence in the subcontinent (Stiller, 1974).

<sup>54</sup> David Gellner follows K.P. Malla's analysis, according to which an Indo-Aryan derivation overwrote an originally Tibetan-Burman etymology of the word 'Nepal' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when Malla rule had reached a period of relative stability. *ne* (cow, buffalo, cattle) and *pā* (man, keeper) linked to Tibeto-Burman origins of the indigenous Newar population, were replaced by a sage called 'Ne' who guarded (*pāl*) the Valley and discovered the sacred *linga* (emblem of the god Siva) (Gellner, 1986, p. 117, 2016, p. 4). Evidence of the complex process of progressive sanskritisation that was taking place in the Kathmandu Valley where rulers, just like the Shah kings in Gorkha, had long used Hindu models of kingship developed in India to claim religious authority for themselves. Written inscriptions by the Malla use Sanskrit, whereas analysis of the place names has revealed that the local population spoke an ancient form of the present day Newars' language – Newar (Bledsoe, 2004, p. 83).

<sup>55</sup> The exact manner of conquest is debated and some sort of negotiations took place. Pradhan quotes from Father Giuseppe who reports that during the siege of Kathmandu, the Brahmins of Gorkha 'came almost every night into the city, to engage the chiefs of the people on the part of their king Prit'hunarayana into his hands'. The city opened its gates to the Gorkhalis (1991, p. 103).

<sup>56</sup> The final battle for the Kathmandu Valley took place at Bhaktapur in 1769, and the local forces were led jointly by the ruling Malla king of Bhaktapur and the displaced Malla kings of Patan, and Kathmandu (Ranjit Malla, Tejnarasingha Malla, and Jayaprakash Malla respectively). Jayaprakash Malla died from wounds sustained in the battle; Tejnarasingha was kept imprisoned, and Ranjit Malla was permitted to become a religious mendicant. (Pradhan, 1991, p. 105)



the nation state of Nepal and the Shahs as the national dynasty.<sup>57</sup>

The Malla kings of each of these cities were able to support a lavish court, urban culture and flourishing artistic tradition from the agricultural income from farming in the large and fertile valley, from trade due to their location on two trade routes between India and Tibet (Pradhan, 1991, pp. 44-46) and in particular from their arrangement to mint coins on behalf of Tibetan rulers (Rankin, 2004, p. 90).<sup>58</sup> Whereas Shah kingship was conceived as a unit, symbolized by the stone [*dhungo*], the Malla kingdoms revolved around the person of the king, whose power was limited by his noblemen who could dismiss him or seize power (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 200). This power structure was mapped onto the concentric structure of the cities, which each had a strong palace (*lāykū*) at the centre that served to concentrate political and ritual authority,<sup>59</sup> surrounded by a templescape that designated the space inside as pure and the space outside as impure (Gellner, 2001, p. 280). Encircling the kings and priestly castes in the centre were the middle castes of farmers and artisans, with the lower castes on the periphery. These spatial practices were an evolution of the *mandala* cities of the Licchavi Hindu kings (who ruled from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE) and enabled the Malla kings to position themselves as the symbolic protectors of the realm, to create and maintain social order (Gutschow & Kölver, 1975).<sup>60</sup> Following the conquest of the three kingdoms of the Valley,

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<sup>57</sup> In 2018, 11 years after abolition of the Shah monarchy, the birthday of Prithvīnarayan Shah was again celebrated as a national holiday.

<sup>58</sup> These related kings competed with each other to build ever more dazzling palaces and temples and to endow ever more elaborate and grand festivals to legitimise their position and boost their prestige (Gellner, 1983).

<sup>59</sup> See Lecomte-Tilouine for argument that the Mul Chowk, the courtyard at the heart of the Hanuman Dhoka palace in Kathmandu was the measuring standard of the kingdom (2009, p. 201)

<sup>60</sup> Licchavi cities were imagined as microcosm, a square organized by four cardinal points with a main Hindu temple at the center point, or *brahmasthan*, and a Buddhist vihara on the periphery (Gutschow & Kölver, 1975). Sudarshan Raj Tiwari argues that the Licchavi in turn adopted earlier spatial practices of the dualist *pringga* city of the Kirata (proto Newar peoples who ruled between the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE). He demonstrates that both the Kirata and Licchavi cities had a clear social hierarchy and positioned a temple at the centre: the Kirata divided space into two halves by a center point, or *dathutole*, marked by a shrine of the tutelary god, with a higher zone on one side, the *thatu*, where priests and nobles resided, and a lower zone on the other side, *kwathu*, where commoners resided (2009, pp. 48–50).

Prithvinarayan continued certain important ritual functions of his predecessors in order to legitimize his position as the rightful, Hindu king of what was now a vastly increased kingdom. The chronicles state that he had himself re-crowned on the throne in Kathmandu's Hanuman Dhoka palace positioning himself at the centre of a ritually significant core territory (Whelpton, 2005, p. 56).

In Kathmandu the Indra Jatra festival was central to the Malla kings' performance of Hindu kingship, and almost all of the chronicles suggest that Prithvinarayan Shah timed his invasion for the first day of this festival.<sup>61</sup> The *Padmagiri Vamshavali* recounts that he received *tika* (a mark on his forehead) from the Kumari (the incarnation of the Malla's tutelary goddess (*kul devata*) Taleju in a little girl) in the place of the usurped king Jayaprakash Malla and in this way authorized his next year of rule.

Next day or full moon of August light half, Prithvinarayana having received the Prasad of the Kumari, seated himself on the throne of Kantipur and was proclaimed king Padmagiri Vamshavali in (Hasrat, 1970, p. 91)<sup>62</sup>

The telling and retelling of these "embellished histories" (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009, p. 196) established a relationship between the Shah king and the Malla goddess Taleju and her living incarnation, the Kathmandu Royal Kumari that became "central to the construction and reproduction of the [Shah] monarchy" (Mocko, 2012, p. 362). This time Prithvinarayan did not install the Shah *kul devata* Kalika at the Hanuman Dhoka palace, but adopted Taleju, the Malla king's *kul devata*, thereby positioning the Shah kings at the centre of an existing sacred realm.<sup>63</sup> In this way he would make clear his right to rule, but simultaneously maintain a connection with the culture from which the identity of the populations of the Kathmandu Valley

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<sup>61</sup> Prithvinarayan's conquest of the Valley was recorded close to the time of the actual events by Jesuit missionary Giuseppe da Rovato, published in 1970 as *Account of the Kingdom of Nepal* (da Rovato, 1970).

<sup>62</sup> Hasrat reproduced Hodgson's marginal comments in his translation, including: "With the usual easiness of a polythesist, the conqueror though of another race, and even creed, mounts the throne under her auspices as the *genius loci* of his new realm" (1970, p. 91).

<sup>63</sup> See Burghart for how Prithvinarayan Shah approached the political integration of the kingdom by respecting the tutelary deities of each conquered realm (1996, p. 233).

had been derived.

*The evolution of Gorkhali kingship: The interrelated role of the palaces at Gorkha and Kathmandu*

Prithvinarayan attempted to reconstitute the symbol of the *dhungo* within the seized Hanuman Dhoka palace,<sup>64</sup> which had numerous courtyards (*chowk*), each dedicated to a particular deity. He did this by shifting the site of the coronation from the *Mul Chowk* to the larger *Nasal Chowk* in the 1770s. The king was crowned on a raised dais at the centre of the *Nasal Chowk* used by the Malla kings to position a statue of Indra during the *Indra Jatra* celebrations (Witzel, 1987, p. 435). This move reinforced the position of the Shah king as the divine ruler of this expanded territory, and confirmed the Hanuman Dhoka palace with the Taleju Temple as its centre.<sup>65</sup>

Contemporary architectural adaptations to the palace projected the Shah kings' territorial ambition and "within two decades the entire palace complex overcame the intimacy and scale of the Malla period" (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 336): Prithvinarayan Shah began reshaping the *Basantapur Chowk* using the same architectural style as the older Malla structures (Korn, 1976, pp. 60–61) with Newar carvings, but surpassing the earlier buildings in size and proportions.<sup>66</sup> A tower was placed at each corner, one of which was nine stories tall, with windows and doors that were larger than earlier examples.<sup>67</sup>

Prithvinarayan reinterpreted the Shah kings (military) practice of moving the

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<sup>64</sup> A reference to Acharya (1968) in Burghart (1996, p. 242) suggests that the throne of the Shah dynasty was carried over the hills from Gorkha and placed in the Malla Palace. Given that the source is printed by His Majesty's Government this seems more likely to be apocryphal.

<sup>65</sup> The Taleju temple is at the centre of the mandala and as such embodied the divine energy associated with the king (Gutschow & Bajracharya, 1977; Hoek, 1993, p. 363). The Taleju Temple was financed by sixty-two state *guthi* according to the register kept at the *guthi samsthan* (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 118).

<sup>66</sup> Completed by his son Pratap Singha Shah in the 1780s (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 338)

<sup>67</sup> Hutt refers to the significance of the names of the two-storeyed Lalitpur Tower (SE), the two-storeyed Bhaktapur Tower (NE), the single-storeyed Kirtipur Tower (NW) and the Basantapur Tower (SW), each referring to the conquered Newar towns. It is not clear when this nomenclature first came into use (Hutt, et al., 1995, p. 102).

Gorkhali court between the valley (winter) and the hills (summer) (Vajracharya, 1975, p. 147).<sup>68</sup> Kathmandu (in the valley) was used in the winter and Nuwakot (for its location in the hills) in the summer.<sup>69</sup> Whereas in Gorkha, the seasonal locations of the court were within one kingdom, these seasonal capitals now spanned a wider territory that had been made up of multiple kingdoms (Burghart, 1996, p.243).<sup>70</sup> The political testament, the *Dibya Upadesh*, attributed to him towards the end of his life, indicates Prithvinarayan's intention to distinguish between the population in the Valley and their new hill rulers through the construction of a new capital, built around a new palace on the western ridge overlooking Kathmandu:

I have seen the arrangements bound by King Ram Shah. I have also seen the arrangements bound by King Jayasthiti Malla. I have also seen the arrangements bound by King Mahindra Malla. I also had the desire that, if God allowed, an arrangement of similar binding for the 12,000 would be bound... This three-cited [Nepal] is a cold stone. Intrigue/conspiracy is the only thing that is great [there]. With one who drinks water from wells [*kup*], there is neither wisdom nor courage. There is only intrigue/conspiracy. My intention was that I would build a palace at Dahachok and I would build around me houses for the leaders and priests of my people, my family, the leaders and chiefs of the hill states. I would build the palace apart. In these cities, apart from the palace, let there remain only pomp and pleasure.<sup>71</sup> (P. Shah, n.d.)

Prithvinarayan's comparison between the "arrangements" [*badhyako*] of Ram Shah of Gorkha (1606-1636) with those of the Malla kings, can be read as reference to both the social regulations and organization of each kingdom, which were, of course, reflected in the spatial organization of their cities. His unflattering description of the Malla kingdoms as "a cold stone", evoked the Shahs' concept of the *dhungo*, the indivisible representation of king and kingdom upon which the Shah kings were crowned (now

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<sup>68</sup> During this period both Kathmandu and Nuwakot were referred to as *rajadhani* (capital) and *mukam* (a Persian loan word meaning encampment) (Vajracharya, 1975, p. 147).

<sup>69</sup> A fort like structure (*durgga*) was constructed in Nuwakot at this time and a shrine dedicated to Kālikā placed close to the shrine of Mallika, the shrine of the Malla kings (Gutschow, 2011b, pp. 796-799)

<sup>70</sup> This distance was symbolic as well as physical. Gellner has traced the term "Newar", which he shows was used, to the mid 17th century, as a designation for "the leaders of the people of Nepal, who spoke nepal-bhasa ('the language of Nepal'). Following Prithvinarayan Shah's conquest of the Valley in the late 18th century, "Newar" was a term used to distinguish the Valley's indigenous subjects from their hill rulers (1986, p. 102-48).

<sup>71</sup> I am grateful to Professor Michael Hutt for his help in translating this paragraph from Prithvinarayan Shah's *Dibya Upadesh*.

reconstituted in the Hanuman Dhoka palace).<sup>72</sup> A difference in this translation from Stiller's original (1968), "I also had the desire that, if God allowed" (Hutt) as opposed to "If it is God's will, I would like to make" emphasizes Prithvinarayan's use of a devotional context to position himself with the people (as devotees), uniting king and citizen together. If Prithvinarayan had shifted the activities of government and centre of political power to a new palace [*darbar*] in Dahachok, he would have created a clear distinction between the Malla rule of the past and the new Shah rule of the present, legitimised in religious terms. The power centre of Kathmandu would have been left as places where rituals that legitimise the king would continue to be performed, part of a constellation of seasonal capitals, with Dahachok as the most significant. Dahachok, as described, would have served as a replication of the political (and social) structure of the newly expanded Gorkhali kingdom with his palace at its centre.<sup>73</sup>

Prithvinarayan Shah died in 1774 and the new capital at Dahachok was never built. His successors continued to move between Nuwakot and Kathmandu until the insecurity of war with the British East India Company in 1814 confined the court to Kathmandu (Kirkpatrick, 1969, pp. 116–117). Whilst the physical displacement of the capital did not take place, the political structure of Gorkha was transplanted onto Kathmandu, and continued to restrict the makeup of the political elite (and thus important governmental posts) to loyal families from Gorkha, rather than integrating into his inner circle any of the ranking members of the Malla courts, whose previous role in king making (or unmaking) he perceived as a threat to the Shahs' unitary concept of kingship (Levy & Rajopadhyaya, 1990, p. 49; Whelpton, 1991, p. 8).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Having secured his legitimacy in Kathmandu, he may have intended to move the site of the coronation to Dahachok.

<sup>73</sup> Stiller's original translation denotes *darbar* as capital. Hutt has here translated *darbar* as palace which serves to emphasise the Shahs' unitary concept of kingship in which the king, his throne and his palace were indivisible.

<sup>74</sup> Hamilton's account of Kathmandu 25 years later describes how whilst the noble families of Gorkha occupied the best Newar houses, the majority of the *Parbatiyas* lived in small, mud-built houses (a tradition brought with them) (1986 [1819] 173). The distance between the two populations became mapped onto the fabric of the city. Archaeological evidence in Gorkha shows use of burnt brick for buildings of families close to the king, where their

Writing about the kingdom of Gorkha at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Burghart distinguished between a realm (*desa*) within which the king exercised his ritual authority and a territorial domain (*muluk*) described as the “entire possessions of the king of Gorkha” within which the king brought subjects together through a tenurial relationship.<sup>75</sup> Both the *muluk* and *desa* were necessary for the Shah kings in claiming sovereignty and included in both were various countries (also *desa*) in which the king’s subjects were natives and claimed rights based on ancestral authority (1996, pp. 238-245).<sup>76</sup> The body of the king (synonymous with the Hanuman Dhoka palace in Kathmandu as the seat of the Shah king’s coronation) was at the centre of the *muluk*, which now had a new nationwide scope, but there was no significant change to the internal political processes of Gorkha (Joshi & Rose, 1966, p. 485). The ethnic basis of this enlarged Gorkhali kingdom was “the gradual migration of the *Parbatiya* (‘hill’) people eastward through the Himalayas” (Gellner, 1986, p. 104) and the cultural links between the *Parbatiya* population (who were Indo-Nepali Hindus) facilitated and reinforced the cultural dominance of the Gorkhali conquerors. Integration was also based on land grants in new areas issued to those loyal to the Shah monarchy (Whelpton, 1997, p. 43).

Prithvinarayan claimed divine authority over more than one realm (*desa*), drawing upon Hinduism as a source of political legitimization.<sup>77</sup> However, the realm of Gorkha was the most significant: The Shah kings thought of themselves as kings of Gorkha, with their tutelary deity (*kul devatā*) Kalika at the Gorkha palace at its centre. He asserted membership of a wider Hindu community, but also created a moral distinction between the ‘pure’

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descendants were found to still reside in the 1990s (Vaidya, 1993, p. 73).

<sup>75</sup> See Stiller’s translation of the *Dibya Upadesh* (Stiller, 1968, pp. 43–44).

<sup>76</sup> By the time of Prithvinarayan’s death the Gorkhali Empire was run by a system of military governors and included the eastern and central Terai regions, the Kathmandu valley, the eastern hill terrain up to the Tista River bordering Sikkim, and the hill regions of Nuwakot and Dhading that lay between Gorkha and Kathmandu. Westward expansion took place under his successors of the hill states in the Gandaki and Karnali basins.

<sup>77</sup> See Burghart for an interesting discussion about linguistic origin of the phrase in a Persian form of speech (1996, p.268)

Gorkhali kingdom, the *asal Hindustan*, from the 'polluted' Muslim or Christian rule in India (Liechty, 1997). He founded a policy of isolation and implemented strict ritual and economic sanctions on the movement of foreign goods and people in and out of the Valley (Liechty, 1997). The *asal Hindustan* was a political entity, which could include non-Hindu subjects, but must be ruled by a Hindu ruler with *dharma* as the ordering principle (Burghart, 1996, p. 268). Shah (Hindu) kingship became linked to political power, a representation of the spirit and 'unity' of the kingdom (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1997, p. 422) and an embodiment of the values of the *Parbatiya* population (Malagodi, 2015, p. 69). The hierarchy of the *asal Hindustan* was defined through a ritual framework. The annual Hindu *Dasain* festival in particular had the power to renew the superiority claimed by the Shah dynasty. A festival celebrated by the *Parbatiya* population, its rituals marked the central position of the realm of Gorkha in the universe and the dependent position of the realm of Nepal (with the Hanuman Dhoka palace in Kathmandu at its centre).<sup>78</sup>

### **Phase Three | From Hanuman Dhoka to Narayanhiti; the marginalised monarchy (1775–1951)**<sup>79</sup>

#### *The regency period: Palace architecture as a legitimising symbol*

Prithvinarayan Shah was succeeded by his son Pratap Singh Shah (1751-1777 r. 1775-1777) whose premature death initiated a protracted period of crisis for the Shah dynasty. The monarchy became progressively an institution of ceremonial figureheads disassociated from the governance of the country, first by regents and then later by prime ministers who administered the polity on their behalf, culminating in severe restrictions imposed by the Rana family that began when Jang Bahadur Rana

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<sup>78</sup> See Mocko for detailed discussion of and history of the Dasain ritual (2012, pp. 393-441)

<sup>79</sup> Many highlight the continuity of the dynamic between monarch and premier throughout this period (e.g. Mocko, 2012, p. 48). I present them as separate moments, with a period of weak rule followed by a shift in scale of disenfranchisement when Jang Bahadur Rana takes power. The Rana family were deliberately dictatorial, using the same methods of legitimation as the Shah kings (Lotter, 2004, p. 245).

manoeuvred himself into power in 1846. These events saw the location of the Shah monarchy increasingly fixed to the city of Kathmandu, which gave a new significance to the composite form of kingship described above. Throughout this period of weak royal rule, palace architecture was used to legitimise the rule of the Shah kings (and those who ruled on their behalf).

Bhimsen Thapa (1775-1839) ran the administration on behalf of the next three Shah kings, and in this capacity acted as the key arbiter with the British. In 1826 at the Hanuman Dhoka Palace, four storey Anglo-Indian wings increased the size of the *Nasal Chowk* to a courtyard of unprecedented size, paved with flagstones and the platform used for coronations was renewed to create “an architecturally pretentious stage” (Figure 2) (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 336). The hybrid Anglo-Indian style was used in this ritually significant space of the palace to create alignment with the dominant power of British India and became the dominant style of the architecture built by those who ruled the country as prime ministers for the next one hundred years. Bhimsen Thapa materialised his position by constructing two palaces (again in an Anglo-Indian style) for himself away from the city core, one on the banks of the Bagmati river at Thapathali and the other further away across the Bishnumati river in Chauni, legitimising the power he had seized by “deliberately seeking the proximity of the sacred river of the valley” (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 853).

Prithvinarayan Shah’s successors constructed a palace on top of the ridge at Gorkha to demonstrate their legitimacy. Built by Newar carpenters and brickmakers from the valley, the two palace wings and their adjoining structure (*Ranga Mahal*) reflect the style of the buildings in the Kathmandu Valley. The organization of the plan and structure of the eastern building, the *raj darbar* was designed to immortalize the life of Prithvinarayan Shah as the founder of the kingdom and to mark the origin of the Shah dynasty. In addition to housing the tutelary deity (*kalika*) in the attic, the ground floor contained an eternal fire (referring to the torch of Drabya Shah), Prithvinarayan Shah’s throne and a room to commemorate his birth. King Rana Bahadur Shah’s (1775-1806 r. 1777-1799) initiation ceremony took



place here in 1788, presumably to reaffirm the origin of the dynasty (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 829).

Both *desa* and *muluk* became synonymous after a two-year Anglo-Nepali war (1814-1816) over control of the Terai plains (Stiller, 1973, pp. 347–370).<sup>80</sup> The war was lost to the British East India Company who by this time controlled India and the peace treaty of Sugauli established a British Residency in Kathmandu and reduced the Gorkhali territories to roughly the size of the current Nepali state: bordered by the Mahakali River in the west and the Mechi River in the east.<sup>81</sup> It forced the Gorkhali kingdom to accept fixed boundaries (a European concept) marked on the ground by stone pillars demarcating its lands from those of British India (Stiller, 1976, pp. 220–222) and enabled the rulers to see the whole kingdom as one *desa* (here meaning country) for the first time (Burghart, 1996, pp. 246–249). Perhaps in response to this, in 1824 the addition of a second set of roofs on the western building and the interconnecting *Ranga Mahal* at the Gorkha palace facilitated a more complex *Dasain* ritual (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 816). King Rajendra Bikram Shah's (1813-1881 r. 1816-1847) donation of a finial on the third floor of the western building to mark the temporary presence of the goddess *Kalika* during the festival finally transformed Gorkha from a palace and memorial into a ritual space that connected state religion with the royal lineage's religious practices making clear their divine right to rule. After the signing of the peace treaty the custom of moving the locus of authority between seasonal capitals was not resumed (Kirkpatrick, 1969 (1811), pp. 116–117).

*The constrained monarchy and a century of Rana rule: Shifting the centre of control*

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<sup>80</sup> From 1860 the defined border of the *muluk* (territory) became the boundary of the *desa* (realm) (Whelpton, 1997, p. 42).

<sup>81</sup> It did also strip Nepal of most of the Terai, but the British returned these lands in the following year. Kailali and Kanchanpur, in the western Terai were given to Nepal only after 1857.

Army general Jang Bahadur Kunwar (1817-77) was next to manoeuvre his family into effective control of the kingdom (taking the name Rana to show that they also claimed descent from the Rajput rulers and to give them caste equality with the royal family (Whelpton, 1991, p. 187).<sup>82</sup> In 1846 he orchestrated a bloody palace coup that purged the court of his political rivals, and officially usurped the monarch's administrative powers of state. Depicting the sovereign as a sacred figure, he used the king's divinity as a reason to exclude him from the political realm. In 1847 he placed Crown Prince Surendra Shah (1829-1881 r.1847-1881) on the throne under his control, confining him to the Hanuman Dhoka palace.<sup>83</sup> Responsibility for administering the polity was ceded to himself, as prime minister, a post he ensured became hereditary. The confinement of the Shah king simultaneously reinforced the sanctity of the Shah king, and presented the Rana prime ministers as the guardians of the Hindu social order (L. E. Rose & Fisher, 1970, p. 37; Whelpton, 2005, p. 84). This social order was an important logic for imagining a national unity centred on themselves (Burghart, 1996 pp. 270-271) and was codified in 1854 as a caste system in Jang Bahadur's document called the *muluki ain*.<sup>84</sup> The Ranas became the de facto rulers of Nepal until 1951, the premiership refashioned as a minor monarchy (Mocko, 2012, p. 67; Sever, 1993, pp. 93–94) with the ability to deploy the army.<sup>85</sup>

Jang Bahadur Rana worked hard to strengthen his ties with Britain and in 1850 became the first native South Asian ruler to visit Europe. He travelled to France and England with the aim of tightening political relations directly with Britain (bypassing the British Viceroy in India) and maintaining the sovereignty of Nepal and legitimacy of his family's rule (Whelpton, 1983). In

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<sup>82</sup> Sanctioned by marriages between the two families.

<sup>83</sup> His father Rajendra was confined to various places, but never Gorkha (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 825).

<sup>84</sup> Notably, the *muluki ain* made social or political mobility almost impossible (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 2).

<sup>85</sup> By the late 1920s, the government began to refer to its kingdom as the "kingdom of Nepal" rather than the previous "Entire Possessions of the Gorkha king," for the first time conflating the realm of the Valley with the various *desa* (countries) subject to the Gorkha kings (Gellner, 1997, p. 5) and collectively calling it "Nepal".

1857 the Rana government provided military support to the British colonial power during the sepoy rebellion through the recruitment of military servicemen to the British regiment, a concession that became a cornerstone of diplomatic relations. Mark Liechty argued that the Rana regime, not the country, was dependent on the British (Liechty, 1997). Jang Bahadur Rana and his successors continued the policy of isolationism and attempted to keep the country sealed off from external influences.<sup>86</sup> They kept contacts with British colonial power at institutional level, harnessed the power of these contacts themselves and restricted it from others, marking a policy shift away from isolationism as a way to protect the state from foreign intervention, to isolationism as a way to protect themselves from their own people, a process described by Liechty as “selective exclusion” (1997, p. 65).

They constructed 41 colossal palaces on large tracts of land (Weiler, 2009), which together effectively shifted the centre of control outside the ritually defined borders of the town, towards the Bagmati river and contrasted in scale to existing buildings to create an imposing landscape with high walls around the perimeter of each palace.<sup>87</sup> Neighbourhoods and streets were carefully controlled by sumptuary laws that tightly controlled access to imported goods<sup>88</sup> and dictated the types of housing each caste could construct (Gellner & Quigley, 1995).<sup>89</sup> The palaces were built as “small citadels” (G. Rana, 1986, p. 89) designed to create separation between the rulers and the ruled and the space around their perimeter was one of fear (S. A. Bajracharya, 2008, pp. 42–44). The palaces created and shaped

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<sup>86</sup> On a practical level, they refused to build roads that connected to British India (in order to keep the British from having easy invasion access). There are a number of photographs extant of porters carrying cars, which later became potent images of the exploitative nature of the Rana regime (Proksch & Baidya, 1995, pp. 122–123); at the time of writing, one of the cars is on display at the National Museum in Kathmandu. In the 1920s they installed an aerial ropeway that could deliver 8 tonnes of freight per hour (Liechty, 1997).

<sup>87</sup> Prior to this, the Taleju temple within the Hanuman Dhoka palace was given as the highest point in the city.

<sup>88</sup> To the extent that a non-Rana could be severely punished for owning a radio (Koirala, 2001, pp. 32–33).

<sup>89</sup> For example, a cannon volley signalled the start and end of a daily curfew between the hours of 9pm and 5am and public gatherings of more than five people were forbidden (Leuchtag, 1958).

social hierarchies and division, for example, the Ranas jealously guarded access to goods, electricity, education within the ranks of the palace – an aristocratic inside [*bhitra*] space, conceived of as separate and protected from the outside [*bahira*], and delineated by the walls of the palace compound (Rana, 1986, p. 90). Whereas the Malla notion of the interior encapsulated the entire city, for the Rana family, interior space was just that inside the palace walls, “a realm separated from the outside space” (Weiler, 2009, p. 137) with walls that kept people in as well as out.<sup>90</sup> This material manifestation of power was one key strategy used by the Rana Prime Ministers to reposition and distinguish themselves from ordinary Nepalis.<sup>91</sup>

King Prithvi Bir Shah (1875-1911 r.1881-1911) who ascended the throne in 1881 at the age of five, was moved to the new Rana-built palace at Narayanhiti. This site, located near to the British Residency,<sup>92</sup> had been the location of some of the earliest Rana residences, confiscated from the man who became head of a coalition ministry that included Jang Bahadur Rana in 1845, Fateh Jang Chautara Shah (Figure 3).<sup>93</sup> The palace was likely built

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<sup>90</sup> For example, Greta Rana reflects on the constraints placed on any women in the compound, whether daughters, wives, maidservants or mistresses – they were not allowed outside without permission. These walls featured prominently in the memories shared with me by people who had lived inside a Rana palace. Most people recalled an occasion of transgression when they had crossed the threshold. This threshold also became a literary focus, with the walls hiding an interior space of corruption and debauchery from the population outside (Bhupi Sherchan’s *Looking for Snakes*. In Hutt (2010, p. 169). See also *Faulty Glasses* by B.P.Koirala (1997).

<sup>91</sup> The consumption of Western goods had started before Jang Bahadur wrested power into his family’s hands, but under the Rana regime, this became an obsession: they dressed in British clothes, drove British motorcars, etc. (See (Lotter, 2004; Sever, 1993; Whelpton, 1983, 2005) for description and analysis of the practices used by the Rana family to uphold their elite status).

<sup>92</sup> On 23 March 2016, Mark Watson from the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh kindly informed me of a map drawn by Major Charles Crawford, in the collection at the Linnean Society. This map arguably locates the position of the British residency in the early 1800s at Narayanhiti a proximity that is interesting to note considering the early occupation of the site by the Ranas.

<sup>93</sup> King Rana Bahadur Shah is said to have given land in the Narayanhiti area to the family of Dhoulal Singh Basnet in 1793 (one of the *tharghar* -literally ‘the houses with the names’ -part of a hereditary elite that formed around the Shah kings in Gorkha) who built a property known as Kirti Mandir. The site came into the control of the *Chautara* (originally the title of a senior *bharadar* (senior office from hereditary political elite from Gorkha), then a more general term for members of a collateral branch of the royal family), who extended the residential complex and named it Narayanhiti. Jang Bahadur Rana confiscated the land from Fateh Jang Shah after he was killed in the Kot massacre and gave Narayanhiti to his brother, Ranoddip Singh. Government of Nepal, Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent

for Jang Bahadur Rana's fourth brother, Ranodipp Singh (1825-1885) in 1847<sup>94</sup> and was later described by Perceval Landon as "a fine building based upon Government House in Calcutta." (Landon, 1993, p. 79) (Figure 4).<sup>95</sup> Its name is made up of two words 'Narayan' (a name of the Hindu god Vishnu, whose temple is located to the south east of the palace compound (Figure 5) and of whom the Shah kings presented themselves as an embodiment), and the Newar 'hiti' (meaning water spout, located opposite the Narayan temple) (Figure 6).<sup>96</sup> This palace had become the official centre of control when Ranoddip Singh assumed the position of prime minister in 1877.

In 1893, when Prithvi Bir came of age, in a test of his strength against the Rana Prime Minister (then Bir Shamsher), he packed up all his possessions and moved back to the Hanuman Dhoka Palace (Sever, 1993, pp. 208–209). This situation is said to have lasted for about a month after which the King returned to the Narayanhiti Palace. Whether this is true or apocryphal, it marks out the Narayanhiti Palace as somewhere that the king did not choose to be.<sup>97</sup> Shrestha notes:

while the old [Hanuman Dhoka] palace still held some importance as the venue for a number of state and religious functions, the removal of the king's residence from there to the new [Narayanhiti] palace relocated much of the activities (C. B. Shrestha, 1986, p. 82)

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Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture (2011). *Narayanhiti Palace Museum*. Kathmandu.

<sup>94</sup> This date is questioned by Erich Theophile in his unpublished report (1992) *Documentation of Architectural Heritage. Part III. Residential Architecture. Preliminary Report* available at the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust. His analysis of stylistic details suggests a later date in comparison with Jang Bahadur's palace building at Thapathali. Rana family sources state that Ranoddip's successor, Bir Shamsher, later extended the building and made it into a permanent royal palace (Rana, P-S 1978, p. 78-91, Sever, 1993, p. 208)

<sup>95</sup> See Weiler (2009, pp. 107-8) for an account of the construction history of the Rana palaces at Narayanhiti.

<sup>96</sup> The site may have been named Narayanhiti after it came into the control of the *Chautara* (between 1793 and 1845).

<sup>97</sup> The archives of the British Resident in Kathmandu record mock darbars arranged to give the impression to foreigners, often the British Resident, that the King was the head of the government (K. Shrestha, 1984, p. 106).

The move of the Shah kings to Narayanhiti is highly significant, separating out as it did the elements of Shah kingship that were crucial to upholding the legitimacy of the dynasty: first, the body of the king was separated for the first time in the recorded history of the Shah dynasty from the location of his coronation, second the king was separated from the centre of the ritually significant Malla palace and Taleju temple, whose location had enabled the king to socially construct his position in the kingdom since its 'unification' in the late eighteenth century. Third, the move does not appear to have been accompanied by the transfer of part of the Shah dynasty's tutelary goddess, thus it dislocated the king from the source of his divine power (though his presence at Narayanhiti did confer religious significance on the space of the palace (Leuchtag, 1958, p. 171)).<sup>98</sup> This careful disaggregation of the core elements of Shah kingship that had formed the basis of their right to rule since the beginnings of the dynasty was more than symbolic, it had the very real effect of preventing the Shah kings from regaining control of the active governance of the country for many years.<sup>99</sup> Activities relating to the active governance of the country no longer took place in the palace where the king resided and the vast Singha Darbar palace compound built by Chandra Shamsher Rana in 1903 became the nerve centre of government.<sup>100</sup>

By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Rana Prime Ministers had marginalised and controlled the Shah monarchy for 100 years. Three kings had lived isolated and under surveillance in their palaces, but by the 1940s British colonial control was eroding and a rise of party-based activism in India enabled Tribhuvan to assert a new, active role for the monarchy.

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<sup>98</sup> Personal correspondence with Marie Lecomte-Tilouine suggests not to distinguish between the Kumari and Kalika. There is a Kumari shrine to the south of the main palace building, the Kumari being the Malla's tutelary goddess.

<sup>99</sup> Erika Leuchtag's account of her interactions with the royal family in 1949 demonstrates the close control that the Rana Prime Ministers held over the royal family with the royal palace used as a constraining device throughout the period of their control over the country (1958).

<sup>100</sup> During the Rana regime most government transactions were made through Singha Durbar secretariat, or prime minister's own palace, but a few formal and regular ceremonies were held inside the Narayanhiti Palace, such as the king's participation in the Holi festival with top ranking officials, offering of male buffalo to Bhairav and the formal appointment of the prime minister by the king, as well as the offering of tika by the king to higher officials on Dasain.

## Phase Four | A resurgent Monarchy at the Narayanhiti Palace (1951-1980)

### *The monarchy restored: Reclaiming the Narayanhiti Palace*

On 6 November 1950 King Tribhuvan Shah (1906-1955 – r.1911-1955) drove with several other members of the royal family from the Narayanhiti Palace and took refuge in the Indian embassy.<sup>101</sup> This is often portrayed as an escape, a “dramatic dash to freedom” (K. Shrestha, 1984, p. 34). Five days later he was flown to India, within two months the Prime Minister, Mohan Shamsher Rana conceded a transfer of political power and agreed to rescind the administrative authority of the Ranas, to place all powers in King Tribhuvan Shah and to form an interim cabinet. On February 18 1951, Tribhuvan Shah returned triumphantly to Nepal (and the Narayanhiti palace) as the constitutional monarch of a nascent democratic polity.<sup>102</sup>

The resurgence of the power of the king began with a rising anti-Rana nationalism of an intellectual elite, based outside Nepal in newly independent India – mostly for education<sup>103</sup> who viewed the Rana regime and its feudal mode of rule as a relic of the colonial era. Members of this elite held visions of a culturally pure state and claimed a role in political governance, not based on any family connections, but on Western concepts of citizenship inspired by actions of the Indian National Congress (Hoftun, Raeper, & Whelpton, 1999, p. 5).<sup>104</sup> In 1950, their organization — Nepali

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<sup>101</sup> Following conversations with Nehru’s government he applied to the Prime Minister for permission to leave the palace for a family picnic and drove instead to the Indian embassy.

<sup>102</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> February (Falgun 7<sup>th</sup>) has since been continually celebrated as a national holiday, democracy day (*Rashtriya Prajatantra Divas*).

<sup>103</sup> Under the Rana regime, access to education was highly limited in Nepal. Students could still study religious languages and subjects such as grammar or astrology in traditional venues (primarily Sanskrit through brahmin-run study centers), but the Ranas actively discouraged the development of Western-style primary and secondary education, except for themselves and children from other aristocratic families who might serve in the government bureaucracy.

<sup>104</sup> See discussion by Pratyoush Onta on artist Balkrishna Sama (1903-1981) (Onta, 1996a).

Rastriya Congress (Nepali National Congress) led by Bishweshwar Prasad (or B.P.) Koirala merged with the Nepal Prajatantrik Congress (Nepali Democratic Congress), a party funded by lower-ranked members of the Rana family denied access to political office to constitute the Nepali Congress Party (NC).<sup>105</sup> There were also Nepali leftist organisations, primarily forming and operating in India, notably the Communist Party of Nepal committed to a republican state, was formed in 1949 in Calcutta (D. Thapa & Sijapati, 2003, p. 78). Together these party-based organisations helped to unsettle the autocratic Rana regime and changed the shape of politics in Nepal.<sup>106</sup>

The shifting political climate in Nepal specifically and South Asia more generally seems to have inspired Tribhuvan Shah to begin actively resisting the Ranas himself.<sup>107</sup> After decades of being forced to accept Rana rule, he began liaising with both the underground parties and Nehru's India. The Ranas were embarrassed by Tribhuvan's departure to India, as they ruled on the pretext of representing the Shah king who was now very publicly announcing that this was not the case. The Prime Minister Mohan Shamsheer Rana deposed the king after he was flown to Delhi and crowned the king's second grandson, three-year old prince Gyanendra (who had been left behind at the Narayanhiti palace, possibly to avoid arousing suspicion) on the platform in the *Nasal Chowk* at the Hanuman Dhoka palace. This move was not accepted by the Nepali Congress and crucially not by Nehru's government. As proposed by India, the Prime Minister and the Congress leadership agreed to form an interim cabinet (Dangol, 1999, p. 50).

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<sup>105</sup> In 1920 the family was classified into three classes - A to C according to their caste and marriage status and this determined the roll of succession.

<sup>106</sup> There was also the Gurkhas, who through their service in the British Army in World Wars I and II had experienced proximity to anti-colonial ideas (Des Chene, 1991).

<sup>107</sup> Tribhuvan supported the Praja Parishad, an underground political party established within Nepal in 1935. The party leaders were arrested in 1941 and four were given the death penalty (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 7). They are commemorated on the martyr's (*Shahid*) gate in central Kathmandu.



## *Experiments in constitutional monarchy and the state occupation of Rana palaces*

Tribhuvan Shah was symbolically very important to the democratic forces in Nepal who all capitalised on his 'unifying' position. Portrayed as the hero of the moment (L. Rose & Scholz, 1980) the restoration of the Shah king's sovereignty, following the Shah kings' century-long confinement was critical to how the new nationalism was being actively re-conceived. During this period direct connections were made in state-sponsored Nepali media between Tribhuvan Shah's actions and those of Prithvinarayan Shah as king, who was portrayed as the 'father of Nepal',<sup>108</sup> linking the purity and distinctiveness of the Nepali nation-state to the monarch (S. A. Bajracharya, 2008, p. 53). The king was presented as "defender-in-chief of democracy and bestower of development and modernity" (Mocko, 2012, p. 79). The corollary to this was that the Rana regime was presented as morally corrupt, an 'autocratic blip' (G. Rana, 1994), in order to create a symbolic separation between the Shah and Rana dynasties (Onta, 1996b). This was felt in the fabric of the city as members of the Rana family were made to leave their palaces, which then either stood empty as symbols of the evacuation of their occupants or were re-occupied by state institutions (Malla, 1967, p. 3).<sup>109</sup> The Narayanhiti royal palace was re-occupied by the king, not only as his main residence, but as the location of the palace secretariat, now the seat of political power.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> A narrative followed closely by the royally sponsored Tribhuvan Museum, on display within the Hanuman Dhoka Museum from the 1950s at least until the earthquakes of 2015. Speeches by Mahendra use the phrase "our August Father" when referring to Tribhuvan (M. H. M. K. Shah, 1966).

<sup>109</sup> Writing ten years later, K.P. Malla gives an evocative description "the walls are coming down, the mansions stand exposed, the plasters are peeling off, and the roofs are thick with weeds." (1967, p. 2)

<sup>110</sup> Other, smaller and more mobile visual representations were also called upon to reinforce the link made between the Shah kingship and the unity of the country. Statues of Rana generals were moved to one side and lifesize standing statues of Shah kings were installed on Kathmandu's main avenues and roundabouts (Toffin, 2008, p. 165). A life size statue of Prithvinarayan Shah was re-fashioned with one raised arm pointing a finger toward the sky as a representation of the unity of the state under the Shahs (Subedi, 2012), then re-positioned directly outside the government secretariat in Singha Darbar.

What started as a democratic struggle and was portrayed officially as a revolution [*kranti*] is more often interpreted as a shift of power from the hands of one political elite to another (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 26).<sup>111</sup> On 11 April 1951, the king promulgated the Interim Government of Nepal Act, 1951, the first democratic constitution in Nepal. The interim constitution defined the legal parameters of a constitutional parliament, independent judiciary, election commission and the post of prime minister as the elected head of a council of ministers (Malagodi, 2013, p. 84), however, as the head of state, the Shah king held all executive powers and this document therefore restored the legal authority of the king (Shukla, 2000, pp. 51–52). Tensions between the political parties were exacerbated by what was an embryonic democratic political structure and Tribhuvan Shah was in a position to take a series of key administrative and constitutional decisions: By 1952, he had appointed three different interim governments. In 1954, following a dissolving of parliament, he oversaw the drafting of a revised constitution that included a Special Circumstances Power Act that granted the monarch full powers of discretion to claim chairmanship of government in "a state of national emergency" (Gupta, 1993; Joshi & Rose, 1966, p. 153). The Communist Party of Nepal was banned from 1952-1956, officially because of its support for an armed rebellion within the militia in January 1952 (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 38).<sup>112</sup>

Tribhuvan Shah was succeeded in 1955 by his son Mahendra Shah (1920-72 r.1955-72) who took a more assertive and proactive role in Nepal's political arena (Joshi and Rose, 1966, p. 285). King Mahendra immediately dissolved the government and forced the Prime Minister to resign. He positioned himself at the top of the political bureaucracy and on 12 February 1959 promulgated a new constitution that made the king the source of all legislative, executive and judicial authority with executive powers (including the right to declare an emergency if the government should fail). This

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<sup>111</sup> Many members of the Rana family remained in positions of authority and high-profile marriages between the families continued, notably that of Crown Prince Birendra and Aishwarya Rana in 1970.

<sup>112</sup> They released several political prisoners, obtain arms from Singha Darbar (government secretariat) and occupy several government buildings (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 36).

constitution made no reference to a democratic system (Shukla, 2000, pp. 80–86) and institutionalised Hindu kingship (Malagodi, 2013, pp. 85-87). The king was defined as “a descendant of the illustrious King Prithvinarayan Shah, adherent of the Aryan culture and Hindu religion” (Article 1) and the Shah monarchy was literally written into Nepali nationalist discourse.

*The monarchy in full control.<sup>113</sup> The Narayanhiti Palace as a tangible rallying point for the nation*

Although parliamentary elections took place on 18 February 1959,<sup>114</sup> on 15 December 1960 Mahendra used the emergency powers within the new Constitution to dismiss the government, arrest the Prime Minister, B. P. Koirala, and most political leaders, regardless of party. He assumed direct control of the country, suspended operation of the constitution and 2 years later on 16 December 1962 ‘gifted’ a new constitution to the nation that established the partyless system of Panchayat democracy.<sup>115</sup> In doing so, Mahendra sanctified absolute monarchy and placed the monarchy above the constitution (Gupta, 1993, p. 261). He claimed parliamentary democracy was not “in step with the history and traditions of the country” (M. H. M. K. Shah, 1967, p. 149), that panchayat democracy was restorative, indigenous and “rooted in the life of the people”<sup>116</sup> and would promote unity and “strengthen the voice of the people” (Stiller, 1993, p. 202). However, the balance of power within the democratic structures was weighted towards the palace and all state sovereignty and powers were vested in the King. It was in at this time that Mahendra commissioned designs for a new palace building at Narayanhiti. He demolished much of the first Narayanhiti Palace to make way for a new palace built (1961-1971) as a “tangible rallying point” for the Nepali nation (B. Polk & Polk, 1985, p. 94) (Figure 7). Discussion of

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<sup>113</sup> The title for this period is drawn from Whelpton (2005, p. 99)

<sup>114</sup> The political parties had been able to draw upon ‘popular’ support from hundreds of people coming to the Kathmandu Valley for relief in the face of a severe food shortage (Dangol, 1999, p. 70).

<sup>115</sup> As a gift, this could be revoked by king at any time (Burghart, 1993, p. 13).

<sup>116</sup> Nepālko Samvidhān, 2019 BS (Panchayat Constitution, 1962)

the design and construction of this palace forms the basis of the next chapter.

As king, Mahendra stood at the centre of a “royally-ordained political order” (Hutt, 2014, p. 422) and by adopting the political idioms and roles of the Prime Minister, the monarchy became a “central, effective force in national politics as it never had before” (Mocko, 2012, p. 88). The king was to be advised and supported and legitimised in his role by a national assembly, or panchayat composed of 125-140 members including 16 nominated directly by the king. Ninety members were elected indirectly through a pyramidal structure that had direct representation at village level only. The administrative and conceptual unit of the Panchayat system was the Indian term for village-centred councils of elders (panchayats) and had four tiers, the Village Panchayat, the District Panchayat, the Zonal Panchayat and the highest level, the Rashtriya Panchayat (which met in the Rana period theatre within the Singha Darbar compound). Anyone on the Rashtriya (National) Panchayat then must have won a series of four elections, received endorsement from the palace and then only had advisory powers. Membership of the Rashtriya Panchayat also included representatives elected from officially controlled Class Organisations (those thought to share common interests – the peasantry, youth, ex-servicemen, women and workers). In theory then this system provided a structure with a popular base, but in reality, it had a very limited range of participation (Gaige, 1975, p. 139).<sup>117</sup>

Immediately after succeeding to the throne Mahendra embarked on a widely broadcast tour of the country (*daudaha*), the first king to do so. He was photographed and heard walking through villages, shaking hands with villagers, ostensibly assessing their development needs. He dispensed on the spot justice and made speeches in which he chastised political parties for placing their political agendas before the needs of the nation (Joshi and

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<sup>117</sup> See Gaige (1975, pp. 138-139) and Shukla (2000, 122-123) for excellent descriptions of the structure of the Panchayat system.

Rose, 1966, p.185). These tours became an annual event and the official publicity and mass media that recorded, printed and broadcast his slogans and speeches (in both English and Nepali), a key part of the image of the Panchayat system, both nationally and internationally.<sup>118</sup> It was an image of a “whole village [that] came together and solved its problems in an atmosphere of unity and harmony.” (Borgstrom, 1976, p. 16). In these Gandhian terms, public order was defined in terms of unity and represented by the king (Burghart, 1996, p. 303) as can be seen in this speech given by Mahendra on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1962 on the occasion of the first Panchayat Day anniversary at the National Theatre House.

The Panchayat system is not the gift of one man. On the contrary, this is a thing which history has moulded into shape out of material and other conditions obtaining in our country. This system expects honesty and diligence from each and every citizen because compared to other countries Nepal lags miles behind in all material spheres of human endeavour and because we cannot raise our country far beyond and above the present conditions of backwardness, unless all of us pool our resources and work together night and day...so that our united national effort might give birth to the Nepal of our dreams. (Tuladhar, 1968, p. 71)

In this speech Mahendra claimed he had uncovered a natural alignment of ruler, realm and subject (an indivisible body politic represented by the king) that had been disrupted by the Rana regime and sullied by the political parties. He presented his right to rule through this system as not driven by will or intent, it simply ‘was’ and had always been simultaneous with people and realm. However, the Panchayat system was built by legal means and King Mahendra did not restore, but created a political culture with the nation held as the source of legitimacy for the state (Burghart, 1993, p. 2). The 1962 constitution defined Nepal’s national identity around three points: Hinduism, the Shah monarchy, and the Nepali language.<sup>119</sup> Article 3 described Nepal as “an independent, indivisible, and sovereign monarchical

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<sup>118</sup> Every year, Mahendra would travel with his top advisors to a different area of the country for two months. On his stops, Mahendra listened to people’s petitions, and often intervened to expedite government attention to neglected issues (L. Rose & Scholz, 1980, p. 47). He was the first national figure, let alone a king to tour the entire country.

<sup>119</sup> King Mahendra set out to create a single national, linguistic, and ethnic identity which he summed up in the phrase, “one country, one form of dress” (*ek desh, ek bhasha*).

Hindu state” legally making Nepal a Hindu kingdom for the first time.<sup>120</sup> Article 20 defined the king as “a descendant of King Prithvi Narayan Shah and adherent of Aryan culture and Hindu religion”.<sup>121</sup> The Nepali language was enshrined within the text of Article 4 that stated “The language of the Nation of Nepal shall be Nepali in the Devanagari script.” Together these three points became the “triumvirate of official Nepali national culture” (Onta, 1996b, p. 214). For the first time, the constitution defined the national religion, national flag, national anthem, national language and even a national flower, colour, animal and bird. An emphasis on Nepali traditions was a key part of official rhetoric of the Panchayat system and was heavily promoted through propaganda and schooling.<sup>122</sup>

As public order was defined in terms of unity, to speak in public was to speak for everyone and therefore required permission from the government (Burghart, 1993, p. 7). Mahendra introduced a series of methods to both suppress opposition and consistently promote his new vision: Party leaders were regularly imprisoned and had their property confiscated; an elaborate network of informants was established (all reporting to the palace); laws were introduced to censor the production and distribution of media or publications considered antithetical to ‘national interest’ and nationalist propaganda was printed in as many publications as possible, most prominently the state-owned newspapers *Gorkhapatra* and *The Rising Nepal*.<sup>123</sup> Politics were therefore negotiated according to what was or was not public or private space. The political parties continued to operate as an

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<sup>120</sup> Anne Mocko has also identified the phrase *ekta ko Pratik*, the king as the ‘symbol of unity’ of a diverse country within the wording of the qualifications for kingship in the law of succession (2012, p. 91)

<sup>121</sup> Nepālko Samvidhān, 2019 BS (Panchayat Constitution, 1962). See Hangen (2007, p. 59) for analysis of the census data from 1961 that records 88% population as Hindu. The use of language and religion rather than any caste or ethnic categories served to play down difference and give the impression of uniformity.

<sup>122</sup> A new unified school curriculum (in Nepali) was introduced that was heavily nationalistic, for analysis of the panchayat era education policies see Onta (2000). King Mahendra enforced the *daura suruwal* as the national (men’s) clothing and every male Nepali had to wear a *topi* (parbatiya hat) on entering Singha Darbar (the general secretariat) as a symbol of personal identification with the nation (Borgstrom, 1976, p. 16).

<sup>123</sup> *Gorkhapatra* was established in 1901 by the Rana ruler Dev Shamsher Rana. Its sister paper in English, *The Rising Nepal*, was founded in 1968 (Hutt, 2006, p. 364).

'open secret' and there continued a circulation of private papers that were considered a part of everyday readership in Kathmandu (Burghart, 1993). People were not arrested for having their own opinion, rather for expressing this publicly (Burghart, 1996, p. 308).<sup>124</sup>

Birendra (1945-2001) succeeded his father in early 1972 and attempted to keep up the "impressive façade of royal rule" (Whelpton, 2005, p. 104) taking advantage of the national image of communal harmony against an increasing backdrop of agitation from both the underground parties and civil society.<sup>125</sup> There was by now dissonance between the ideal 'unified' nation, which was supposedly moving forward and passionate about development [*bikas*] and the actuality of vast inequalities of caste, ethnicity and gender as well as severe economic problems (Brown, 1996; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2004). Despite official claims to the contrary, the panchayat system relied upon local relations of influence and hierarchy (Caplan, 1975), and was unable to diffuse local autonomy - "dominance was achieved without hegemony" (Guha in (Lakier, 2009). In the capital, although the Kathmandu elite accepted the reality of royal rule (Whelpton, 2005, p. 104), they did not buy into Panchayat ideology and "as education spread and levels of political consciousness rose, opposition to the panchayat system grew" (Hutt, 2004, 3).<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> See Fujikura for analysis of development initiatives that formed conduits through which party activity was maintained and democratic culture developed (2001).

<sup>125</sup> In 1974 there was a nearly successful assassination attempt against King Birendra, in 1979 student activities led a movement that resulted in a national referendum (though it was deemed to provide the system with a renewed mandate).

<sup>126</sup> Before 1951 there were just a handful of schools in the KTM valley, 634 by 1983 and then 1727 by 1993 (Liechty, 1997, p. 57)

## Chapter Three | The construction of a new royal memory

The Narayanhiti Palace was built in Kathmandu between 1961 and 1970 as a “tangible rallying point” for the nation (B. Polk & Polk, 1985, p. 94), an external symbol of a political memory (A. Assmann, 2008, p. 55) designed to last.<sup>127</sup> In this chapter, I look back to the construction of a new royal memory in 1960s Nepal. This was a time when the monarchy held most of the state’s executive powers, and Mahendra Shah was actively forging the nation in order to legitimize the new structures of his Panchayat system (Burghart, 1993, p. 2). The new palace, his administrative centre, was to be a symbol of the Nepali nation, created by the King – “the first focus for the pride and culture of modern Nepal” (B. Polk & Polk, 1985, p. 94). I ask how and why the Narayanhiti palace building, designed by Californian architect Benjamin Kauffmann Polk (1916-2001), with state interiors by British firm Asprey & Company, was used to shape the politics of time and space, and to uphold the Shah monarchy.

Whilst there are no published words by the king himself about the palace design, this quotation, taken from an official, English-language, guide to the palace encapsulates the way that as an objective manifestation of this new royal memory the new Narayanhiti palace was intended to be representative of Mahendra’s re-presentation of the monarchy as uniting and advancing the country.

As a modern form of His Majesty’s concern for the welfare of his subjects and international friendship. Perhaps this is the best message and most fitting symbolism of the Narayanhiti Palace. (His Majesty’s Government, Ministry of Communications, 1976, p. 14)<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> See Burghart (1993) re. Mahendra’s creation of a political culture during the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>128</sup> References are to the 3<sup>rd</sup> (1976) edition; the publication date of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition could not be established, but references to King Birendra suggest a date after 1972.



The palace was cultivated as a symbol to highlight Mahendra's appeal to both tradition and modernity, presented as a "modern form" of a pre-existing concern (1976, p. 14). The palace's symbolic significance is not in its aesthetic qualities, as such, but in the degree to which they formed part of a convincing narrative with the ability to reinforce a shared system of belief. Homi Bhabha describes nation as 'narration', a kind of discourse enacted as a 'cultural elaboration' inscribed around certain objects (Bhabha, 1994). Understanding the palace as such an object, it can be understood by both the narratives in which it is inscribed and by the manner in which it is perceived (A. Assmann, 2008, p. 55). Mahendra expressed his aim "to constitute political relations so that they were in harmony with the traditional order" (Burghart, 1993, p. 1) and the palace was an object around which he narrated a selectively remembered past and through this process developed a stable image and identity for the monarchy for the future. This is evident through the ways in which Mahendra turned to Nepali (specifically Newar) forms, in direct contrast to the neoclassical buildings of the Ranas, in order to emphasize the internally generated authenticity of Nepal and to legitimize his rule.<sup>129</sup> Therefore, although the Narayanhiti palace was a steel-frame, concrete building designed by a Californian architect,<sup>130</sup> contemporary official narratives emphasized the Nepali-ness of its design; the hipped pagoda roof with the pinnacle modelled on the Shah palace at Nuwakot, the temple tower, the vast doors decorated in bronze plate and designed by Nepali artist Balkrishna Sama, and the use of brick as a facing material.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> The Ranas' choice of style was deliberate, intended to simultaneously construct narratives of distinction between the ruling elite and the population at large and create proximity between the ruling elite and the British. Mahendra was not alone in his desire to recast a national identity for Nepal, many newly independent nations used architecture in their search for national identity: reclaiming an idealized precolonial past by referencing vernacular forms (Bozdogan 2001 on Turkey); inviting high-profile modern architects to construct iconic symbols in the International style (Prakash 2002 on Corbusier's Chandigarh); diverse responses based on changing nationalist agendas and narratives (Kusno 2000 on Indonesia).

<sup>130</sup> It used steel from India and cement from Britain that arrived in steel drums (Shanker Nath Rimal. Recorded Interview, 6 April 2012)

<sup>131</sup> For example, the official palace guide, 1976. The Chinese brick and tile factory was inaugurated on 11 March 1969, so this could be argued to simultaneously be a symbol of modernity.

This chapter uses Jan Assmann's model of cultural memory (*kulturelle Gedächtnis*), as expanded by Aleida Assmann as a tool to reveal the social and historical frames that dictated how the palace was to be seen (A. Assmann, 2010; J. Assmann, 2011). The narrative expressed in written form in the 1976 guide evidences the palace's part in an active promotion of the Panchayat system and legitimation of the king's role as head of state. According to Jan Assmann, a narrative needs the formation into text, images, rites or monuments to give it stability as a cultural sign. Jan Assmann looks at the conditions and social structures of organization which groups and societies use to connect themselves to objectified cultural representations. (J. Assmann, 2002, p. 240; J. Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 130). As an institutional representation of the nation, the palace was at the centre of the construction of a national memory, legitimized by the past, through everyday routines, the formalization of key ceremonies and the reclamation of architectural forms, and it remained in this place for more than thirty years.<sup>132</sup> Through consideration of the discursive bases of the palace's design (representation), the process of its creation (practice) and its use as a theatrical backdrop to state events (experience) (Dovey, 2008), I reveal the process of signification of the Narayanhiti palace in the 1960s and early 1970s to show how it was deployed as part of the construction of a new national memory. Re-visiting the processes of memory construction at the start of the Panchayat era is intended to foreground the discussion of the more recent de- and re-construction of national narratives that follow in the next chapter and the contestation that occurs over the interpretation of the country's royal past in the second part of this thesis.

The Narayanhiti palace remains absent from the predominant architectural discourse relating to Nepal.<sup>133</sup> The detail of the design process outlined in

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<sup>132</sup> See Onta (1996b) for discussion on how accumulated, shared experience of the panchayat system constrains political action to this day.

<sup>133</sup> For example, it remains absent from the Architectural History Curriculum at Tribhuvan University (Sudarshan Raj Tiwari. Personal Communication, 24 July 2013) and was not referred to by Gutschow in his chapter on the political use of the pagoda form, despite it pre-dating the examples given (Gutschow, 2011a).

this chapter was not published at the time of the construction of the palace and to date no in-depth study has been undertaken into the design process, the design itself or any contemporary interpretation of the palace.<sup>134</sup> As I will develop in some detail later, this absence can be explained by two key factors: first, the codes of deference and secrecy put in place by the monarchy (Hutt, 2006) and, second, the conditioning force of Nepal's semi-colonial experience (Nelson, 2011).

Dominant studies on architecture and nationalism focus on how the nation-state uses architecture to represent itself in official nationalist propaganda (Bozdogan, 2001; Vale, 2008). This approach has contributed to an understanding of the Narayanhiti palace as an embodiment of a Panchayat national imagining, an ideological superstructure emanating from Mahendra's work with an American architect in the context of a postcolonial (post-Rana) condition (Malagodi, 2015; Nelson, 2009). This focus has usefully highlighted the way in which the new palace building was intended to supply the image of the nation, to increase legitimacy and arouse national sentiment. However, it has not addressed questions of reception and risks granting the panchayat state and its architectural manifestations a totalizing power. Whilst the Narayanhiti palace was woven into a state-sponsored narrative, it would be a mistake to think that everyone experienced it in the same way.

Within the definition of cultural memory elaborated above, Aleida Assmann distinguishes between the institutionalized nature of political memory and the more fragmentary and diverse nature of social memory (2010), a distinction that is reflected in Richard Burghart's analysis of public life under the panchayat system, where he argues that it became a "counterfeit reality", highlighting the gap between state rhetoric and reality (1993, p. 11). I rely on the written word of the designers and semi-structured interviews with those involved in the design and construction process, sources

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<sup>134</sup> Excepting an article published in SPACES Magazine in late 2009 after the Monarchy was abolished and the king had left the palace (Ranjit, 2009).

inflected by the fact that their authors were operating in a tightly controlled public space in which they would have been obliged to follow specific scripts, for example that of sociocultural unity under a Hindu monarchy. The palace, as a public space, would no doubt have been interpreted differently across caste, class, gender, ethnic and locational lines, but these intricacies of reception are too complex for me to trace here.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, in order to acknowledge and engage with a range of audiences, I turn to the analogy of framing used by architectural historian Kim Dovey to explore the nexus between place and power:

Used as a verb, to 'frame' means to 'shape' things, and also to 'enclose' them in a border – like a mirror or picture. As a noun, a 'frame' is an established 'order' and a 'border'. 'Framing implies both the construction of a world and of a way of seeing ourselves in it – at once picture and mirror. (Dovey, 2008, p. 1)

Each 'frame' is a reflection of a set of shared concerns, experiences and narratives that supported and defined the memories of individuals, as well as groups, a materialization of Halbwachs' social and historical frameworks (1992). As the centre of political authority controlled by the monarchy, the palace was material, symbolic and functional. The idea of the 'frame' is intended to synchronize the analysis of both time and space,<sup>136</sup> of memory and built form. The 'frames' are intended to be both literal and discursive, to highlight the ways in which action is structured by built form, and architecture constructs meaning. They are indicative of the ways in which the palace was both the physical product and the condition of, social relations by which identities are formed and transformed (Lefebvre, 1991).

These 'frames' provide the capacity for identity building at a range of levels and form the organizing basis of the second part of this chapter. In doing so, it is my intention to locate particular intersections of social relations that made up the identities of the space. In this way I show both how and why

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<sup>135</sup> See Boyer (1996, p. 7) for a useful discussion of the inversions of public and private space.

<sup>136</sup> Halbwachs (1992) insists that no memory is possible outside shared social frames and that the shifting or crumbling of these frames induces changes in personal memory and even forgetting.

the palace was used to shape the politics of time and space in 1960s Nepal to form a national identity that was certainly shared, though not uncontested.<sup>137</sup>

### **A new nationalism and the break from the [Rana] past**

During the period of rule by the Rana prime ministers (1846-1951), the Shah kings may have been bound by the Narayanhiti palace compound, but there is evidence to suggest it was a contested space. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Rana family used the construction of massive edifices with neoclassical designs in order to exert control, to distinguish themselves from the population, and legitimize their position (Liechty, 1997).<sup>138</sup> Their choice of style was deliberate, adopting the forms and tropes of the British in order to symbolically strive towards equality with the regional colonizer (Isaacson, 1990; Lotter, 2004; Weiler, 2009) and decisions about what was constructed on palace grounds rested with them.<sup>139</sup> Yet, today's visitors to the Narayanhiti Palace Museum will see that Tribhuvan experimented with internationally modern styles and materials and commissioned his own designs within his immediate surroundings, adjacent to the southern wing of the main palace building.<sup>140</sup> These were actions that created a visual distinction between the kings' residence, and the public space of the official Rana-built palace.<sup>141</sup> One explanation relates to the location of this smaller

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<sup>137</sup> See Kusno (2010) for discussion on the importance of exploring architecture and nationalism beyond a state-centred approach.

<sup>138</sup> See an aerial photograph by Ganesh Man Chitrakar taken in 1960, published in Rana (Prabhakar SJB Rana, Pashupati, & Rana, 2003, pp. 150–151).

<sup>139</sup> Archival records held at the Museum of English Rural Life document the process of ordering and shipping a "Plant House" (greenhouse) from Messenger & Co Ltd in Loughborough, England to Calcutta, for transport over land to Narayanhiti in 1900. The order is placed by the Southern Commanding General of the Nepal Army (Fateh Shamsher Rana – 5<sup>th</sup> in the roll of succession). A greenhouse meeting the dimensions given in these records, and with iron work manufactured by Messenger & Co Ltd can be found in the main garden of the Narayanhiti Palace (the greenhouse features on page 44 of the Messenger & Co Ltd catalogue).

<sup>140</sup> For example, the remains of the swimming pool and bar visible in Leuchtag (1958, p. 97) and several sets of concrete garden furniture.

<sup>141</sup> Now known as Tribhuvan Sadan, much of this building was demolished following the massacre of 1 June 2001. The building itself has been partially reconstructed based on plans drawn up by Purnima Engineering Consultancy. Image of the swimming pool in Leuchtag, and sketches in Gurung give an idea of scale (Gurung, 2013, p. 17, 19; 1958, p.

property inside [*bhitra*] the palace compound both conceptually and physically; the king's expression of a modern, and distinct, identity was tightly controlled and we can assume, allowable because it was not visible from the compound's perimeter and therefore not public.<sup>142</sup> The main, neoclassical, south facing wing of the official palace building, however, served as a symbol, used not as the king's residence, but for official activities.<sup>143</sup>

A large earthquake on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1934 caused serious structural damage to this southern wing,<sup>144</sup> which was subsequently restored, adapted and it continued in use for official functions. Discussion of this restoration in Rana family sources states that after the earthquake, Tribhuvan orchestrated the addition of a split, double staircase to the central colonnaded porch on the south façade, in direct reference to the architecture of Kedleston Hall in England, and that the engineer Surya Jang Thapa was 'nearly punished' by the then Prime Minister, Juddha Shamsheer Rana for undertaking this work without his permission (P. Rana, 2008, p. 36).<sup>145</sup> That the Rana prime minister would relinquish control over the redesign of the central portion of the most important public façade at the head of the largest palace compound in their urban and political landscape seems unlikely.<sup>146</sup> It is

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97). Books in the palace library with titles such as *Feudal Architecture of Japan* by Kyoshi Hirai (1973); *Concrete Design and Construction* by Kenzo Tange (1983); *Buckingham Palace* by H Clifford Smith (1931); *The Personality of a House* by Emily Post (1948).

<sup>142</sup> See Chapter Two for discussion re Rana distinction between inside (*bhitra*) and outside (*bahira*), here Tribhuvan was able to express himself. This is evident by the epithet given by Leuchtag, the "Happy Cottage" (1958).

<sup>143</sup> The caption on a 1951 photograph found by the author from the Metro Group Editorial Service, New York reads "The Royal Palace in Katmandu {sic}, principal city of Nepal, is the residence of the king and the scene of many official functions at which the king is merely a figurehead."

<sup>144</sup> Killing two of Tribhuvan's Rajkumaris (daughters) (P. Rana, 2008, p. 36).

<sup>145</sup> Punishment would have apparently resulted in a loss of rank of Captain.

<sup>146</sup> Erich Theophile uses the photographic record to trace the phases of architectural adaptation to the building in his unpublished report (1992) *Documentation of Architectural Heritage. Part III. Residential Architecture. Preliminary Report* available at the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust. His work indicates that the essential design idea of all renovations since the 1890s were based on the Government House in Calcutta, and its antecedent Kedleston Hall, i.e. this adaptation credited to Surya Jang Thapa, under the instruction of King Tribhuvan, followed an existing pattern. For a full account of the phases of remodelling of this façade of the Narayanhiti Palace drawn from the visual analysis presented by Theophile, see Weiler (2009, pp. 106–108). Weiler also notes that Bir Shamsheer Rana (r. 1885-1901) served the Nepalese government at Government House in

possible that a commission by the king slipped through unnoticed in the context of the massive reconstruction effort taking place across the capital,<sup>147</sup> or this could be a purely literary standoff in which Purushottam Rana pitched king and prime minister against each other in order to foreground his diatribe against Mahendra that follows in his text. Either way, the architecture of the palace was understood to relate to political power.

Successive building activity at the Narayanhiti Palace during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was supported by progressive expansion of the compound.<sup>148</sup> By the 1950s it housed the Palace Secretariat, the Military Secretariat (Koirala, 2001) as well as the site of a series of private royal residences, separate from the official palace building, a separate swimming pool, stables, cowsheds and open farmland. Mahendra Manjil, was constructed during the early 1950s just inside the south gate adjacent to the northern edge of the Narayan temple complex to house Crown Prince Mahendra and his second wife.<sup>149</sup> The official palace building served as a symbol, used not as a residence, but for official activities.<sup>150</sup> Like his father before him, Mahendra does not appear to have considered re-locating back to the Hanuman Dhoka palace, for reasons expressed here by Emily Polk, wife of the architect of the new official palace building:

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Calcutta as a diplomatic representative, again linking this precedent to a Rana mode of visual distinction.

<sup>147</sup> Erich Theophile's notes show that he interviewed Surya Jang Thapa in the early 1990s, so Thapa could have relayed this story to Purushottam Rana.

<sup>148</sup> As exemplified by Guthi Lagat documents K78/21 and K11/47 re. claiming land at the site in 1886 (BS 1943) and extending roads in 1890 (1947) quoted by Erich Theophile in his unpublished report (1992) *Documentation of Architectural Heritage. Part III. Residential Architecture. Preliminary Report* available at the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, p. 22.

<sup>149</sup> This date is a best guess. According to family members, the home was built by Hari Shamsher for his daughter Ratna and Mahendra at a time when Mahendra and Tribhuvan were not on good terms following Mahendra's decision to marry the younger sister of his first wife (Prabhakar Shamsher Rana. Personal Communication, 29 July 2014 and Ketaki Chester. Personal Communication, 18 July 2014). At the time of writing, this property remains the residence of Ratna Shah. It was traditional for the oldest son of the king to move into his own residence upon being designated Crown Prince. And Leuchtag also records a visit to Mahendra, as Crown Prince in his then home, probably a wing of the palace building completed in 1888 (1958, p. 168).

<sup>150</sup> Leuchtag indicates that this separation between residential and official activities had been in existence since the king was moved to Narayanhiti, as she quotes Tribhuvan as stating "That was my father's private palace,' ... 'where he kept his five hundred wives.'" (1958, p.167).

The king has several palaces, but they are in the old part of Katmandu {sic}, and they are very ancient. They are 600 to 1,000 years old and, of course, absolutely filthy dirty. They could never be cleaned. Everything is just saturated with ancientness. It was not an administrative core. There was no administrative section and no place for him to live... He decided he was a modern king, he was going to have this whole new thing. (E. Polk, 1994, pp. 190–191)

Rana credits Mahendra with the demolition of this wing of the palace building, as a result of his ‘ancestral anger’ [*purkheli sanak*] and his desire to break with the recent past (2007, p. 36). The exact date of the demolition is not known, but it was certainly carried out in phases (Figure 7).<sup>151</sup> Mahendra expressed his desire to build a new palace in 1959, and invited several foreign architects to propose designs.<sup>152</sup> It is not clear if these invitations were overlapping (an informal competition), or if each relationship was struck up in turn.<sup>153</sup> The designs available for study are those from Swiss architect Robert Otto Weise (1929-1996), and the Palace’s American architect, Benjamin Kauffmann Polk. Weise was coming to the end of a two-year assignment in Nepal with the Swiss Association for Technical Assistance, supporting the Ministry of Agriculture. He had worked for the royal family on a number of design projects<sup>154</sup> and was approached to submit a proposal for the new palace design in February 1960.<sup>155</sup> Polk

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<sup>151</sup> The base map of Prushka’s protective inventory (1975) was probably based on aerial photographs taken in the early 1970s, and shows the existence of the east wing (known as Bombay Chowk) alongside the new palace building.

<sup>152</sup> Engineer Shankar Nath Rimal. Recorded Interview, 06 April 2012. The architects were Minoru Yamasaki, Emery Roth & Sons, Martin Burn, Robert Weise and Benjamin Polk. Rimal claimed that this is recorded in documents held in the Palace. Minoru Yamasaki could have been approached as he designed the United States Pavilion for the World Agricultural Fair in 1959, which was held in India (Dehli). Emery Roth & Sons had a major influence of the architecture of post-war Manhattan, though there is no link to this project recorded in the company’s archives held at Columbia University. Martin Burn Limited were based in Calcutta and constructed a number and variety of buildings there during the period of British colonial rule.

<sup>153</sup> Kai Weise (Robert Weise’s son) recalls that his father’s project (February 1960) fell through due to a misunderstanding with the royal aide-de-camp. Personal Communication, 8 July 2013.

<sup>154</sup> A barn for the royal palace, a restaurant in the Gokarna forest and residences for Prince Himalaya and Prince Basundhara in Tahachal (that became the International Club). Weise, Kai. 2005. *Architect Robert Weise: The Life, The Work, The Times*. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>155</sup> Gutschow describes how Robert Weise dominated architectural production in Kathmandu during the 1960s and 70s, with projects for Tribhuvan University, Hotel



moved to India in 1952 and with engineer Binoy Kumar Chatterjee established the firm Chatterjee and Polk in 1957 (-1964).<sup>156</sup> Chatterjee and Polk became the largest architectural firm in Asia and are likely to have been introduced to the King through the Ford Foundation.<sup>157</sup>

A comparison of a sketch ground plan by Weise (Figure 8)<sup>158</sup> with that of the existing building (Figure 9) suggests a level of clarity about the functional requirements of the palace in order to accommodate the formal ceremonies and political events in which the participation of the king was now required. Both architects' designs show a similar division of space between guest, state and private functions, including a prominent throne room.<sup>159</sup> Whereas the planning of Rana palaces allocated the largest, most prominent spaces to the areas of the palace in which foreign guests were received, these visitors did not stay on site.<sup>160</sup> After 1951, Nepal established political relations with a large number of countries, including the US, USSR and

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Annapurna, Hotel Yellow Pagoda, Hotel Malla, buildings for the Royal Nepal Army, 34 residences and the Nepalese pavilion at the Osaka Expo in 1970 (2011b, p. 974).

<sup>156</sup> Chatterjee and Polk had offices in Brabourne Road, Calcutta and Connaught Circus, New Dehli. They employed over 70 architects, engineers, quantity surveyors, town planners and technicians. Their projects were both numerous and varied: public, domestic, town planning, civil, industrial, but with a common emphasis on "economic designs of aesthetic distinction in reinforced concrete or in structural steel for long or short span structures, ...." (Chatterjee & Polk, n.d., p. 4). Polk's archive in the Environmental Design Archive at the University of Berkeley reveals that the work of the firm was not only prolific, it was also prominent. There are copies of interviews on the All India Radio and articles in regional design journals.

<sup>157</sup> The Ford Foundation had a branch office in New Dehli since 1952 and funded advisory services for the development of planning infrastructure in Nepal between 1960 and 1972 (Ford Foundation Archives 06000155). Mahendra had heard about Polk's design for the Tripikata Buddhist Library and research centre in Rangoon, a high-profile project funded by the Ford Foundation (Polk 1985, p. 94), for which Polk was awarded the Maha Thieppa Guru title by the Prime Minister U Nu. The other side of the work of the firm was primarily industrial.

<sup>158</sup> Weise, Kai. 2005. *Architect Robert Weise: The Life, The Work, The Times*. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>159</sup> Polk refers to it as a 'palace and government house' indicating the series of functions he was asked to accommodate (1993b, p. 7; 1985, p. 97)

<sup>160</sup> The palaces of the Ranas were planned around a courtyard structure, with a central suite of tall, public reception rooms (generally on the first floor), in which foreign guests could enter without impacting on the purity of the rest of the space, an organisational structure that had more in common with the spatial order of Newar houses than their European precedents. (Slusser, 1982, p. Appendix V).

China, who all set up embassies in Kathmandu between 1958-1960 and there arose a need to regularly host foreign royal and diplomatic guests.<sup>161</sup>

The Narayanhiti Palace in Kathmandu constitutes a “royal village” with its various purposes, and His Majesty immediately perceived in it the national symbolism for Nepal’s central government. (B. Polk, 1993b, p. 9)

Polk wrote that Mahendra’s palace building was conceived of as a symbolic centre of government, organised by its functional requirements. Each state visit followed a set programme and the new palace was designed as the architectural stage for a significant number of these events: including the exchanging of speeches between the king and the visiting Head of State; official receptions; the signing of the visitors’ book, and receiving the credentials of foreign diplomats. State guests resided in the palace in the specifically designed guest wing, whilst the private wing was intended to house the king and queen whilst they acted as hosts. The central state wing was designed to house state ceremonies, such as the conferring of medals, oath taking, and state dinners.<sup>162</sup>

A second comparison, this time between the concept sketch by Weise (Figure 10) and the final design by Polk (Figure 11), reveals a clear symbolic break from the neoclassical Rana past.<sup>163</sup> When seen side by side, their designs suggest that the form of the palace exterior (of a modern Hindu monarch) was encouraged to draw upon traditional (Newar) forms, as both are defined by their adoption of a tiered pagoda roof as a dominant aspect of the design. The palace building was intended to visually express the identity of the new nation as both modern and unique in its heritage. I will explore this in more detail below.

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<sup>161</sup> Official photographs on display in the Palace Museum reveal 20 official state visits by heads of state between 1971 and 2001.

<sup>162</sup> Chiran Thapa. Personal Communication, 01 August 2014. My conversations with a large section of the palace secretariat about their previous work were concerned with organizing the detail of ceremonies, for example, Ms Shah (Recorded Interview, 10 July 2013) and Mr Gurung (Personal Communication, 11 July 2012).

<sup>163</sup> That this narrative was dominant at the time is emphasized in the writing of both Benjamin Polk (1985, p. 94) and in the recollections of Emily Polk (1994, p. 191).

## The Design Process

Emily Polk recorded that her husband's designs were accepted in 1961 after Polk paid a personal visit to the king.

So Ben went up there. Sure enough, the king said, "Please make some designs." Ben said, "I don't make designs, but I will design you a palace." He designed it and the king approved it instantly. He thought it was absolutely wonderful, and he was commissioned to go right ahead. (E. Polk, 1994, p. 192)

Polk later professed his purpose in designing the palace as "to feel why the ancient buildings were as they were, to understand the people and to work freshly." (1985, p. 97),<sup>164</sup> "dismissing it [the building tradition of the past] from your conscious mind" (1961, p. 40; 1985, p. 97). Polk's emphasis of the *tabula rasa* tendency of modernist design evidences his intellectual background (Western scientific, technical and politically rational), and suggests the influence of the methodology applied to his work in Rangoon, funded by the Ford Foundation. There he was invited to travel to Pagan to examine the architecture there before he started to design the Tripikata Library (B. Polk, 1993b, p. 5). Polk's expression of purpose also emphasises the importance of understanding the 'spirit of the place', an idea prevalent in the 1960s and that saw one of the primary functions of buildings as being to 'orient', to tell us where we are (B. Polk, 1961).<sup>165</sup> His professed focus on geographical inspiration (1985, p. 98) risked pre-empting the possibilities of local architectural knowledges, as if the latter did

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<sup>164</sup> Weise too stated that "the new era in Nepal must be created though with a progressive spirit, but with a traditional mind." Weise, Kai. 2005. *Architect Robert Weise: The Life, The Work, The Times*. Unpublished manuscript, p. 9.

<sup>165</sup> Polk published a volume of essays in 1961 entitled *Architecture and the Spirit of the Place* that were substantially written in 1951 (B. Polk, 1961) "Fine buildings are climaxes of geography. They become possible when the Architect has brought his science and his technique to terms with the rootedness of his spirit; when he feels the sweep of history and knows the seasons' changes, and when he finds himself at one with the purposes and customs of his people. Then as he rejoices in the significant and the particular of his immediate programme, he will submerge and depersonalize himself in his work and will know the thrill in the divination of forms. He we hold mysterious converse with the tutelary genius of the Place." (B. Polk, 1961, p. 22) In a piece promoting his work, he wrote that this page is deliberately juxtaposed with images of the Tripikata Library to show the "counterplay between thought and form" (Friends Journal October 15 1962 from Polk's papers in the Environment Design Archives, Berkeley).

not exist. His approach raises questions of authenticity and of course authority, in who decides what is authentic.

Polk was no stranger to the use of design to support the construction of national identity. He had just designed India's first national memorial at the Jallianwalabagh in Amritsar. He emphasised the palace as a tool for reconciling the past and the present and his writings indicate him to have been (at least latterly) aware of the panchayat rhetoric and Mahendra's theory of monarchy.<sup>166</sup> He was also a pragmatist and justified his choice of reinforced concrete as a suitable construction method in a situation where there were what he described as "limited construction skills" (B. Polk, 1993b).

The Palace with its high central throne room and its even higher temple spire to the right would be a recollection – about which might cohere visually once again a Nepali purpose – a will that is needed to solve today's long-term problems and to maintain independence from its two giant neighbours. The King's policies indeed already involved more common people in the national planning process than is usual in South Asia, partly, to be sure, because the bureaucracy is very weak (B. Polk, 1993b, p. 8)

Polk entered Nepal for business meetings only and in his search for the authentic, seems to have not strayed far outside the Kathmandu Valley (B. Polk, 1993b, p. 8; B. Polk & Polk, 1985, p. 96).<sup>167</sup> Whilst he intended to establish a local office in Kathmandu and took up designing schools for USAID (Isaacson, Skerry, Moran, & Kalavan, 2001), he and his wife Emily returned to the USA in 1964, leaving government engineer Shanker Nath Rimal, to oversee the construction of the palace. Benjamin Polk's discussions on the design of the palace were mediated through the building

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<sup>166</sup> The fact that they are all retrospective means I am unable to draw a direct correlation.

<sup>167</sup> Gutschow writes that the local office was taken care of by Isvor Narsingh, the son of Kisor Narsingh Rana, who had studied engineering at Roorkee College in the 1890s (2011, p. 976). My conversations with Shanker Nath Rimal suggest that whilst Polk took up rent on a property in Lainchaur (possibly through Isvor Narsingh), this was shortlived. In 1964, just months after construction had begun, Rimal received a sudden communication requesting Polk's payment to be sent to his office in the United States. Recorded Interview, 06 April 2012. According to the account left by Emily Polk, he planned to set up a new office in New York (E. Polk, 1994, p. 243).

committee via Rimal, a process he found frustrating.<sup>168</sup> Although Polk wrote that he saw his role as an opportunity to offer continuity “collectively for the people of Nepal” (1985, p. 97), and by referencing traditional temple forms, “the glory of Nepal” (1985, p. 94); it is more accurate to view his role as one of re-arranging bits of an existing world into an imagined one, using what he had to hand, and directed by the king.

Construction began in 1964 and was overseen by a committee chaired by the king’s younger brother, Prince Gyanendra.<sup>169</sup> There was no architectural training and there was no registration system for architects in Nepal in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>170</sup> Rimal trained at the Bengal Engineering College in Calcutta with a scholarship from the Colombo Plan (1953-1957). He went on to undertake an internship at Dyckerhoff and Widman, a leading German construction company and registered his firm in 1962 as “Engineers and Architects”, an early use of the professional term ‘architect’ in Nepal. Rimal was steeped in an understanding of modernist design,<sup>171</sup> he had undertaken a royal commission in 1958,<sup>172</sup> and had established family connections with the royal family and a close working relationship with the king. Together this placed him in a position to influence the implementation of the design.<sup>173</sup> The committee approved design changes proposed by him, such as the use of brick rather than marble as a facing material – proposed as an appropriate alternative because of its associations with Newar architecture

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<sup>168</sup> Recorded Interviews with both Edward Asprey (04 January 2013) and Shanker Nath Rimal (06 July 2013).

<sup>169</sup> Personal communication with Ketaki Chester, 18 July 2014, who remembers the family receiving regular progress reports. Shanker Nath Rimal remembered the list of members of the committee: General Chandra Shmsher Rana, Lalita Thapa (secretary), Rimal (as engineer in charge and secretary), 2 representatives from king, 3 to 4 general engineers, and 2 Nepali carpenters

<sup>170</sup> The Society of Nepalese Architects (SONA) was founded in 1990.

<sup>171</sup> As demonstrated by his design for the residence of Khadga Bahadur Singh in 1966, described by Gutschow as a “cantilevered two-storey box with a curtain wall of glass and boxed eaves” (2011b, p. 975)

<sup>172</sup> The *Shahid* (Martyrs) Gate, in central Kathmandu (“Interview with Shanker Nath Rimal,” 2002)

<sup>173</sup> Significantly Rimal is known within the palace community as the architect of the palace. He continued to work for the palace and built servants quarters in 1968-9. He also designed and oversaw the construction of the entire Eastern wing.

and ability to communicate the value of tradition.<sup>174</sup> The committee requested the addition of a broad flight of stairs leading to a ceremonial entrance to the main reception room, at the centre of the main, southern facade (reminiscent of the former Rana palace building).<sup>175</sup> Under the direction of the king, they commissioned leading artist Bal Krishna Sama (an anti-Rana nationalist who in 1968 was made Vice-Chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy) to design the panels for the doorway.<sup>176</sup>

Benjamin Polk expected to be involved in designing the interior furnishings of the new palace, and whilst he remained in India (B. Polk & Polk, 1985, pp. 93–94),<sup>177</sup> his wife Emily Polk resided in Kathmandu from 1962 to 1963 and began work on designs based on what she described as “indigenous idioms” she had found depicted in the paintings at a previous visit to the Ajanta caves in Maharashtra State, India. Based on her experiences in Calcutta, this was her attempt to re-connect the Shah royal family with their Hindu roots (E. Polk, 1994, pp. 237–241).<sup>178</sup> Her sketches (Figure 12) suggest an intention to use expensive materials such as ebony and animal skin and I can find no evidence that her designs were presented to the King.<sup>179</sup> In 1968, when the main construction was complete, the London firm Asprey and Company, who had long associations with the British

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<sup>174</sup> Described by Polk as “omission of exterior finish” (B. Polk & Polk, 1985, p. 95).

<sup>175</sup> Gutschow comments on the addition of a central portico to the majority of Rana palaces (2011b, p. 857).

<sup>176</sup> Shanker Nath Rimal. Recorded Interview, 06 April 2012. Balkrishna Sama (previously Shamsheer) was one of the contributors to an edited volume, published in India, celebrating the life and work of Nepali poet Bhanubhakta in 1940 (to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death) and therefore in developing what Onta describes as a *bir* history of Nepal (Onta, 1996a).

<sup>177</sup> Shanker Nath Rimal recalled that the plan had been for Polk to take on the guest wing, Asprey and Company the state wing and a local Kathmandu firm, the private wing. Personal Communication, 05 July 2013.

<sup>178</sup> Her intention was to connection with tradition, “beds which were based on ancient Indian forms, Hindu forms, then chairs based on ancient forms, because my thought was that it was very sad and inappropriate that all of these great Indian and Hindu and south Asian families who had homes and palaces should be furnished with Western styles” (E. Polk, 1994, p. 237). Artist Desmond Doig describes her rather naïve attempts in his account of his time with her at the Royal Hotel (1994, p. 39).

<sup>179</sup> Held at National Womens Museum of Art, NYC.

monarchy<sup>180</sup> and who were known to the king,<sup>181</sup> were offered the contract to design the state interiors of the palace.

Asprey was founded in 1781 as an ironmongery and had built a name for itself as a practitioner of good design and as offering a quintessentially British product. (Hillier, 1981, 115).<sup>182</sup> Unlike other British luxury houses that opened showrooms in British India, particularly Calcutta, the company's only showroom was on London's Bond Street. The interior decoration department was opened under the leadership of Algernon Asprey after the Second World War and largely financed by foreign, royal clients.<sup>183</sup>

Algernon Asprey was responsible for designing the complete set of state interiors.<sup>184</sup> The project took about 18 months and during this period Asprey stayed in Kathmandu for weeks at a time.<sup>185</sup> He developed each of his designs following a meeting with the king to discuss design requirements for a particular space. After each meeting, he would return to his room in the Soaltee Hotel (owned by the royal family) and quickly produce perspective

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<sup>180</sup> They held royal warrants at the time as jewellers and silversmiths (1940)

<sup>181</sup> Edward Asprey. Recorded Interview, 04 January 2013. Asprey confirmed the long-standing family connection that continues to this day

<sup>182</sup>The company was run by different members of the family, with varying degrees of success. Through the manufacture of high quality goods and a series of shrewd take-overs, the company made ever more grandiose products, which by the 1920 included custom-made commissions for patrons such as Indian Maharajas. From the middle of the nineteenth century, as exhibitions became both a product and tool of Empire, the firm used their setting to create a reputation for itself (Hillier, 1981).

<sup>183</sup> Whilst this business started with Phyllis Sutton-Vein was modest at first, it built momentum on the basis of the patronage of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, who visited the shop whilst exiled in London during the war. He built a good relationship with Algernon Asprey and Aspreys in fact paid his hotel bill – something he did not forget. In the 1960s Algernon Asprey was invited to decorate his palace in Addis Ababa. This is credited with opening access to new networks and connections. Unfortunately following the sale of the family firm in the 1990s, many archives were destroyed and so it is not possible to detect the beginning of Asprey's association with the Nepali monarchy – though he is known to have completed work for Tribhuvan. The official Asprey history (published 1981) does not cover this period, at least in part due to a family dispute that was live at the time of its publication. Edward Asprey. Recorded Interview, 04 January 2013.

<sup>184</sup> This was possibly the largest contract of its kind being handled by a UK private firm at the time. *Algernon Asprey Exhibition, Goldsmiths Hall, 1976*. Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, NK.94.0125. The Narayanhiti Palace commission enabled Algernon Asprey to establish a successful business model, that saw him win successive royal commissions for huge palaces across the Middle East. He established his own business in Bruton Street in 1971.

<sup>185</sup> In the late 1960s, he was also designing the interiors for the Nassaria Guest Palace in Riyadh

sketches that once approved, would then form the design drawing for the team on site (Artley & Asprey, 1980, p. 7) (Figures 13 and 14).<sup>186</sup> The majority of pieces were especially commissioned from a range of small manufacturers across the UK and Europe, produced and flown in (on a Britannia aircraft), making this a complex team project. This included everything from the fibrous plasters mouldings for the decoration of the *Lamjung* dining room ceiling to the 50-foot chandelier in the *Gorkha* (throne) room designed by Harry Rath of Lobmeyer, Vienna in conjunction with Algernon Asprey (Artley & Asprey, 1980, p. 46), the sycamore office desk used in the King's official office, the *Gulmi* room designed by Gordon Russell of Broadway, Worcestershire<sup>187</sup> and landscape paintings by Asprey's chief artist and designer James Porteous Wood (lining the *Bajura* room).<sup>188</sup>

Designing for royalty is usually associated with the use of precious or fine materials, and with exquisite craftsmanship. Algernon Asprey's clients, including Mahendra, appear to have preferred appearance to substance. The goods produced by Asprey used cheaper, exotic materials that gave the impression of wealth; "he meets the shrunken budget with leather, macassar ebony and gold tooling in place of real gold and diamonds" (Hughes in (Artley & Asprey, 1980, p. 14)).<sup>189</sup> Algernon's business practice during this period, of large-scale team projects, which relied on a certain amount of standardization, contrasted with the accepted (western) understanding of luxury, that valued individual craftsmanship and placed emphasis on the exclusive and the unique.

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<sup>186</sup> Shankar-Nath Rimal remembers him sketching in front of him. Personal Communication, 05 July 2013. Several of these sketches are still in existence, forming part of Asprey family collections.

<sup>187</sup> For example, office desk by Gordon Russell. Design number: X9765-71. Gordon Russell Museum. Asprey owned a series of small firms, including Percy Bass, curtain makers and upholsterers

<sup>188</sup> Edward Asprey. Recorded Interview, 04 January 2013.

<sup>189</sup> This text is not critical in itself, but the mention of these points suggests criticism from other quarters of the design community. Edward Asprey pointed to his father's use of sycamore, a wood that can be stained any colour (in the case of Mahendra's official desk – stained black to look like ebony).



Asprey wrote that when designing for royalty it was necessary for the designed object or interior to provide a vehicle for the display of fine indigenous craftsmanship, for example the wooden staircase connecting the main reception room (*Kaski Baithak*) to the throne room on the second floor (*Gorkha Baithak*) (Artley, 1980, p. 7). Workshops had been established within the palace grounds before 1968 and local craftsmen were called upon to assist the team flown in from London.<sup>190</sup> This became a source of pride,<sup>191</sup> and on Mahendra's request, the most senior of craftsmen, were issued with certificates recording their work on the project. Several established their own businesses on the basis of their work on the palace interiors with Asprey.<sup>192</sup>

The palace would appear to have been used for official functions from January 1969<sup>193</sup> and whilst there was no official launch, the first event to be broadcast from the palace through the state-owned print media was the wedding of the then Crown Prince Birendra with Aishwarya in February 1970.<sup>194</sup> The palace acted as bridegroom's home and the *saipata* procession led from the Narayanhiti Palace to Singha Darbar. This was a major media event, involving guests from all over the world (Simha, n.d.).<sup>195</sup>

### **A new palace for a modern Hindu king**

Polk's design is a steel-framed, concrete building<sup>196</sup>. It is a predominantly horizontal composition running East-West and made up of a series of

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<sup>190</sup> Engineer Shanker Nath Rimal. Recorded Interview, 06 April 2012.

<sup>191</sup> "In constructing the Palace, many Nepalese worked in unison with people of different nationalities and, as a result of their concerted efforts, the Palace was completed on the eve of the wedding of His Majesty King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev in February 1970." (His Majesty's Government, Ministry of Communications, 1976, p. 5)

<sup>192</sup> For example, woodcarver Motiram Tamrakar. Engineer Shankar Nath Rimal. Recorded Interview, 06 April 2012.

<sup>193</sup> The Danish Princess Margarethe signed visitors' book at Palace in 1969 ("Programme of the Danish Princesses' Visit Released," 1969).

<sup>194</sup> To which photographs in his archives at the Environmental Design Archives, Berkeley attest, Benjamin Polk was evidently invited.

<sup>195</sup> T30558 BL in the British Library.

<sup>196</sup> It used steel from India and cement from Britain that arrived in steel drums. Engineer Shanker Nath Rimal. Recorded Interview, 06 April 2012.

overlapping, stepped, brick-clad blocks. The higher blocks at the rear are capped with low hipped roofs clad in slate tiles. At the centre of the design, above the marble entrance staircase and canopy, is a tower capped with a two-tiered pagoda-style roof and bronze pinnacle. This tower dominates the façade, and at night a 40ft high window on its southern wall allows the light from the chandelier in the throne room to be visible from the south side. To the right of the throne room tower, is a taller, thinner, stepped concrete tower, topped with a pinnacle inspired by the Changu Narayan temple, whose verticality is emphasized through the use of a series of cylindrical mouldings that run the entire height of the structure (Figure 15). When completed, the exterior surface of these two towers was painted pink. The design makes clear architectural references to the Newar architectural canon, it also shows the influence of the early designs of American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, with whom Polk spent four weeks in 1936.<sup>197</sup> Polk published his own written description of the building after a visit to Nepal in 1990:<sup>198</sup>

Congruity of design was achieved by deriving the major forms from traditional elements. The building is too large to be seen as a whole – even from the axial new boulevard that His Majesty established leading directly to the entrance. It is a vertical-horizontal experience of motion: the building has total balance and total lack of symmetry. What is visible from the front entrance gate is the central and dominating part of the building consisting of a trio: the high and central throne room, the Hindu temple tower higher still, and the projecting covered entrance on the left with its screen of hanging “columns”. Like the Tripikata Library, the Palace is not open to the public. (B. Polk, 1993b, p. 9)

This account of the palace by Polk emphasizes the fact the palace was intended to be seen from a specific point some distance to the south, with the foothills and the Himalayan peaks, the ultimate symbol of authenticity, as a backdrop (Sekler, 2003, p. 124), a view used by the authors of the 1976 guidebook to associate the new palace with a royal tradition of palace building in Nepal.

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<sup>197</sup> Polk associates this way of working with Frank Lloyd Wright. Polk stayed with Frank Lloyd Wright for four weeks in 1938 at Taliesin, Wisconsin (B. Polk, 1993a, pp. 3–5).

<sup>198</sup> Evidenced by photographs in EDA Archive, Berkeley, California.

In a fine clear morning in autumn, with the never-ending play of sunlight over the snow-peaks, and the silhouette of the mists still lingering over the hills, it looks as though the Palace had stood there for an age. Its beauty, however, is new and fresh. (His Majesty's Government, Ministry of Communications, 1976, p. 5)

The decision to describe the new palace building in the context of Nepal's unique topography was intended to root the Shah monarchy in the idea of the Nepali nation and to simultaneously highlight Nepal's individuality and pride. The trio of elements, described by Polk in relation to their respective heights, reflect the wording of the 1962 constitution of Nepal as an "independent, indivisible and sovereign monarchical Hindu state" (I.3.1). The "Hindu temple tower"<sup>199</sup> as a source of authority separate from the monarch (the throne room), who in turn personally represented the body politic. This "idea of the Nepal nation creates a hierarchy of belonging to Nepal." (Malagodi, 2015, p. 83)

### **The palace and the king as an embodiment of the nation**

The Narayanhiti palace was built as a public statement that spoke loudly of the character of the Nepali state, and the role of the Nepali monarch as King Mahendra wished them to be perceived at a time when nation-states were imagined as being integrally related to bounded space. A consideration of the conventions used to name the rooms in the palace reveals that the intention for the palace to act as a legitimating force went beyond its physical appearance and was rooted to the Shah dynasty's unitary conception of kingship, in which king, throne and palace are all representations of the entire kingdom, as discussed in Chapter Two (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 198). Each entrance to the main section of the building was named after a Himalayan peak, for example the main entrance at the top of the marble staircase on the southern elevation is the *Gauri Shankar Dwar* (Figure 16) and forty-five of the rooms are named after one

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<sup>199</sup> Described as a viewing tower in (His Majesty's Government, Ministry of Communications, 1976)

of what were (until 2015) seventy-five districts of Nepal, the floor plan of each level reflecting a map of the country and serving as a representation of the kingdom (Figures 17 and 18).<sup>200</sup> The king's territory (*muluk*) radiated out from the throne room, positioned at the centre of the building, serving to emphasise the person of the king at the heart of his kingdom, the 'symbol of unity' (*ektako pratik*).<sup>201</sup> Mahendra developed the Shah monarch's unitary concept of kingship to set out a single national, linguistic and ethnic identity, enshrined in the 1962 constitution.<sup>202</sup> That Mahendra's form of nationalism was exclusionary is well known (Gaige, 1975; Gellner, 1997). The palace, as a representation of the Nepali nation, derived from the king himself served to legitimate his political authority and construct a common identity.

The three largest state rooms in the central wing of the building are closely associated with the origins of the Shah dynasty. They refer to three of the seventy-five districts of Nepal, but also to the small kingdoms that made up the early Shah conquests: *Kaski Baithak*, after the principality where the Shahs are claimed to have first settled served as the name for the main reception room where the king received state guests, swore in the prime minister and other officials. *Lamjung Kajha*, conquered by Yasobrahma Shah was the state dining room and *Gorkha Baithak*, conquered by Drabya Shah in 1559, as the throne room reconstituted the symbol of the royal stone, *dhungo* at the centre of the palace. "In a way, the Shah still appears to reign from Gorkha, albeit a Gorkha transplanted to the Kathmandu Valley." (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 203)

The significance of these appellations goes still further. A key enabler of Jang Bahadur Rana's usurpation of power that was to last 100 years, was

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<sup>200</sup> There is a wooden sign next to the entrance to each room, with the room name given in both English and Nepali. These names are not referred to in the 1976 guide, and I have been unable to see the same room name signs in the guide's published images. My interviewees on the ex-palace staff all however suggest that the room names have been there from the opening of the palace building.

<sup>201</sup> A copy of the text of the 1962 Constitution of Nepal in English can be found here: [http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/rarebooks/downloads/Nepal\\_1962\\_Constitution\\_english.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/rarebooks/downloads/Nepal_1962_Constitution_english.pdf) (accessed 31 August 2018)

<sup>202</sup> See Chapter Two and refer to discussion in Malagodi (2013, p. 89).

the granting of the hereditary title of Maharaja of the formerly independent principalities of Kaski and Lamjung by Surendra Shah in 1856, a title that was handed down within the Rana family until 1951 and used to challenge the authority of the Shah kings. This room naming strategy enabled the Shah monarchy to symbolically reclaim this territory as part of their kingdom. The Narayanhiti palace clearly underlined the indivisibility of the royal territory (*muluk*) and stood “as a symbol of the kingdom’s modernity.” (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 202).<sup>203</sup>

In the second part of this chapter, I outline three separate frames: First, the way in which tradition was played up in the design of the palace in order to capitalise on internally generated authenticity. Second, the way that Mahendra deliberately brought the palace into play as a symbol of office, by and through the inscription of an official national narrative that focused on the exterior of the building. Finally, in consideration of its use as an instrument of foreign policy, through the way in which the palace was intended to be used.

### **One | Playing up tradition**

King Mahendra emphasized the use of Newar architectural forms for key occasions of state ritual. For example, Gutschow observed that the coronation platform [*mandapa*] upon which King Mahendra and Queen Ratna were crowned in 1956 was crowned with two tiered roofs (Gutschow, 2011a, p. 20), of which the coronation book commented:

It looks just like a pagoda. This indicates that the Royal sovereigns are the objects of worship next to God (Rajbhandari, 1956, p. xxi)

For the king to have legitimacy, the nation had to remain Hindu and Mahendra claimed to be uncovering an indivisible body politic (ruler, realm,

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<sup>203</sup> Footnote about puja room evident in plans, HM on ground floor and official on first floor

subject) that had been the nation's inheritance since Prithvinarayan Shah.<sup>204</sup> He asserted this to be a contiguity usurped by the Ranas and sullied by the political parties and in this context, use of the pagoda form (originally reserved for temples) was intended to be restorative.<sup>205</sup> The coronation was attended by representatives from countries all over the world and use of the pagoda form was political and intended to emphasize Mahendra's role as the world's only Hindu king and Nepal's national independence.<sup>206</sup>

The modern palace building utilised the tiered pagoda form for the central throne room, giving it the "apparent structure" of a Newar temple (B. Polk, 1993b, p. 38). It also used a copper clad hipped canopy supported by four carved wooden columns over the main entrance.

Contemporary writers referred to the Newar architecture of the Kathmandu Valley and the category of Nepali architecture interchangeably. For example, in *The Nepalese Perspective*, directed at an English-speaking audience in 1972, Sharma states "It is this architecture that is unlike anything [an outsider] would get to see in India or anywhere else" (P. R. Sharma, 1972, p. 20). Also in *The Nepalese Perspective*, Manandhar writes that the pagoda form "preserves [Nepal's] own special position in the cultural history of the world' and that it has 'acquainted the outside world with us'" (1969, p. 11). The architectural discourse of style in Nepal is often articulated through the rhetoric of modern and traditional, a dichotomy that is mapped onto the spatial categories of foreign and native (Nelson, 2013, p. 126). This differentiation is associated with colonial ways of seeing and representation and is essentially political (Chattophadyay, 2006; Hosagrahar, 2005). The decision to use an augmented Newar pagoda roof

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<sup>204</sup> Speech given 15<sup>th</sup> December 1961 (Tuladhar, 1968, p. 20).

<sup>205</sup> Photographs of the Mandapa used by Tribhuvan in 1913 show a simple hipped roof. See Madhan Puruskar Pustakalaya [https://www.flickr.com/photos/mpp\\_flr/albums/72157629626130677](https://www.flickr.com/photos/mpp_flr/albums/72157629626130677)

<sup>206</sup> When Mahendra's son, Birendra was crowned in 1975, a similar, but much more elaborate platform was constructed, later dismantled and transferred to the Botanical Garden in Godavari. The proportions of the tiered roofs and carved decoration were enlarged and mark a deliberate exaggeration of anything dating back to the Malla era (12<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> Century rulers of the cities of the Kathmandu Valley), which was seen as the "golden era" of Nepali architecture (Gutschow, 2011a).

for the coronation *mandapa* represented an attempt to create a temporal distance from the Rana regime and its use of foreign forms. In doing so it perpetuated a foreign mode of looking at Kathmandu buildings that gave preference to traditional forms.

The official decision to play up the traditional elements of the Narayanhiti palace design in order to give it a traditional guise (Malagodi, 2015, p. 75) can be understood therefore as a response to the narrative of the destruction of the traditional and native form by modern and foreign forces that was born out of the ending of the Rana regime.<sup>207</sup> According to this narrative, ‘the ancestral buildings like ... the south western front of the Hanuman Dhoka Darbar can only be found in the Valley of Kathmandu’, whereas the Narayanhiti Palace was part of a growing ‘unenviable wilderness of reinforced concrete buildings’ (Malla, 1967, p. 8),<sup>208</sup> “Imported foreign architecture [that] is not only totally different to our environment but also could be sometimes provoking to our architecture.” (B. N. Bajracharya, 1969, p. 10)<sup>209</sup>

Juxtaposing a reading of the Narayanhiti palace with analysis of the 1962 constitution, Malagodi writes that the palace, like the constitution “articulate[d] the *raison d’être* of the Panchayat regime: a modern political endeavour cloaked in a traditional guise” (2015, p. 75). This cloaking was dependent on the way its intended meaning was projected (or not) and received. For example, for those foreign diplomats who were able to visit

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<sup>207</sup> As Liechty (1997, p. 6) concluded, ‘stories of Nepal’s relationship with foreign goods and cultural practices before 1951 have been – like the Rana palaces and the foreign objects themselves – at best neglected as irrelevant, and at worst actively reviled as instances of cultural contamination’. For example: “For the purposes of the consideration of the typical architectural styles of Nepal, these structures can be safely discounted, despite their expensively ambitious magnificence.” (Banerjee, 1980, p. 68)

<sup>208</sup> In Kathmandu, this narrative is enacted through the projects of UNESCO and foreign governments which have, since 1963, entered Nepal with the objective of preserving the country’s architectural heritage, e.g. (Pruscha, 1975). Its persistence as a narrative has led to the neglect of the palace building by Architectural Historians. See (Whitmarsh, 2018).

<sup>209</sup> The number of state buildings under construction at the same time as the palace was significant and included the Martyrs’ Memorial, the Town Hall, the Central Telegraphic Office, the General Post Office, the Academy (1968), the Mint, the Bureau of Mines, the Supreme Court (1957), the National Archives, the NIDC Office, and the Police Club.

the palace, the 1976 guidebook emphasized the ‘Nepali-ness’ of its exterior design; the “indigenous” hipped pagoda roof with the pinnacle modelled on the Shah palace at Nuwakot, the temple tower, the symbolism of the vast doors decorated in bronze plate and designed by Balkrishna Sama, and the use of brick as a facing material.

Whether one looks at the Narayanhiti Palace from the outside or has an opportunity of entering it, the impression it begets is that of a modern edifice inspired by traditional Nepalese architecture. (His Majesty’s Government, Ministry of Communications, 1976, p. 13)

Whilst the institution of the monarchy was undergoing modernization (placed at the heart of politics), a manipulation of historical consciousness was orchestrated to cultivate a national memory and create an independent land on which development [*bikas*] could be enacted (Onta 1996, 232).<sup>210</sup> Mahendra positioned himself as “simultaneously the authentically traditional sole leader of his country and the eminently modern head of state” (Mocko, 2012, p. 92). The use of tradition as a way of restoring Nepal’s international reputation reveals an awareness within the palace of Nepal’s marginal position on the global stage.

## **Two | Bringing the palace into service as a symbol of office**

The construction of a new, concrete palace building in Kathmandu was a luxury, a large-scale, expensive<sup>211</sup> project that physically manifested the power of the monarch, through large-scale destruction in the heart of the city that in a very real way mediated the space around it. In addition to the demolition of a large part of the earlier Narayanhiti Palace, several other Rana palaces were dismantled to create a major North-South axis (now

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<sup>210</sup> See Hobsbawm on the invention of tradition. On the occasion of Mahendra’s coronation a committee was formed – Upatyakanchal Tatkalin Sudhar Samitee (Valley Reform Committee), for the repair and restoration of religious and other cultural heritage sites. Which within 3 years, restored 78 temples, numerous rest houses, stone waterspouts and other small shrines (Amatya, 2007, p. 43).

<sup>211</sup> Shanker Nath Rimal recalled the overall budget to have been of the value of 8-9 crore rupees (excluding the interiors). Recorded Interview, 06 April 2012.



known as Darbar Marg, known locally as “Kings Way”) (Figure 19).<sup>212</sup> Many in Kathmandu would have at least experienced the disruption of this physical imposition of power in a prominent part of the city, yet it is almost impossible to find contemporary references to either the construction work or the inauguration of the new building.<sup>213</sup> For example, the *Gorkhapatra* (the state-owned daily) and *Rising Nepal* (its sister English language paper) in their coverage of the wedding of Crown Prince Birendra in February 1971 did not discuss the palace, despite the event being its first and very public airing.<sup>214</sup> The physical tearing up and reconstruction of a significant part of the city contrasts with its relegation to the unquestioned frame of events and the “things that should not be said” (Hutt, 2006, 360) about the palace in public space exemplify the complicity of the architecture of the palace with social order, specifically the role of the monarch, who had complete control of the public sphere.<sup>215</sup>

Mahendra’s complete control over the public sphere (Burghart, 1996) makes it almost impossible to track down contemporary criticism of the palace.<sup>216</sup> Oblique references can be found, for example, Benjamin Polk refers to the possibility of such opinions when he states “I make no apology to those who think these expensive public symbols are out of place when people are in poverty” (1985, p. 94) and Edward Asprey recalled the king’s response to criticism of the palace being completed to a lavish standard:

Whether he wanted to appear less extravagant or this was forced upon him by circumstance, I can’t be sure. But there is no doubt in my mind that

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<sup>212</sup> Tom Bell (2014, p. 263) makes reference to the re-use of bricks from the Rana palace buildings.

<sup>213</sup> Published volumes of King Mahendra’s speeches include those given at the inauguration of contemporary buildings such as the Supreme Court and the Royal Nepal Army Headquarters (all demonstrating the king’s service to the nation – *desa-seva*) but not the palace (which would draw attention to his position at the top of the political order). See for example Tuladhar (1968).

<sup>214</sup> In contrast to this: when the British Queen, Elizabeth the Second visited Kathmandu in 1961, several articles in *The Rising Nepal* discussed the new road built to connect the airport to the palace.

<sup>215</sup> Contributed to by the high walls around the perimeter of the palace compound.

<sup>216</sup> I have been informed by a number of interviewees that the palace building was famously (though no-one could quite remember who coined the phrase) likened to a railway station.

Mahendra was disillusioned [with the palace], wasn't wild about living there and felt it had gone slightly over the top.<sup>217</sup>

Shankar Nath Rimal, who worked in close proximity to the king during the construction process, remembered Mahendra having a change of heart, part-way through the project. Rimal recalled a conversation with Mahendra about the facing material for the building (a choice between marble as specified by Polk that would have to come from the Carrara quarry outside Rome rather than the local Godavari, or brick). Mahendra is said to have stated wearily “even if I build the Tajmahal, the Nepalese people might not appreciate my work”<sup>218</sup> and selected the brick. His choice of a traditional material in this context could have been intended to provide the building (and its apparently lavish interiors) with a cloak of modesty.<sup>219</sup>

The wedding rituals of the then Crown Prince Birendra and Aishwarya both began and ended at the palace, representing its launch as a representation of the nation and the official home of the Shah king (Simha, n.d.). In spite of the explicit identification of the kingship with the nation discussed above,<sup>220</sup> Mahendra realised a danger in projecting the nation as belonging to the monarch and Burghart's analysis of his speeches given across the country during the 1960s, reveal the application of the *vaishnavite* concept of service to one's deity to national service (*desa seva*) (Burghart, 1996, pp. 256–258).

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<sup>217</sup> Edward Asprey. Recorded Interview, 04 January 2013.

<sup>218</sup> Shanker Nath Rimal recalled that it became apparent that Godavari marble was not up to the job. Rimal stated that he had suggested use of brick to the King, pointing out its association with Newar architecture and “purity” of material. Recorded Interview, 06 April 2012.

<sup>219</sup> The meaning of these bricks is nuanced, as they came from modern brick factories. They were known as Chinese, after the first modern kiln established with Chinese support in Harisiddhi in the mid-1960s. The Chinese brick and tile factory was inaugurated on 11 March 1969.

<sup>220</sup> Until 1951 the Shah kings and later the Rana prime ministers, as recipient of all state revenue could decide how to disburse funds, either for governmental or personal expenditure. After 1951 a fiscal policy was introduced that predicted the annual costs of government and adjusted taxation accordingly. The king and the royal family received a salary from the state and unlike the pre-1950 period, any surplus now accrued to the state rather than the king (Burghart, 1996, p. 256).

Mahendra projected himself as working alongside the state in the service of the nation and his actions in the late 1960s and early 1970s suggest a deliberate (re-)positioning of the palace to enable it to be brought into service as an effective symbol of office, rather than a luxurious royal home.<sup>221</sup>

Mahendra is said to have sold the palace to the people in 1972 (P. Rana, 2008, p. 43). By portraying the building as the property of the people gifted by the king, "... by and for the people of Nepal." (B. Polk, 1993b, p. 8) Mahendra positioned himself with the people as a devotee of the nation-state in an attempt to legitimise his position. The palace became officially interpreted as a symbol of office alongside the crown and sceptre<sup>222</sup> and its form served to naturalise the position of the monarchy at the head of the political order with its "ultimate Nepaleseness" (Onta, 1996a) designed to promote a national culture.

As a symbol of office, I suggest the entire building was conceptualized as public space and was therefore called upon in pursuit of international recognition Mahendra, as absolute monarch, positioned himself as the bridge between the 'traditional' world of Nepal and the 'modern' west (Lakier, 2009, p. 212). The country was opening up and seeking international recognition as an independent state as well as support through aid packages.<sup>223</sup> The Narayanhiti Palace was designed for the receiving of foreign royal and diplomatic guests and the design of the palace interiors by a British firm can therefore be explored in the context of this international audience.

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<sup>221</sup> According to Shanker Nath Rimal, Mahendra publicly distanced himself from the palace by deciding to reside elsewhere; this was reflected in his request to change the layout of the private rooms on the south-side, reducing the size of the bedroom. This was echoed by Edward Asprey who recalled that his father was disappointed that the palace was not used more, that Mahendra was not comfortable there and that he resided in his own villa.

<sup>222</sup> Images of crown, sceptre, royal standard are juxtaposed in the 1976 guide to the palace.

<sup>223</sup> Acharya shows a steady increase in foreign aid as a percentage of development expenditure from the first Five-Year Plan (1956-1961) through the Fourth Plan (1970-1975) (1992, p. 9). This then increased exponentially from the mid 1970s to 1990 and by 1997 over half the government's budget came from foreign aid.

### Three | The palace as an instrument of foreign policy

Asprey's designs were imported from Britain, thereby continuing the identity practices of the Ranas, who deliberately maintained a direct link to Britain as the source of political modernisation and legitimation.<sup>224</sup> However, the luxury associated with the vast Rana palace buildings and their lavish state rooms overflowing with British and European paintings, décor and furnishings, practices that express indulgence in built form, was by 1962 associated with the exploitative rule of the Rana family, portrayed as immoral and deemed distasteful. Why and how then did Mahendra commission designs by a British firm for some of the most important interior spaces in the country?

As described in Chapter Two, the palace complex at Narayanhiti was built as a small citadel, surrounded by walls designed to create separation between the rulers and the ruled. For those living and working within Rana palaces, the space inside the walls was described as *bhitra* [inside], a feudal concept of space that offered “security, authority and protection” (G. Rana, 1986, p. 90), or fear and control for those on the outside (*bahira*) (S. A. Bajracharya, 2008, pp. 42–44). This separation continued after 1951 and access to the main palace building was extremely restricted, even to palace staff.<sup>225</sup> Selected members of the public were granted the opportunity to enter the palace grounds to receive *tika* from the king at the annual festival of *Dasain*, but did not enter the main building. Politicians, civil leaders, and on occasion foreign diplomats were usually granted audiences with the king in a separate one-story building to the south west of the main palace called

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<sup>224</sup> Mahendra followed in a line of Nepali rulers who emulated foreign elites in order to uphold their position (Gellner, 1999, pp. 7–9). The early Shah kings, who inhabited Malla palaces and attempted to distance themselves from the British and Mughals, were in this sense the exception to the rule of imitating foreign rulers.

<sup>225</sup> As emphasized by my interviews with ex-members of palace staff, who all recall their first entrance into the building – often surreptitiously, or post-2008 when the king had already left. Members of staff would carry passes, which enabled various levels of access. The highest level granted access to the private wing of the main palace building (See Chapter Five).

*Mangal Sadan*.<sup>226</sup> Therefore, whilst the main reception room (*Kaski Baithak*) was familiar to Nepalis in a mediated form via photographs distributed through the state-sponsored press to commemorate visits by foreign Heads of State, the conferring of medals on other members of the royal family, and the swearing in of government officials by the king, very few people entered the interior of the palace and those who did were either foreign guests or members of the Nepali educated elite.

Though the interiors of the palace were published, this was in the official English-language guidebook to the Palace (1976), where the text juxtaposed alongside photographs of the palace and its interiors emphasizes the indigenous character of the design. For example, images of each of the state interiors are paired with captions that highlight their symbolic aspects; the rhododendron pattern in a pair of curtains, the wood carving of Nepalese craftsmen, or the use of local materials such as marble from Godavari. The guide does not mention Benjamin Polk or Asprey of London, it omits any mention of the origin and design of the building, but picks out those aspects contributed to by Nepali craftsmen and artists. This highlights the multiple identity-making practices at play.

Architecture is a way of scripting a performance, and the Narayanhiti Palace can be viewed as a staging-ground in which each room formed the stage for a specific activity. As a symbol of office, I suggest the entire building was conceptualized as public space and was therefore called upon in pursuit of international recognition. Foreign guests were intended to come away with an impression of simultaneously seeing the value in offering support to a country with a distinctive national identity and have confidence in the monarchy's ability to bring development to the country, i.e. at the king's official home, to experience a luxurious (modern) environment with which they were familiar. In this sense, the palace interiors formed an active part of Mahendra's foreign policy. An account by M. Casey (the wife of a former

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<sup>226</sup> Official meetings sometimes took place in designated rooms on the ground floor of the main palace building (See Chapter Four).

Australian Governor-General) on the occasion of the wedding of King Birendra to Aishwarya in 1970 offers us the chance to experience a performance in action:

The King's banquet, the last of the official ceremonies, was held in the new palace. You entered from the road up a long long flight of wide stone steps carpeted in red or more adroitly by means of an Otis lift near a side entrance. For an hour and a half the many guests stood on a honey-coloured marble floor... Finally we moved into the banqueting hall, another long high narrow room made lively by mirrors, candelabra, armchairs of crystal with seats of gentian blue, and by jewelled women. At the far end rose a mural of the impeccable peak of Everest, the summit of the world... How can one assess the impressions taken away from this visit by the many disparate guests? It was an opportunity for informal talks; you could see unexpected fish swimming towards each other...<sup>227</sup>

The official guide to the events of the wedding includes photographs of the tents set up in the palace grounds to host the official guests, including various heads of states and foreign diplomats (Simha, n.d.). Interestingly, Casey's account does not privilege representation nor spatial structure, they operate together. She picks out particular material items of note, the lift as an example of modern technology which she was perhaps surprised to see in Nepal, the marble floor of the *Kaski Baithak* and the painting of Everest at the far end of the *Lamjung* dining room, as well as the way in which the informal arrangement of the dining room facilitated the discussion of politicians (the unexpected fish mentioned by Casey) from all countries in support of Mahendra's policy of non-alignment.

Whereas the Ranas used British goods as part of a series of strategies of visual distinction that prioritised being *seen*, the interiors of the Narayanhiti Palace were intended *not* to be seen by the majority of the population of Nepal. They were designed to be seen and experienced only by the Nepali elite attending the state events staged in the palace, alongside foreign guests. Alongside the complete control of state media, it was precisely the limited access of the palace interiors by the elite that made it possible for Mahendra to commission British designs at a time when official rhetoric

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<sup>227</sup> Casey, M. 1970. 'An Auspicious Occasion: 25<sup>th</sup> February to 4<sup>th</sup> March 1970'. Unpublished Manuscript. Kent History Centre ref: CKS-U951/Z81/5.

required the Rana palaces to be reviled. Mahendra's concern for those Nepalis attending state events at the palace, would have been less the re-invention of tradition, as in the official guidebook, but rather to uphold the prestige requirement of the Shah royal family. The social identity of the members of the Nepali elite who visited the palace would have been conceived through the spatial images created by the Rana palaces that preceded it (Liechty, 2003, pp. 40–46; Lotter, 2004). The British-designed interiors at Narayanhiti would have been understood by them as both modern and luxurious and served as a symbol for this group of elites, determining their collective position in society.

## Conclusion

The persistence of the model of architectural discourse that began in the 1960s at the time of the palace's construction persists to this day, shown in the following quotation by Nelson who evaluates the palace in relation to western notions of modernity.

At the time of its inauguration in 1969, Narayanhiti Palace was intended to signal a modern and forward-looking architecture. Looking back, Narayanhiti stands not as a beacon of modernity, but rather as a symbol of the failure of Nepali architecture to establish a modern style." (Nelson, 2009, p. 60)

Such aesthetic judgments have led to the neglect of the palace by architectural historians, foreign and Nepali alike, and the palace continues to prompt ambivalent readings and reactions.<sup>228</sup> Rather than perpetuate what Nelson describes as the 'tragedy' of Nepali architecture by focusing on questions of style and authenticity, influenced by others (Chattophadyay, 2006; Hosagrahar, 2005, p. 7; Kusno, 2010), I have focused on considered the design and construction of the Narayanhiti palace building enabling an exploration of what have been presented as formal contradictions and a

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<sup>228</sup> For example, "overall the palace is eclectic and surreal" (Ranjit, 2009, p. 43), a "*towering pink folly*" and "*Versailles in Green Nylon*" ("Versailles in green nylon; Nepal's royal palace.(The tragic home of the House of Shah)(Narayanhiti Palace)," 2009)

lack of coherence, i.e. the adoption of dominant European concepts into the design of a Nepali royal palace. The identification of three distinct ways in which the Narayanhiti Palace framed time and space in 1960s and 1970s has revealed the socially constructed identities of the palace and the complexities of the plurality of its meanings at the time of its construction and launch, meanings that were under constant renegotiation.<sup>229</sup> I argue that the remarkable features of the palace's modernity were the circumstances of its design, its imposition by the king, the official narratives constructed to legitimize the reinvention of the role of the monarchy, and its function as an official office, framing the king's interactions for foreign politicians and diplomats and his subjects.

The palace was the centre of political authority at the time of its construction. As such, all traces of the Rana legacy had to be seen to be erased. An official narrative was inscribed around the exterior of the palace that played up tradition in order to legitimize the political authority and nationalist stature of the monarchy to a local audience. In this way, Mahendra called the new palace into service as a new symbol of office and as the centre of political power and at the centre of the capital, Kathmandu, the palace played a role in the creation of this hierarchical and exclusionary notion of Nepal. The Narayanhiti Palace was actively used to construct patterns for self-interpretation, legitimized by the past. These patterns differed according to whether the audience experienced the interior of the palace through their participation in key ceremonies, or not; according to nationality, and/or status. The traditional elements of the form of the palace's exterior and its materiality were emphasized to signal the country's uniqueness and independence, and to dress a stage upon which international relations were played out.<sup>230</sup> The palace's state interiors on the other hand, drew upon British and European designs and were intended to

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<sup>229</sup>The legitimization of these multiple interpretations is important because it highlights the importance of understanding the palace within its local context and challenges the culturally constructed oppositions of modern and traditional that have thus far framed the way the palace has been understood.

<sup>230</sup> The "urge to demonstrate Nepaleseness with pyramidal roofs" in the heavily controlled public sphere became pervasive (Gutschow, 2011a, p. 21).



simultaneously uphold the position of the royal family within the ruling Nepali elite, and to indicate the country's ability to enact development to foreign guests.

The built environment is central to the formation of memories of experiences and learnt knowledge and the new palace building physically extended the presence of the monarchy. Its construction within the pre-existing walled palace compound, controlled access and through the shared experience of those who had to walk around its guarded perimeter, or queue for entry, the palace served to form communicative memories that made it clear it belonged to the monarchy as the head of state, not the people, what Bourdieu would describe as the palaces' 'complicitous silence' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 188).<sup>231</sup> The palace was used by Mahendra to seek legitimacy through the will of the people of Nepal, yet its bounded compound, simultaneously excluded all but the elite from the inner workings of the government. Its message to non-elite determined their position in society. This exclusion was challenged in 1990, again in 2006 and finally ended in 2009, when the palace was opened to the public as a national museum and I consider the palace's role as a target of resistance in the next chapter.

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<sup>231</sup> And this in spite of the public nature of monuments guiding contemporary government policy. Gutschow writes about this period "any building owned by the king, the state or the *Guthi Sansthan* was considered public and historical" (2003, p. 13).

## Chapter Four | The decline and fall of the monarchy

### Phase Five | the contested monarchy (1980 –2006)

#### *Cracks in the façade*

In the 1970s cracks began to show in the “impressive façade of royal rule” (Whelpton, 2005, p. 104) and little the king said was taken at face value (Burghart, 1996, p. 309). The spread of education resulted in rising levels of political consciousness and increasing opposition to the Panchayat system expressed by large-scale student protests, satirical criticisms in the independent press and anti-panchayat movements led by the banned political parties that now started to coalesce (Hutt, 2004, p. 3).<sup>232</sup> In response to high-profile student demonstrations and rising pressure from the international community, in 1980 the king held a referendum that offered citizens a choice between the partyless Panchayat system with an amended constitution or a multiparty system of government. The referendum is viewed by many political analysts as the beginning of the end of the Panchayat, because although the Panchayat side won,<sup>233</sup> its process laid bare the contradictions within the system (Burghart, 1993).<sup>234</sup> Subsequent amendments to the constitution that included direct election to the Rastriya Panchayat (national panchayat) led to even greater disenfranchisement, particularly among educated Nepalis, because the Panchayat Policy and Evaluation Committee, created to reform the Panchayat system, was felt to obscure the continuing power of the palace

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<sup>232</sup> Campus politics kept the flame of opposition alive pre 1980. From 1980 students began to implement programmes initiated by parties. Following the death of B.P.Koirala in July 1982 the Nepali Congress eventually launched a *satyagraha* (civil disobedience) campaign against the ban on political parties. This ended when on 20 June 1985 a series of bombs exploded in the capital: at the gate of the Narayanhiti Palace, the Hotel de l’Annapurna (owned by the king’s sister) and the Rastriya Panchayat Hall in the Singha Darbar complex.

<sup>233</sup> By 2.4 to 2 million votes (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 93).

<sup>234</sup> “By fighting against the collectively organized parties, the panchas became effectively a political party of partyless people and Nepal was transformed from a partyless democracy to a one party state that was run by the partyless party” (Burghart, 1996, p. 305).

of the executive (Burghart, 1993, p. 11; Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 99; Shaha, 1990).<sup>235</sup>

In addition to membership of the Raj Sabha (Council of State), members of the royal family held positions in a range of semi-governmental trusts and charity organisations.<sup>236</sup> For instance, Gyanendra served as the chairman of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation from 1982-2001 and the Lumbini Development Trust from 1985, Dhirendra was Chairman of the National Youth Fund in 1987 and was patron of the National Sports Council in the 1970s and 80s, the queen, Aishwarya, was Chairperson of the Social Services National Coordination Council (SSNC) from its establishment in 1977, an organisation which controlled the flow of international aid money into the country and the Pashupati Area Development Trust from 1986 to 1990 (Letizia, 2012). What was known (and imagined) about the actions of the royal family in these official positions fuelled rumours about their active manipulation of politics: Bajracharya describes an active public urban imaginary “enchanted with a political underworld” (2008, pp. 67–68).<sup>237</sup> This imaginary focused on all members of the royal family, apart from the king,<sup>238</sup> and was given space to exist by the secretive nature of decision-making within the palace secretariat behind palace walls (Shaha, 1982, p. 27).<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> The king had ultimate authority for the selection of the prime minister and the nomination of 28 of 140 seats in the house. It was reported that elected members of the newly elected Rashtriya Panchayat voted according to palace orders, which were conveyed by telephone or in personal interviews with Prince Dhirendra or Prince Gyanendra (Hoftun et al., 1999).

<sup>236</sup> Gyanendra was a member of the Raj Sabha from 1977-1990 and the Raj Parishad from 1990-2001.

<sup>237</sup> The National Sports Council was renowned for employing trained martial arts experts against the governments’ political opponents (Brown, 1996, p. 94). The Pashupati Area Development Trust was criticised for its compulsory purchase of land.

<sup>238</sup> Hoftun suggests that because there existed so much contemporary speculation about how much the king actually knew, this suggests the existence of people who went to considerable lengths to preserve his reputation (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 67).

<sup>239</sup> According to social scientist Rikishesh Shaha the central level, non-royal elite wielded immense power: palace secretaries, aids-de-camp to the royal family, chiefs of the army staff, military advisors to the king, palace tutors, some politicians. High ranking government officials and professionals without connections to the royal palace found themselves frustrated even when exercising their legitimate authority (Shaha, 1982, p. 27).

A growing number of private newspapers published what had been public secrets about the hidden work of the state, placing what were increasingly understood as corrupt and unacceptable practices in the public domain.<sup>240</sup> The sources of corruption were believed to reach into the royal palace, as laid bare in popular Nepali poet Bhupi Sherchan's (1935 – 1989), poem "Looking for Snakes" (*Sarpako Khojima*), published in 1984.<sup>241</sup>

I have even seen them in the darkness/  
But before I could strike/ they fled down their holes/  
Their lairs I destroyed/ but/ then they fled  
Down even bigger holes/  
These too I have destroyed/  
But/ even as I pursued them/ they escaped  
And went to hide behind walls/  
I knocked down the walls/  
But shame! The walls that sheltered them were so tall/  
I could not climb them/ breach them, or enter within.

I know/ my campaign is in vain/ Leave aside killing a snake/  
I might even be bitten myself/ any time/  
Even so I sit snoring asleep/ lying in wait by the walls/  
Because I am looking for those snakes/  
Which time after time are striking/  
Striking/ striking/ striking  
At this beautiful land.<sup>242</sup>

As the protagonist of the poem, Sherchan stalks "the snakes of corruption" through the spaces of Kathmandu with a stick in his hand. In the poem's final two stanzas, his search for the "disguised snakes/ That adopted civilised forms" (Hutt, 2010, p. 170) ends when the snakes disappear behind walls that are too high for him to climb (Hutt, 2010, p. 168). Sherchan is known for his use of accessible language (Hutt, 2010, p. 90) and he regularly drew upon the spaces of city of Kathmandu as a source of spatial metaphors. As described in Chapter Two, the palace compounds

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<sup>240</sup> This came to a head in 1987, after Prince Dharendra's aide de camp was convicted of involvement in the attempted murder of journalist Padam Thakurati in 1986. The *Saptahik Bimarsha* published a series of corruption scandals about "an underground gang with palace connections" that named government officials with close ties to the palace. The affair ended when Prince Dharendra renounced his royal privileges, left Nepal and divorced his wife, the sister of the Queen, Aishwarya (Hoftun et al., 1999, pp. 105–106).

<sup>241</sup> Hutt questions Chetan Karki's assertion that the poem was written in the 1960s, as it was not published alongside similar material at the time (Hutt, 2010, pp. 168–169).

<sup>242</sup> Translation Hutt (2010, p. 169).

encircled by high walls had physically manifested power since the Rana period, and Hutt confirms that Sherchan's use of walls as an allegorical device were readily recognisable as a direct reference to the palace compound, behind the walls of which the real workings of the Panchayat system were understood to take place.<sup>243</sup> Sherchan believed in poetry as a medium that should be used to convey a social or political message and his political fury is here directed at the political elite protected by their ability to hide behind official positions.

The censorship of the public domain that forced Sherchan and many other poets to write using allegorically ultimately revealed the fictional nature of the system and opened it up to international criticism (Burghart, 1993, p. 12).<sup>244</sup> The collapse of the Panchayat system was finally precipitated in 1989 by an economic crisis that resulted from India's closure of many transit points along Nepal's southern border. Shortages and rising prices, saw the growth of discontent, particularly in urban areas. The government declared a national crisis, in an attempt to foster national unity and shore up the Panchayat regime. In late 1989 the Nepali Congress and a group of leftist parties called the United Left Front (ULF) introduced a political ultimatum directly to the king; introduce political reform or face the launch of a non-violent movement.<sup>245</sup>

### *The Narayanhiti Palace as a target for resistance*

The *jan andolan* [people's movement], as it was known, marked a significant shift in the force of the contests against the Panchayat system, both ideologically and institutionally. It began symbolically on 18 February

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<sup>243</sup> Michael Hutt. Personal Communication. 17 August 2018.

<sup>244</sup> At the same time the lack of censorship on international news meant that the middle classes in Kathmandu, in particular, were able to follow the revolutions in the Soviet Union on newly available television sets (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 143). For example, the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu who visited Kathmandu in 1987 at the request of the king, was overthrown by his people in December 1989.

<sup>245</sup> On the deadline of 18 January 1990, the Nepali Congress held a large three-day public convention, in a direct challenge to the constitutional ban on political parties. The Congress leaders announced the launching of a democracy movement on Nepal's official 'Democracy Day' (18 February) unless the king met their demands.

1990 (democracy day) with demonstrations, protests, rallies and *bandhs* (strikes) organized by the agitating parties, mostly in the Kathmandu Valley – though activities rapidly spread to other main urban areas, particularly in the Terai.<sup>246</sup> In the Valley, the various professional organisations, such as the Medical Association and the Bar Association, etc. joined the democracy movement one by one and as the protests intensified, an international audience became aware of events and pressure on the Panchayat government grew.<sup>247</sup> On 6 April 1990 there were around 200,000 people on the streets of Kathmandu, and workers across the country went out on strike, marking Nepal's most popular political movement to that date (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 129; Ogura, 2001, pp. 151–162).

The palace was a target for direct challenges to the authority of the king. On 6 April Student protestors and party activists finally marched from the Tundikhel (the parade ground in the centre of Kathmandu) up Durbar Marg towards the south gate of the Narayanhiti Palace. When met with security forces guarding the roads that led to the royal palace, they threw bricks and chanted slogans defaming the king and queen such as “*bire chor desh chod*”, (“thief birendra, leave the country”) (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 130).<sup>248</sup> These inverted the image of the king as gift-giver (Burghart, 1996, pp. 193–225) to the king as a thief in order to express the “illegitimacy of the king's political authority during the Panchayat years” (Lakier, 2009). The troops opened fire on the crowd with live ammunition and shot dead a protestor who had climbed a statue of King Mahendra south of the palace and several other demonstrators.<sup>249</sup> Images of this spectacle were shared with

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<sup>246</sup> The movement was also supported by a political alliance amongst Nepal's more radical communist groups, the United National People's Movement (UNPM). The alliance included the Communist Party factions of Masal and Mashal, the latter led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal, a.k.a. 'Prachanda', the future leader of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

<sup>247</sup> People were killed in small numbers from the beginning, but things changed dramatically when police opened fire on and killed several demonstrators in Patan on 30 March and this display of violence close to the capital catalysed what was a struggle into a mass movement within the Kathmandu Valley (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 17).

<sup>248</sup> Images of the royal couple were placed on dogs (Lakier, 2009, p. 207).

<sup>249</sup> Numbers are uncertain, but the BBC reported in the evening of 6<sup>th</sup> April that at least fifty had died. (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 130) Following this incident, statues of Mahendra became a focus for protest across the country (Ogura, 2001, p. 176).

the wider community through the national print media and the re-telling of events saw Durbar Marg, the 'king's way', re-appropriated as a path to democracy and the king become a despised figure amongst many ordinary people.<sup>250</sup> The events of 6<sup>th</sup> April 1990 featured heavily in public consciousness and their memories were anchored by the urban spaces in which they took place. The meaning of the palace in particular, as the seat of royal authority and site of harsh repression, could never quite be the same.<sup>251</sup>

The palace was the stage upon which the king addressed this crisis of legitimacy for the monarchy. Late in the evening on 8 April 1990 the Narayanhiti Palace formed the backdrop to a broadcast on Nepal TV that was an attempt to deliberately re-position the monarch as leader of political reform. The statement read that following an audience with the leaders of the four parties leading the democracy movement, Birendra had lifted the ban on political parties and invited political reforms based on the people's advice (Hoftun et al., 1999, p. 133; Shaha, 1990, p. 210). In front of the cameras, the party leaders then declared that their demands to establish a multiparty system had been fulfilled, and called off the movement.<sup>252</sup>

Photographs of the four party leaders who took their seats in front of the king alongside interviews with each of the leaders were circulated in the state media (Ogura, 2001, pp. 195–196), intended to be interpreted by viewers as the king freely relinquishing his powers to the people rather than as a result of a mass uprising. Noting the impact of the media coverage

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<sup>250</sup> Portraits (*tasbir*) of the King and Queen in public buildings were removed or turned to face the walls (Brown, 1996, pp. 127, 191) and images exist of protestors burning images of Prithvi Narayan Shah (Rights, 1990).

<sup>251</sup> The existence of criticism is suggested by stories, still prevalent during the period of my fieldwork that placed Birendra at the top of the palace's tower during the events of 6<sup>th</sup> April 1990. They may have developed as a narrative intended to obfuscate the king's direct political role. The typical narrative described Birendra watching the crowds advance up Durbar Marg towards the palace. Horrified by the violence he saw, acted immediately to abolish the Panchayat system and hand sovereignty over to the people. This materialization of a separation of the king and his people through the space of the palace, drew parallels with the Rana period when King Tribhuvan was deliberately kept inside the palace grounds for all but official occasions.

<sup>252</sup> K.P.Bhattarai and G.P.Koirala from the NC and Sahana Pradhan and Radha Krishna Mainali from the ULF. Rising Nepal 17 April 1990

broadcast from the palace that night, Manjushree Thapa later wrote that “something palpably altered within all Nepalis. We had become citizens... We got a sense of what it meant to be sovereign. It felt as though a spring wind were sweeping down to blow away the haze that had for so long obscured our view of ourselves. It felt as though we could look around and finally see the truth.” (2005, p. 120). Thapa referred directly to the actions of the king in relation to the politicians, who addressed them as equals, and thereby revealed his position in the new political order.<sup>253</sup> The king would have to take action in order to legitimise his continued occupation of the royal palace.

### *Democratising the space of the palace*

Birendra eventually promulgated the new constitution on 9 November 1990.<sup>254</sup> Though it officially ended the Panchayat system, vested sovereignty in the people and set the ground for a new democracy, considerable powers and privileges were still assigned to the king and the royal family.<sup>255</sup> The king remained as supreme commander of the army (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 228), retained emergency powers (Hutt, 1993, p. 45) and the royal family were positioned above and outside of the public domain. Immune from both prosecution and taxation, the press could not freely write about them (Lakier, 2009, p. 213). Article 27(2) made the king ‘the symbol of Nepali nationality and unity of the Nepali people’ (138), legitimising the political power granted to the monarch. Article 27(1) defined the elements that legitimized the king as head of state (137) and the etymology of the definition of state [*adhirajya*] in Article 4 suggests the state [*adhirajya*] could not exist without a *raja* - a Hindu ruler whose authority

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<sup>253</sup> Manjushree Thapa recalls how on Nepal Television the king was asked by Ganesh Man Singh to adopt more egalitarian modes of speech and address people in the more honorific form ‘*tapaa*’, rather than the ‘*timi*’ form that is also reserved for adults addressing children.

<sup>254</sup> For texts and identification of the differences between the constitutions of the 20th century, see Shastra Dutta Pant, *Comparative Constitutions of Nepal* (1995). For analysis of the 1990 Constitution in particular, see Mara Malagodi (2013). For discussion of the pressure exerted on the political parties by the king using the army, see (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, p. 171).

<sup>255</sup> The king was supported financially by the government, and Narayanhiti Palace was provided for specifically in the national budget.



stems from the notion of Hindu kingship discussed in Chapter Two (Malagodi, 2013, p. 159). The power of the monarchy was reduced with the king as head of state, no longer head of government, but the 1990 constitution enshrined the traditional view that the Shah Hindu monarchy embodied the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Nepali nation.<sup>256</sup>

The first national elections since 1959 were held on 12 May 1991 and the Nepali Congress once again won an overall majority.<sup>257</sup> During the 1990s the country experienced a series of eight short-lived governments (usually led by the Nepali Congress) and all but the first administration ended before the end of its term. The parties tasked with running the government, now publicly accountable, came under heavy criticism for both political infighting and allegations of corruption at all levels and the democratic system was fragile (M. Thapa, 2005, pp. 126–129). Through the enactment of his political duties, which placed him in a stable institutional position, the king was able to take advantage of the uncertainty about precedence that existed in the new system (Brown, 1996, p. 190).<sup>258</sup> Constitutionally the king held far less political power than under the Panchayat system, but in practice the monarch was at “the center and source of both legislative and executive authority, and the ultimate arbiter of the laws of the country” (Mocko, 2012, p. 104).<sup>259</sup> For example, the Raj Parishad (King’s Advisory Council) replaced the Raj Sabha (State Council) officially only with the task of declaring the succession upon the death of the king, though a committee

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<sup>256</sup> Malagodi stresses the importance of the institutionalisation of the nation at a constitutional level, the way that it is framed by the past and continues to shape later developments, whether in line or in opposition to it. (2013, p. 159).

<sup>257</sup> G.P.Koirala (younger brother of B.P. Koirala) was nominated prime minister and was sworn into office on 26 May 1991. A poll carried out by the Political Science Association of Nepal during election hours in 1991 reveals that support for the idea of a republican state was widely expressed (31.2% of those polled/ 39.8% of those party-members polled) (Dangol, 1999, p. 227).

<sup>258</sup> Brown has described a “seemingly absurd” occasion when insufficient chairs were provided at a tea party hosted by the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The royal family were seated, but Prime Minister Koirala was forced to stand and this was interpreted as an affront to Koirala and a challenge to democracy (1996, p. 190).

<sup>259</sup> See Mocko for a detailed account of practices that position the king at the top of the political and social order during the 1990s (2012, pp. 104–109), and more recently in (Mocko, 2016).

of palace and government representatives drawn from the Raj Parishad routinely met with the king, at the palace, to discuss policy issues.<sup>260</sup>

After the elections, in order to consolidate his position as constitutional monarch, Birendra used the enactment of his ceremonial and social roles, combined with prominent press coverage to reassure particularly the population outside of Kathmandu and the international community that he had no intention of trying to win back the power he had just vested in the people (Lakier, 2009).<sup>261</sup> The palace Press Secretariat continued to issue regular bulletins on the royal family's activities and as a result Birendra and the royal family were recursively featured in mainstream news across all forms of media, mediating the encounter between the king and his citizens by extending, for example the view (of a photograph or piece of film footage) to countless people across the country. The Narayanhiti Palace was called upon in the construction of the king's image as a popular figure and in 1993, in an effort to showcase his exemplary behaviour as constitutional monarch, five rooms of the state wing of the main palace building were opened to visitors (Gorkhali, 1993).

Visitors were able to enter twice a week: Mondays was for Nepali nationals and Thursdays for foreign tourists.<sup>262</sup> On these occasions visitors entered into the main reception room (Kaski Baithak), entered the guest room (Parbat room) and then moved directly upstairs to the Gorkha Baithak (throne room). In following the King's official route through the building, the visitor route reinforced the hegemony of the monarch.<sup>263</sup> The English

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<sup>260</sup> The Standing Committee comprised the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the three top Palace administrators (the Principal Secretary of the Palace, the King's Private Secretary, and the Military Secretary) and the three top leaders of the government (the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the parliamentary opposition leader).

<sup>261</sup> Nervousness about the role of the monarchy during 1990 was expressed through wide and public criticism over any attempt Birendra made to maintain his primacy in the political process (Dangol, 1999, pp. 232–233; Hutt, 1993, p. 33).

<sup>262</sup> There was an entrance fee of Nrs. 250 for foreign visitors (Gorkhali, 1993) I have not been able to establish whether there was an entrance fee for Nepali visitors.

<sup>263</sup> Gorkhali's account describes the effect of walking this axis, past the over life size portraits of the Shah kings as "a panorama of the Shah dynasty... the best way to get a feel for the role of royalty and the Shah dynasty in Nepalese history." (1993, 19)

language leaflet produced for visitors refers to the King's direct descentance from King Prithnarayan Shah, and includes sections on the king's symbols of office; the throne, and the royal crest (Figure 20).<sup>264</sup> This description of the Gorkha room is typical of the way that the leaflet set out the state activities of the king and referenced religious symbolism throughout, highlighting the king's ceremonial role as head of state and continuing the Panchayat commitment to the religious foundation of the Shah monarchy:

The sixty-foot high Throne Room is patterned on the design of a Mandap, with four columns converging at the centre to support its pagoda roof. Looking down from the columns are eight paintings of the Asta Matrika and Ashta {sic} Bhairab, with a magnificent chandelier in the centre. Functions held here include the promulgation of the Constitution, the Coming-of-Age Ceremony of the Crown Prince and investiture ceremonies.

The narrative of Birendra as a democratising monarch is made clear by the fact that the Mugu Room was furnished with furniture and other items belonging to King Tribhuvan (1906-1955) (Figure 21). The inclusion of Tribhuvan's collections in this room, which was entered by visitors immediately after the throne room, before returning downstairs to the Kaski Baithak, was surely intended to reactivate a memory that linked the office of king with Tribhuvan as the 'father of democracy'.<sup>265</sup>

The relentless presentation of the monarchy as part of the fabric of the country was intended to affect popular opinion, as reflected in this extract from *Naya Nepal Post* that describes the Prime Minister's visit to the Narayanhiti Palace on the occasion of the king's birthday in 1993, his first visit since the promulgation of the 1990 constitution.

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<sup>264</sup> The Narayanhiti Royal Palace, Nepal {n.d.} A scanned copy of this leaflet was given to me by a member of ex-palace staff who, seeing they were to be disposed of, took it as a souvenir during the transition in 2008-9.

<sup>265</sup> When I first visited the Palace Museum in 2010, the Mugu Room was set out like an office with a desk as the central feature. The desktop is covered in objects such as globes, ashtrays and inkstands and the room feels like a shrine with flowers in a vase to the side of the desk chair and display cabinets surmounted by photographs of Tribhuvan and his wives.

His Majesty's birthday had never before been celebrated with so much loyalty and devotion... circumstances have made the PM realise the extraordinary significance of the King in this country, and change his attitude toward the King. His Majesty has done a great favour to Nepal and the Nepali people by agreeing to remain under the Constitution. His Majesty has left no stone unturned to observe the decorum of constitutional monarchy during this period...The King is now common to all. ("Extract from Naya Nepal Post," 1993)

Opening up the palace to the public presented the king and the palace as 'common to all'. It was intended to reduce criticism, both locally and internationally, of a political system, controlled by the king, that had always privileged high-caste, hill-based, Nepali-language-speaking men.<sup>266</sup> The 1990 constitution had opened space for new political organizations, and demands on the central government on behalf of Nepal's various minorities became increasingly prominent through an explosion of ethnic, language-based, gender-focused, and caste-oriented movements and groups (Gellner, 1997).<sup>267</sup> In public speeches on Democracy Day Birendra stressed the importance of following democratic norms and values and his continued presence as advisor to and upholder of the democratic system, both publicly and behind the scenes, made it harder to imagine replacing or removing him.<sup>268</sup>

### *Continuities of practice at the palace*

Despite the careful cultivation of the king's democratic image, the official and ceremonial uses of the Narayanhiti Palace saw little change following

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<sup>266</sup> Leftist parties expressed their frustration with the lack of restructuring of the political, social or economic order (Dixit, 2001/) through extra-parliamentary tactics, such as street protests, strikes and blockades (Thapa, 2003, xi).

<sup>267</sup> Commissions established to look after interests of women, dalits and janajati included the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (Nepal Janajati Mahasangh) founded in 1990/93 (see Gellner et.al..1997 for a list of janajati groups). By 1995 there was a restriction on one representative body per ethnic group (Gellner, 1997, p. 20). By 2008 54 of 59 recognised groups had representative bodies in the Nepal Federation of Nationalities.

<sup>268</sup> In an interview given to a local weekly, the president of the UML, Mana Mohan Adhikari, stated, "All the people will honour the king if he stays within the limits of the constitution and helps consolidate democracy. Otherwise there will be no one to back him. But we too must honor the king and listen to him. The government must take into account the feelings of the king, since he is still a force. That is why I advise my colleagues not to offend him." *Saptakhik Bimarsha* September 19 1992 in *Nepal Press Digest* 39, no. 29 (July 17 1995), 277.

the change to constitutional monarchy after 1990.<sup>269</sup> Notable for the image it projected of the king representing and speaking for the state, was Birendra's role as the head of state for international relations: He himself was educated in the UK, USA and Japan and together with Queen Aishwarya made overseas visits for the purpose of establishing diplomatic relations, projecting Nepal's international image and presenting Nepal's position of non-alignment. The official photographic record on display in the Narayanhiti Palace Museum presents a continuum of visits from visiting heads of state hosted at the palace between 1970 and 2001 from Mahendra to Birendra.<sup>270</sup> The Kaski Baithak continued to be used as the highly photographed location where Birendra accepted the credentials of all foreign diplomats newly appointed to Nepal (Goenka, 2001).

The Narayanhiti Palace was where Birendra held regular meetings with the Prime Minister, the heads of the security services, both government ministers and party leaders at (Mocko, 2012, p. 104-105) which in contrast to the carefully crafted image, described above, of the king as upholder of the democratic system, directly connected him to the administration of the state and reproduced established patterns of palace dominance.<sup>271</sup> Birendra maintained personal contact with the leaders of all branches of government, to the extent that his particular practices were criticised by some for being "semi-constitutional" (Hachhethu, 2004).

The king had controlled the army both constitutionally and institutionally since 1950. B.P. Koirala wrote about the traction gained by the king when the military secretariat was relocated within the grounds of the Narayanhiti Palace in 1951, as this gave a direct link that bypassed government channels (Koirala, 2001, pp. 39–42).<sup>272</sup> The location of military power in the

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<sup>269</sup> As evidenced by a consistent allocation of funds to the Narayanhiti Palace in the national budget, which was not substantially changed until 2006-2007.

<sup>270</sup> India, Denmark, China, Yugoslavia, Bangladesh, Japan, Sri Lanka, UK, Pakistan, Egypt, France, Austria, Zimbabwe, Finland (up to 1990).

<sup>271</sup> Chiran Thapa. Personal Communication, 1 August 2014.

<sup>272</sup> The political analyst Aditya Adhikari recalled the fact that contemporary political commentators referred to the defence ministry as "the post office", a description intended to imply that their sole role was in transmitting messages between the army headquarters

1990 constitution remained with the king as Supreme Commander in Chief (119(1)).<sup>273</sup> Article 118 in the 1990 constitution stated that the king could operate and mobilize the army on “the recommendation of the National Defence Council”, so although technically the army fell under the provision of the defence ministry, since the king controlled the National Defence Council in practice, he continued to control top-level appointments and promotions.<sup>274</sup> The military high command remained located within the grounds of the palace after 1990 and the interdependence of the king as protector of national security and the army the protector of the king is evidenced in the playing out of state rituals, such as sovereign affirming festival of Dasain:<sup>275</sup> Since Birendra acceded the throne in 1972,<sup>276</sup> on the tenth day of Dasain, *Vijaya Dashami (tika day)*, after obtaining *tika* from his own relatives at their residences in the south east of the Narayanhiti Palace compound, the king would offer *tika* to his own extended family in the private wing of the main palace building and then move to the Tanahun room in the guest wing to give *tika* to top government officials, including all the heads of the military (chief of the army, police), re-establishing his position as head of his family and head of state.<sup>277</sup>

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and the military secretariat who were located within the grounds of the Narayanhiti Palace (Aditya Adhikari, 2015, p. 56).

<sup>273</sup> The Royal Nepalese Army traced its ancestry back to the fighting force organized by Prithvinarayan Shah in the eighteenth century and had long been considered an extension of the palace with the guiding principle *Raj Bhakti Hamro Shakti* (loyalty to the king amounts to the power of the army) (Adhikari, 2015, p. 221).

<sup>274</sup> The council was constituted of three members, the prime minister, the minister of defence and the commander in chief of the army. The 1990 Constitution gave the king the power to appoint both the Commander in Chief of the army and the Prime Minister (Articles 119(2) and 36(1)). The defence portfolio was often held by the prime minister; therefore the king had ultimate authority for the appointment of both members of the council and responsibility for military deployment and strategy.

<sup>275</sup> The Hindu religion and its identification with the monarchy was a primary source of strength and motivation for the RNA with priests recruited in every military institution and Hindu gods and goddesses worshipped in every barrack (Adhikari, 2015, p. 270). Army officers were required to sacrifice an animal in the Kot in worship of their regimental colours.

<sup>276</sup> I am unable to confirm if this took place before the reign of Birendra.

<sup>277</sup> Army Day is another significant celebration that reaffirms relationship between monarchy and army took place in February each year on the occasion of *Maha Shiva Ratri* the king (in full military dress) attended a military revue on the Tundikhel where he reviewed the troops, presented colours to two battalions and observed a variety of displays of military hardware, technical expertise and entertainment before changing out of his military uniform and going onto Pashupatinath (Mocko, 2012, pp.186-187).

In addition to his political duties, the ceremonial and social roles of the king and the royal family were central to the functioning of the monarchy in the 1990s and these were co-ordinated by the Palace's Master of Ceremonies department.<sup>278</sup> The department occupied a whole building, near the west gate of the palace compound and its staff coordinated several thousand invitations per year for the king and his family to preside as the chief guest for functions ranging from the anniversaries of educational institutions to the inauguration of industrial facilities.<sup>279</sup> Although their official positions were curtailed after 1990, Queen Aishwarya was active in women's issues, Crown Prince Dipendra was head of the National Sports Council and chairman of the Nepal Olympic Committee, Princess Shruti was a patron of the arts and Prince Gyanendra was still chairman of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation. The depictions of the members of the royal family as they carried out these ceremonial roles in the national media portrayed them as working in the service of the nation (Lakier, 2009, p. 222). Birendra also participated in an annual calendar of religious rituals which continually re-performed the king's royalty and his position in relation to gods, his government and his people (Mocko, 2012, pp. 107–108). These rituals were both a formal political duty according to the 1990 constitution (Articles 4 1, 27 1) and a continuation of the practices of Shah kingship described in Chapter Two that reaffirmed the religious foundation of the Shah monarchy (Lakier, 2009, p. 223).<sup>280</sup> Birendra was usually in traditional Nepali attire *daura suruwal* and by allowing the mediation of his ritual participation through the media, he carefully presented himself as performing his political duty without explicitly claiming royal divinity (Dangol, 1999, pp. 110, 201). By 1993, the queues of people waiting outside the southern gates of Narayanhiti Palace to be given tika on the occasion of Vijaya Dashami began to grow after the sharp decline that followed the *jan*

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<sup>278</sup> One of the largest departments in the palace with its own dedicated building.

<sup>279</sup> Personal communication with ex-palace staff. July 2013. Chiran Thapa. Personal Communication, 1 August 2014.

<sup>280</sup> Other continuities existed between the democratic 1990s and the preceding Panchayat system (Brown, 1996, p. 190). Even after 1990, the monarchy continued to feature in educational curricula across the country in what Onta describes as the *bir* (brave) to *bikas* (development) narrative of Nepali 'national history' (*rashtriya itihās*), with Prithviraj Shah still presented as the creator of the nation and as 'the father of democracy' (1996a).

*andolan*.<sup>281</sup> Together, the ceremonial and social practices that centred on the king enabled the monarchy to endure during the 1990s. They represented an inner consensus on how the Nepali nation has been imagined and defined through the prism of Hindu kingship and through them, the palace inscribed power relations both through urban iconography and the practices of everyday life.

The leftist parties appealed to a growing disaffection throughout the 1990s as popular aspirations for stability, inclusion and economic development were consistently not met.<sup>282</sup> The United People's Front (*Samyukta Jan Morcha*), a front for the CPN (Unity Centre), became the third-largest party in parliament in the 1991 election. In 1994, the Unity Centre and the UPF split into two factions. The radical section led by Baburam Bhattarai was denied recognition by the Electoral Commission, in 1995 re-named itself the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), and in 1996 announced the launch of a 'People's War' on the basis that the government had failed to respond to a list of 40 demands submitted by the UPF, which included a call for a secular state and for monarchy to be stripped of all of its privileges (Hutt, 2004b, p. 5). The long-term plan of the Maoists was to slowly establish base areas in rural hill districts, from which all state institutions were banished and gradually replaced with parallel state structures such as 'people's governments' and 'people's courts', curtailing the reach of an already weak state (von Einsiedel et al., 2012b, p. 20). The government was unable to deploy the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA), which was controlled by the king, and used the poorly trained and inadequately equipped police force, resulting in a large loss of life.<sup>283</sup> By mid-2001, the Maoists had gained almost total control of five mid-western hill districts and their army was active across the country (Hutt, 2004, p. 6), they slowly encircled the larger

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<sup>281</sup> Pictures of the king and queen in public buildings were once again adorned with garlands and silk scarves (Brown, 1996, p. 191) and hung in private houses where they received daily offerings of lamp and incense along with deities (Toffin, 2008, p. 167).

<sup>282</sup> Adhikari writes about systematic abuse in Rolpa where the police force arrested representatives, harassed women, ransacked property and as a result both they and the Nepali Congress were widely despised there – for example the first road in the Rolpa district was built in 2003. (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, pp. 32–33)

<sup>283</sup> Nearly 2,000 people by mid-2001 (Hutt, 2004, p. 6)



towns and cities and violence increased (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015; D. Thapa, 2004, 2012).

It is at this point that the conflict escalated, prompted by the apparently unrelated massacre of Birendra and much of the royal family on 1 June 2001.<sup>284</sup> The official version of events states that Crown Prince Dipendra shot several members of his own family before turning the gun on himself at a regular family gathering in the grounds of Narayanhiti Palace. Dipendra remained in a coma for almost two days after the shootings and during this time was officially designated the eleventh Shah king of Nepal.<sup>285</sup>

Immediately after Dipendra's death, the king's younger brother, Gyanendra, was crowned king at the Hanuman Dhoka Palace. Whereas Birendra was reluctant to deploy the army against its own people, the new king, Gyanendra (1947-) declared a state of emergency and deployed the Royal Nepal Army in November 2001. The massacre exposed a conflict between the organization of Nepali national identity around a Hindu monarch and the democratic demands of public accountability. The frame of the palace broke with itself and finally exposed the central orchestration of royal authority.

### *The imagined space of the palace*

Following the succession of Gyanendra, the careful construction of the image and role of the monarchy described above was laid bare by the contrast between Birendra and his family who had acted as the public face of the monarchy, and their successors. The palace maintained a policy of silence and attempted to control and censor information about the massacre. The news broke first through international news channels creating a situation where inside the country (i.e. inside the king's domain) little information was available and many Nepalis heard the news from their

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<sup>284</sup> 4,500 people are reported to have died in 2002 alone (von Einsiedel et al., 2012b, p. 20).

<sup>285</sup> The Raj Parishad (royal advisory council) met on the morning of June 2nd to decide the succession as the throne could not be empty. They decided that since Crown Prince Dipendra was technically still alive, he should succeed his father, regardless of whether he might be responsible for his father's death and despite his severe brain damage.

relatives in the diaspora. By the morning of 2 June 2001, most Nepalis in the Kathmandu Valley at least knew that the king was dead, despite a complete news blackout orchestrated by the palace.<sup>286</sup> Government radio and television stopped broadcasting, Nepal Television switched from regular programming to a still image of the Shiva temple, Pashupatinath, and on 2 June broadcast details of the royal family's funerals. Private radio stations and newspapers also held back and just 2 out of 10 daily newspapers printed anything about the killings the next morning.<sup>287</sup> Lakier describes the crisis of representation posed by the exposure of royal authority in an age of publicity.

The murder of the king, no matter how shocking, was no longer supposed to be able to affect the democratic order. It was in this context that the clampdown on information by the palace appeared so mysterious – and, after the fact, significant. (Lakier, 2009, p. 211)

That the massacre took place inside the palace, placed the crime scene within one of the most secretive spaces in the country. The only official report followed a short investigation by the Chief Justice and the Speaker of the Nepali Parliament and was produced in a matter of days, involving no forensic analysis and relying chiefly on eye-witness accounts.<sup>288</sup> Its publication did not satisfy many who felt the royal family had the opportunity to cover up what had taken place and conspiracy theories continued to multiply.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> The palace ordered that satellite transmissions be blocked and called on the army to handle all arrangements. the enthronement of the new king they placed the entire capital under a shoot-on-sight curfew. In the afternoon, with the curfew still in effect, Crown Prince/King Dipendra's body was loaded into an army jeep, driven to Pashupatinath temple, and cremated.

<sup>287</sup> Though *Kantipur* did bring out a special edition that night, the articles it contained did not mention anything about the cause of death (Hutt, 2006, p. 368). The Press and Publications Act 1992 prohibited "causing hatred or disrespect or ignominy or inciting malice against His Majesty or Royal Family or causing harm to the dignity of his Royal Majesty."

<sup>288</sup> *Narayanhiti parva: vistrīṭ prativēdan* (The Narayanhiti Incident: Full Report), n.p., n.d. Available from 246224 Bagbazaar, Kathmandu. Reference from Hutt, 2006, p. 367).

<sup>289</sup> For example (Raj, 2001). For discussion of Nepali street literature after the massacre, see (Hutt, 2017b). Announcements about the intention to demolish the actual building, Tribhuvan Sadan emerged in July, apparently under the orders of the Queen Mother. For many this confirmed suspicion of a conspiracy as demolition would render any further investigation impossible.

In June 2001, in an article titled “Narayanhiti Hatyakanda: Sadyantra ki Sanak?” (Narayanhiti Massacre: Conspiracy or Idiosyncrasy?) Himal magazine published a three-dimensional projection drawing of the billiard room inside Tribhuvan Sadan (the building in the palace where the shootings took place) alongside an aerial drawing of the whole palace compound, taking the readers on a tour. The publication of these artists’ impressions allowed people to spatialise their imaginings of the previously inaccessible world of the palace for the first time.<sup>290</sup>

Writing after the massacre, Nepali author and playwright, Sanjeev Uprety explored the relationship between collective and personal madness through the space of the palace in a sophisticated reflection of political and urban reality. Published initially as a series of short stories in *Kantipur*, then in 2012 as the novel *Ghanchakkar* (The Puzzle), Uprety’s narrator, a Nepali professor of English, is drawn to the palace, as the invisible power centre of the country, in search of a solution to his personal instability that is inextricably linked to the turbulent politics of the time.<sup>291</sup> For Uprety, the palace was THE space within which to explore Nepali nationalism.<sup>292</sup> He melted reality and imagination in a fictional account that begins with scenes reminiscent of the 2006 *Jan Andolan* only on this occasion the gates of the palace are left unguarded.<sup>293</sup> He described his narrator passing by guards, who had been smoking marijuana and left the palace unprotected. On arriving at Tribhuvan Sadan (the bungalow in which the massacre took

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<sup>290</sup> Yogesh Raj emphasized to me the personal significance and variety of depictions because no one knew what the spaces were actually like. Personal communication, 3 July 2013. For example, the artists’ impression published in *Himal* 15-29 June 2001/ 1-15 Asar 2059, 30 and kindly shared with me by Anne Mocko. Inaccuracies in the drawing suggest it was pulled together from available sources, and was not drawn by someone who knows the site.

<sup>291</sup> Uprety told me that he met a German man who used to measure energy flows using divining rods and that he saw NPM at the centre of the dangerous and invisible energies of the city. Sanjeev Uprety. Personal Communication, 26 July 2015.

<sup>292</sup> His account reflects an understanding of the history of the palace and the monarchy, with references to historic events, religious symbolism. Sanjeev Uprety. Personal Communication, 26 July 2015.

<sup>293</sup> The gates of the palace lose the spirit of royal authority and though he later refers to climbing over them, they seemingly melt away.

place), the Professor peered through a window to find himself a spectator on the scene of the massacre.

No one was seen there in the room. Then I took a secret look around. I could see some light spreading. The pistols and guns of all sizes were scattered throughout the room. The blood marks could be seen fresh on the walls.

Suddenly I felt difficult to breathe, burning in my head, palms, and the soles of my feet and also felt sick. What and where am I seeing this? No. How have I come to see such a scene making me so dizzy?

Oh yes, I realised that I was seeing the inside room of the palace where a horrifying incident had taken place. Was it a murder organised in this room? Because of the guns and blood marks, it seemed that they were speaking the history of the past.

One could also feel that this room has included, not just one, but many other fearful historical recollections. Probably many old screams from the terror and conspiracy are echoing in this room. Perhaps the unsatisfied phantom (spirits) of the nation have been squirming somewhere around here. (Uprety, 2012)<sup>294</sup>

The Professor leaves the palace after he sees a reflection of himself in the image of descriptions of Dipendra on the night of the attack (Figure 22). He joins crowds outside the palace gate, where everyone is still desperately seeking their own meaning, and realises that he is no closer to the truth.<sup>295</sup> Uprety's use of magical realism was a subversive method of inhabiting this period of the recent past that both avoided censorship and the absolutism of the written word.<sup>296</sup> Uprety's narrative weaves its way through layers of memories associated with the space of the palace, and presents a scene that would have been familiar through the rumours circulating at his time of writing.<sup>297</sup> His writing explores a shift in meaning of the palace, from what he suggests was a divine space during the Panchayat and the period that

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<sup>294</sup> Translation of the original Nepali by Krishna Pradhan.

<sup>295</sup> People gathered outside the Narayanhiti Palace on the following day to mourn the dead and see what was happening.

<sup>296</sup> Abhi Subedi, personal communication, 12 November 2015. Subedi discussed Uprety's use of an existing modern tradition of the use of allegory to avoid censorship.

<sup>297</sup> Though the question of the royal authority over the palace is addressed obliquely, the emotional intensity of the narrator's experience can be interpreted as stemming from the rebellion implied in the penetration of the space of the palace. Sanjeev Uprety. Personal Communication, 26 July 2015.

followed, to a demonic space, represented by the blood stains on the walls.<sup>298</sup>

In Uprety's account, the world inside the palace is depicted as shadowy, dark, frightening and disorientating, "Run now from this tragedy to the open street out of the palace." He suggests that the palace, as a space of the nation, is haunted by the powerful presence of the past actions of the monarchy: "Perhaps the unsatisfied phantom (spirits) of the nation have been squirming somewhere around here." (Uprety, 2012) Uprety's imaginary foray behind the palace walls presented the palace as a haunted place belonging to another time. Abhi Subedi has suggested that "the spectre of the past can continue to work under a different guise if openness does not guide the decisions of the stakeholders." (Subedi, 2009b) As the closed space of the palace had revealed practices of royal authority that now seemed illegitimate, Uprety's writing can be understood as an attempt to lay bare the space of the palace and contain the past.<sup>299</sup>

Artists and authors, like Uprety,<sup>300</sup> turned to the space of the palace as a space to focus questions about the relationship between the past, present and future.<sup>301</sup> The active creation of a physical and psychical space, the doubling of the space of the palace, is important because they opened up the private space of the palace to the public sphere in defiance of the restrictions put in place by the monarchy.

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<sup>298</sup> Uprety blurred the role of author narrator when he played the character of the Professor in performances of the novel at the Gurukul Theatre – images of his own arrest during the jan andolan were projected across the stage during a scene of arrest in the play, in this way blurred fact and fiction / past and present.

<sup>299</sup> Hutt writes that according to the cover of the third edition of *Raktakund* (Pond of Blood) in 2009, 135,000 copies of the book were sold in 2007, which would make it the best-selling book in Nepal this century. Sales that indicate a popular demand for literature to help people make sense of turbulent times. (Hutt, 2017b, p. 50)

<sup>300</sup> Through the use of images (Ragini Upadhyay-Grela – Figure 23) and literary descriptions, such as those by Uprety.

<sup>301</sup> In his review of the street literature that emerged after the massacre, Hutt identifies at least six books that begin with the royal massacre. At least three of those have the palace in the title: *Agnijwalama Darbar* [The Palace in Flames of Fire] by Kesharaj Devkota (Feb 2007), *Darbar Hatyakandko Rahasya* [The Mystery of the Palace Massacre] by Arjun Gyawali (March 2009) and *Narayanhiti Darbar ra Deshbhaktako Avasan* [The Narayanhiti Palace and the End of a Patriot] by Rajkumar Pokharel (2011). (Hutt, 2017b, p. 52)

Following the death of Birendra, the Maoist leaders took the opportunity to recast the dead king as both aligned with the Maoists and representative of the patriotic people who would now suffer his loss. In contrast Gyanendra, the new king became the subject of vitriol.<sup>302</sup> Rather than railing against the feudalism of the monarchy, they adopted the memory of the dead king to the Maoist cause by suggesting Birendra had an undeclared working unity (*aghoshit karyagat ekta*) with the Maoists and claimed that they had similar views on national issues.<sup>303</sup> The presentation of Gyanendra as a “puppet of expansionism born into the palace” (Bhattarai, 2005), aimed to provide justification for the Maoists’ action against the censorship of the new king who was effectively de-linked from the institution of monarchy (Lakier, 2009, p. 214). The Maoists declared the monarchy extinct and began to appropriate the “glorious image of the Shah dynasty” (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 230) for themselves, thus the civil war evolved into a conflict directed against the king.<sup>304</sup>

### *The palace as the centre for direct rule*

Gyanendra addressed parliament during the first week of its new session on 30 June and from August 2001, he gradually also began to fulfil his ceremonial duties, participating in rituals across the capital in just the same way as Birendra would have done.<sup>305</sup> He did not however, assume all the duties and idioms of kingship all at once, and notably the Narayanhiti Royal

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<sup>302</sup> Lecomte-Tilouine (2004) described how the conflict escalated into a direct confrontation between the Maoists and the king and quotes slogans used by the party, such as “Down with the feudal-murderer Gyanendra clique’. The RNA is referred to as ‘the hired asses of Gyanendra that go by the name of royal army’, the Prime Minister is the ‘king’s vile lackey’, Gyanendra is the ‘self-proclaimed “king”’, the ‘butcher’, ‘murderer’, or ‘puppet’, the ‘five times naked king’.

<sup>303</sup> Baburam Bhattarai in his now infamous editorial “Naya kotparva lai manyata dinu hundaina”(We Should Not Recognize the New Kot Massacre) on June 6 in *Kantipur* (Bhattarai, 2005, pp. 17–25) and Pushpa Kamal Dahal (a.k.a. Prachanda) in a press release on 11 June 2001 (quoted in (D. Thapa, 2003).

<sup>304</sup> For example, “Traditional monarchy in Nepal ended with the Royal massacre” Prachanda Disabodh, July 2001 in (Raj, 2001, p. 104).

<sup>305</sup> He appeared at Krishna Janma-Ashtami (in August 2001), Indra Jatra (in September 2001) for example on 26 October 2001 he received the *phulpati*

Palace was used only for official business not as his residence, exemplified by the fact that in 2001 he did not give tika at the palace on the occasion of *Vijaya Dashami*.<sup>306</sup> On 4 July 2002, he and his wife Queen Komal (apparently accompanied by a contingent of 3-4,000 soldiers) moved not into *Sri Sadan*, the residence used by Birendra and his family, but into the east wing of the palace, an extension of the main palace building and began developing it by adding an additional storey (Gurubacharya, 2002).<sup>307</sup>

Like the Shah kings before him, Gyanendra turned to Hinduism to legitimise his position. He made two state visits to India in 2002, where he visited significant religious sites in an attempt to boost Nepal's Hindu identity, emphasising the country's distinctiveness and its association between the Hindu population (Hachhethu, 2007, p. 1829). Right wing Hindu groups lauded him as emperor of all the world's Hindus as a way to protect the world's only Hindu state and therefore the monarchy, of Nepal.<sup>308</sup> Within Nepal, Gyanendra used the Dasain festival to reaffirm his position because of both its importance to the Hindu state (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 148) and the Shah dynasty. During Birendra's reign there was an established tradition of visiting Kathmandu's nine most prominent goddess temples on the eighth day of Dasain. At his first Dasain, Gyanendra visited every temple in the country that had a link to the Shah dynasty (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 234). He also announced his son Paras, Crown Prince on Dasain in 2001, recognising the festival's role in legitimising the Shah dynasty (Mocko, 2012, p. 423). In an interview with *Time* magazine he stated that the monarchy was bound to the people as "the preserver of all things, a role that has been spelt out for a king in Hindu mythology as the personification of God Vishnu" ("The Future Lies in Democracy," 2004).<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> See Gorkhapatra 20 October 2001

<sup>307</sup> The tradition was for a new residence to be built for the eldest son of the monarch, as he became Crown Prince, hence Tribhuvan Sadan for Tribhuvan, Mahendra Manjil for Mahendra with his second wife Ratna, and Sri Sadan for Birendra. Gyanendra had no such residence in the palace grounds.

<sup>308</sup> In February 2003, the Seventh World Hindu Conference at Gorakhpur.

<sup>309</sup> See also Bell (2014, pp. 174–175) who quotes from one of the priests at the Gorkha Palace who confirmed Gyanendra's regular practice of visiting the palace to receive blessings for his actions.

Gyanendra adopted a more visibly active political stance than his brother had, and rumours circulated about the king's ambitions to go beyond his constitutional role (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, p. 64; Jha, 2014, p. 52).<sup>310</sup> The published diaries of the chief military secretary at the palace, Vivek Kumar Shah suggest that Gyanendra used the secrecy that surrounded the palace to obscure his influence over elected political leaders, including the Prime Minister.<sup>311</sup>

On 26 November 2001 a majority parliament, led by the Nepali Congress, deployed the Royal Nepal Army in response to a series of increasingly audacious attacks by the Maoists<sup>312</sup> and declared a state of emergency for three months (dissolving the House of Representatives).<sup>313</sup> On the same day King Gyanendra promulgated the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance officially branding the Maoists as terrorists (Hutt, 2006, p. 375).<sup>314</sup> On 4 October 2002, citing Article 127 of the 1990 constitution, the king seized executive power, dissolved the council of ministers and replaced the Prime Minister.<sup>315</sup> The next three years saw three different

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<sup>310</sup> Comparisons were made between the two brothers at all levels, their temperament, their education, etc.

<sup>311</sup> "An elephant shows its tusks but hides its chewing teeth,' ... referring to a well-known Nepali proverb. 'Likewise, the palace must project itself as a highly democratic institution while secretly carrying out its strategy.' (Adhikari quoting the published diaries of Military Secretary Bibek Shah (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, pp. 64–65). In contrast Adhikari's quotation from Shah's diary on 2 July 2000 suggests Birendra was reluctant to take on an overtly political role.

<sup>312</sup> Notably on 23 November a direct attack on the Royal Nepal Army at the military position in Ghorahi, Dang and on 25 November an attack on Salleri, the headquarters of Solukhumbu district. In total 55 people were killed in these attacks including both civilians, soldiers and policemen (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, p. 65).

<sup>313</sup> The dissolution of the House of Representatives was controversial and three members of the Cabinet resigned in protest. The Koirala faction of the Nepali Congress challenged the move in the Supreme Court but the dissolution was upheld. The decision ruled that the ultimate decision rested with the king, who's decisions were beyond the jurisdiction of the court. ("House dissolution case: King's role in House dissolution beyond the court's power," 2002)

<sup>314</sup> These events took place very soon after the September 11 attacks in the USA. By labelling the Maoists as 'terrorists', the Nepal government was able to access money, military support and training and tacit international consent to suppress the 'terrorists' with little regard for legal rights.

<sup>315</sup> Replaced with Lokendra Bahadur Chand (a Panchayat-era politician - three-time prime minister from the ex-parliament's only conservative and overtly palace-leaning party (the RPP).



government administrations, each appointed and sacked by Gyanendra with no parliamentary or civic participation in the political process.<sup>316</sup> Progressively more government business was conducted by executive order, either from the king or the prime minister (who was accountable to the king). This period of unconstitutional rule (Malagodi, 2013, p. 188)<sup>317</sup> came to a climax on 1 February 2005, when Gyanendra once again dismissed the government, and citing articles 27 and 127 of the constitution, replaced the prime minister with a council of handpicked ministers chaired by himself.<sup>318</sup> Gyanendra instituted a new aggressive military campaign against the Maoists and was able to use the backing of the military to become increasingly assertive.<sup>319</sup> The freedom of speech and right to information were also severely curtailed (Hutt, 2006, p. 378).<sup>320</sup> On 1 February 2005, the leaders of all the mainstream political parties were placed under house arrest and hundreds of others were detained at home or in army or police camps (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, p. 172). Further institutional changes harked back to the Panchayat system: The positions of commissioners to Nepal's fourteen zones were reinstated and they reported directly to the palace; committees were formed to monitor the activities of the political parties and the bureaucracy; civil service unions that had flourished since the 1990s and were owned by the parliamentary parties were banned. The symbiotic relationship between the Shah monarchy and the Narayanhiti Palace, saw the palace become a symbol of the king's role in setting and maintaining the (counter-terrorist) actions of the Nepali state;

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<sup>316</sup> Lokendra Bahadur Chand 11 October 2002 to 30 May 2003, Surya Bahadur Thapa from 4 June 2003 to May/ June 2004, Sher Bahadur Deuba from May/June 2004 to 1 February 2005.

<sup>317</sup> Malagodi argued that instead of being used to restrain governors from protecting the governed, judicial order was used to protect governors from the governed and preserve the state by legal means.

<sup>318</sup> The king instigated a communications blackout at the time of this announcement that lasted for a week (Bell, 2014, p. 171).

<sup>319</sup> The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance granted blanket immunity to the security forces, even for grave human rights violations, national defence spending increased from NRs3.8 billion in 2000 to 8 billion by 2004 (supported by equipment and advice sent from the US) and army recruitment increased exponentially (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, pp. 68–69).

<sup>320</sup> The Federation of Nepalese Journalists, an umbrella organization of all working journalists of the country, described the one year of direct rule of the king as a black period for Nepali media, with 176 people arrested or abducted during 9 month period (Hutt, 2006, p. 378).

and the institutional reforms and repressive measures that rode straight through the 1990 Constitution and reinstated absolute monarchy.

Despite a propaganda campaign reminiscent of the Panchayat period, the extent to which the king was exercising de facto executive power throughout this period became clearer to many across the country as time went on. Ultimately virtually all of the country's non-royal political factions, individuals, and institutions were realigned against the monarchy. For example, there was a muted response from the press when the palace budget was increased by 233 percent in July 2002 (Hutt, 2006, p. 380),<sup>321</sup> but by 2004 all the mainstream political parties staged what were almost continuous demonstrations against each of the appointed governments in Kathmandu and these included the use of anti-monarchy slogans, with the palace a regular focus of resistance (Jha, 2014, p. 53; D. Thapa & Sijapati, 2003, p. 174).<sup>322</sup> Enconced in his palace, the king was increasingly isolated from political reality outside of Kathmandu (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, p. 176). The leaders of the now divided Nepali Congress, and the CPN-UML joined with four smaller parties to form the Seven Party Alliance that aimed to end the king's direct rule, reinstate the dissolved house and open negotiations with the Maoists.<sup>323</sup>

As well as being extremely unpopular within Nepal, the king's actions were condemned internationally, and the withdrawal of military aid and diplomats by major donor countries weakened the royal government.<sup>324</sup> This pressure

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<sup>321</sup> At the end of November 2002 Gyanendra reactivated a 1974 ordinance that permitted the palace to set its own budget, reversing changes made in 1990. ("Palace, not the ministry, to decide on royal expenditures," 2002)

<sup>322</sup> See, for example ("Don't Chant Slogans Against the King," 2004)

<sup>323</sup> The actions of the king were also challenged by a Supreme Court ruling that argued that Article 127 of the 1990 Constitution could only be used to address constitutional difficulties and not to create new bodies of governance. Sanjeeb Parajuli on behalf Rajiv Parajuli v Royal Commission on Corruption Control and Others Writ No. 118 of 2062 (decision 2062/11/1) in Khatiwada, Apurba "Judicial Reviews of Laws inconsistent with the Constitution". [http://www.ncf.org.np/upload/files/580\\_en\\_SSRN-id893803.pdf](http://www.ncf.org.np/upload/files/580_en_SSRN-id893803.pdf) accessed 07 June 2015.

<sup>324</sup> British military aid was withdrawn on the second day of the coup (Bell, 2014, p. 172), India and America also withdrew their military aid and the UK, USA, EU and India recalled their diplomats (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, p. 250).

led the king to lift the state of emergency on 29 April 2005 and he was forced to allow the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to establish a mission in Nepal. At the end of November 2005, the highest representatives of the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) and the Maoists met in Delhi, India. With the support of Indian political leaders, they negotiated a 12-Point Memorandum of Understanding, which outlined a joint course of action to overthrow the king's regime. The agreement stated that "the autocratic monarchy [was] the main obstacle" to "peace, democracy, prosperity, social progress, and independent and sovereign Nepal." (Roy, 2008) and that in order to achieve equality a 'radical restructuring of the state' was required. Together the SPA-Maoist alliance boycotted local government elections in February 2006 and committed themselves to a people's movement (*Jan Andolan II*) to push for change (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, p. 180).<sup>325</sup> The second *Jan Andolan* began on 6 April 2006 and lasted for three weeks. Protests intensified in urban areas across the country over several days and the strike was supported by public-sector employees (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, p. 199).<sup>326</sup> The palace was again a focus for protests in Kathmandu and the city's Ring Road became a frontier where protestors gathered following the enactment of a day-time curfew (Bell, 2014, p. 308).<sup>327</sup> On 24 April 2006, Gyanendra reinstated the House of Representatives, thereby restoring executive power to the people. The SPA immediately called off the *Jan Andolan* and the Maoists accepted the terms on offer.

## **Stage Six | the suspended monarchy (2006-2008)** <sup>328</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> The campaign was successful, half of the 4,146 positions had no candidates and voter turn-out was at an all-time low of 20% and many of those who did vote worked for the civil service or one of the security services, jobs that depended directly on the king (Adhikari, 2014, p.185).

<sup>326</sup> Adhikari cites Bishnu Nishturi's diary that records employees at government ministries inside the Singha Darbar compound who organized gatherings and chanted slogans against 'autocracy'

<sup>327</sup> The government declared Durbar Marg a prohibited zone for all forms of rallies and demonstrations.

<sup>328</sup> This subheading title borrows from Anne Mocko (2012) whose account of this period shows this to have been a 2-year long process of negotiation between the mainstream political parties, the palace and the Maoists. She argues it can be understood in distinct

*De-centring the role of the palace (2006)*

The widespread jubilation that followed the capitulation of King Gyanendra to the demands of the second *jan andolan* promised a “New Nepal” (Bell, 2014, p. 316), however, there was no agreement about what this “New Nepal” would look like or what steps would need to be taken to bring it into existence. Mocko reveals the unsettled relationship between the government and the king during 2006 through examination of the installation process of the new prime minister and cabinet in April 2006, the issue of the state budget in July 2006 and the process of investigation undergone by the Commission established to examine the king’s period of direct rule. The first indicates a de-centring of the palace as the centre of control: after being sworn on 30 April 2006 in by the king at the Narayanhiti Palace, three months later, the prime minister retook his oath with the rest of the cabinet at Singha Darbar.<sup>329</sup> This made clear that the king did not have overall sovereignty (Mocko, 2012, p. 163). The second, a two-thirds reduction of the palace budget announced under part 167 on 12 July 2006, dominated media coverage of the national budget announcement.<sup>330</sup> The cuts were in line with the prevailing view that the monarchy, particularly since 2002, had misused funds at the expense of the people and the country; they included significant cuts to the maintenance budget for the Narayanhiti palace buildings.<sup>331</sup> The third, argues Mocko, suggests a lack of recognition by the palace of the changed status of the monarchy throughout this interim period as the king refused to respond to questions presented to

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stages, 2006 when the king’s political power was removed, 2007 when the social status of the king was eroded and 2008 when the king was removed from office.

<sup>329</sup> Though in not taking the additional oath to join the Raj Parishad, this severed an institutional link between the monarchy and the premiership (Mocko, 2012, pp. 158–159).

<sup>330</sup> For example, *Nepali Times* 12 July 2006. The cuts amounted to 70.7 per cent of the total expenditure and lower by 45.8 per cent of the initial allocation.

<sup>331</sup> The new Finance Ministry and the Home Ministry audited the king’s direct government, and published a list of allegations detailing blatant misuses of funds. Mocko’s interview with the then Finance Minister, Ram Sharan Mahat reveals that the royal family’s discretionary fund was cut, preventing their use of state funds for ceremonial purposes, royal gifts and charitable donations. Members of the royal family continued to receive their living stipend, though now subject to income tax. Thus, they were reconfigured as employees of the state. (Mocko, 2012, pp. 177–178).

him by the Raimajhi Commission panel, sworn in at the Supreme Court to investigate the actions of the King's executive government and its handling of the *jan andolan* movement (Mocko, 2012, pp. 178–180).<sup>332</sup>

On 28 April 2006, the House of Representatives was recalled for the first time for four years, signaling the end of the *jan andolan*.<sup>333</sup> Representatives of the House decided to disrupt and replace the ceremonial practices of inauguration, which dated from 1990. They replaced the opening ritual of installing the royal mace in the House chamber with a two minutes' silence in honour of those who had died during the *jan andolan*. They also chose not to wear their old badges of parliamentary membership because they featured the royal crown as their central emblem ("Nepal Prime Minister to name New Cabinet," 2006). These were more than symbolic gestures: they made it clear that the king was no longer the head of government.

The reconvened House issued a proclamation that endeavoured to alter the 1990 Constitution:<sup>334</sup> Whereas in all past constitutions sovereignty rested with and was safeguarded by the king, the preamble to the Proclamation stated that "Nepal's sovereignty and state power rests on the Nepali people..." and point eight declared Nepal a secular state. Whilst this was not a legal amendment to the 1990 Constitution, it sought to radically transform the position of the king within Nepal's political system (Malagodi, 2013, p. 193).<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> The Commission's report (which was not published) named Gyanendra as responsible for corruption and killings during the period 2002-2006, but as Head of State, his legal status was found to be unclear and no action was recorded against him, though a recommendation was made for his legal status to be altered so that he could ultimately be both charged and tried

<sup>333</sup> The Nepali Congress held a majority, the UML held the second largest number of seats, followed by the other five parties in the SPA. The Maoists held no seats and therefore no position in the Cabinet. Of those who had served in the king's direct administration, two were barred, the staffing of the ministry bureaucracy was quietly changed and several of the ambassadors who had been appointed during Gyanendra's direct rule were recalled.

<sup>334</sup> The parliamentary leaders kept the Maoists informed, but not actively involved in drafting the legislation (Mocko, 2012, p. 167). As it rested authority with the House, Mocko argues it legitimized and elevated the seven parliamentary parties, over not just the monarchy, but also over the Maoists (Mocko, 2012, p.171).

<sup>335</sup> The Proclamation (on 18 May 2006) explicitly presented itself as implementing the goals and wishes of the people generally: it began "In respect of the sacrifices and participation made by the Nepalese people in the peaceful joint people's movement."

As the fact that the House of Representatives (HoR) established on the support of the people's movement is sovereign and fully authorized has been realized in the king's declarations on April 24, 2006 that the Nepali people are the source of state power and Nepal's sovereignty and state power rests on the Nepali people and the people's aspirations exhibited in the present peoples' movement and on the basis of the road map of the seven political parties for resolving the violent conflict continuing in the country,

Makes the following declaration through this House of Representatives that this House of Representatives is sovereign for the exercise of all the rights until another constitutional arrangement is made to take the responsibility to gear ahead in the direction of full-fledged democracy and make an end to the autocratic monarchy by institutionalizing the achievements of the present peoples' movement, while safeguarding the achievements of the 1990 people's movement.<sup>336</sup>

The government and the army were re-named to eliminate the king's ownership of each (2.1/ 3.1), and all executive, legislative, and military authority was transferred to the House of Representatives, the Cabinet of Ministers or the Prime Minister. Other modifications substantially constrained the rights and privileges of the king and palace and curtailed the legitimacy of the monarchy (5.1-5.6). The Raj Parishad (the king's advisory council) was abolished (4), the royal family's tax-exempt status was rescinded (5.3), the staff of the palace, which had always operated as an independent administration, were transferred into the purview of the government's civil service (5.5), and palace security was placed under the jurisdiction of the Cabinet (5.6). The proclamation granted the House of Representatives the right to unilaterally change the laws of succession (5.1), and gave the House of Representatives or the courts the unprecedented right to formally question the king's actions (5.4). It also included a call for the commissioning of a new national anthem (Hutt, 2012). Throughout 2006, the palace was progressively displaced from the centre of power, but its place was not yet taken by anything else. These modifications served until 15 January 2007 when an interim constitution was promulgated and effectively removed the king from the running of the state.

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<sup>336</sup> Full text of the House proclamation can be found here: <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/forwarded-news/FS-011-2006> (accessed 22 August 2018).

A ceasefire agreement signed on 16 June 2006 was followed by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on 21 November 2006, which officially brought an end to the insurgency. The 8-point ceasefire agreement stated the parties' joint intentions to integrate the Maoists into the structures of government and write an interim constitution, and included provisions for the UN to monitor the behaviour of both armies and of arms use. The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement by the Prime Minister and the Maoist Chairman Prachanda signalled a change in the political position of the Maoists, who after years of operating underground now "began to operate in state politics as leaders of the most vocal, but nevertheless newly mainstream, opposition [to the monarchy]." (Mocko, 2012, p. 175)

*Appropriating the space of the palace (2007)*

The Interim Constitution was promulgated by the House of Representatives on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2007 and placed sovereignty in the hands of the people. The Preamble began "We the people of Nepal, in exercise of the sovereign powers and state authority inherent in us ... promulgate this Interim Constitution of Nepal 2063 (2007)", and defined the state of Nepal as "an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive" (Article 4). It had striking continuities with the institutionalised Nepali national identity dependent on the co-ordinates of Hinduism, the Shah monarchy and the Nepali language (Malagodi, 2013, pp. 272-73). For example, it used the same formulation of the Right to Religion (Article 23) as in the 1990 Constitution, and although it defined Nepal's national languages as "all the languages spoken as the mother tongues in Nepal." [*rāshtra bhāshā*], Nepali in the Devanagari script remained the country's official language (Preamble, clause 5).<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> The full text of the Nepali and English translation of the Interim Constitution can be found here: [http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/rarebooks/downloads/Nepal\\_Interim\\_Constitution\\_2007\\_first\\_to\\_sixth\\_amendments.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/rarebooks/downloads/Nepal_Interim_Constitution_2007_first_to_sixth_amendments.pdf) (accessed 22 August 2018)

This new Constitution nationalized the palace (article 159.3-5), reconstituted the premiership, and left the future of the monarchy open to an elected Constituent Assembly (159.3. ).<sup>338</sup> Article 159.1 states “No power regarding the governance of the country shall be vested in the king.” Article 159.2 invested all the governmental functions in the prime minister: “The Prime Minister shall perform all works pertaining to the governance and operation of the country.” Although the prime minister was not declared head of state, he was designated various kingly practices such as the appointment of ambassadors and the granting of state awards to the Constitutional Council, of which the prime minister was chairman (Article 149) and could no longer be removed from office through a vote of no confidence (Article 38.7). This led to the contemporary interpretation by parliamentary politicians that the prime minister was both the head of government and the head of state (Mocko, 2012, p. 182).

The interim constitution replaced the House of Representatives with a Legislature Parliament that included all 209 members of the House, 73 Maoist parliamentarians and 43 miscellaneous parliamentarians, who in practice were divided up among the existing parties. The Cabinet was reshuffled to reflect the new Parliament and with three portfolios the Maoists became an official part of the governance of the country. The difference of views (and levels of parliamentary experience) between the Maoists and the mainstream parliamentary parties led to a fragile and antagonistic relationship. After two postponements, elections to the Constituent Assembly were finally held on 10 April 2008 and resulted in a landslide victory for the Maoist party who won 38% of the total seats (Slavu, 2012, p. 250). These elections determined the fate of the monarchy as the Constituent Assembly abolished the monarch in its first session.

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<sup>338</sup> Articles 159.3-5 state that the property belonging to the king and the royal family, including their palaces, would all be nationalized and brought under government control. The registration of the land to HM, Royal Palace (1984 09 30) at the Department of Land Reform and Management was changed to be under the government on 26 August 2007 (2064-05-09 BS). Plot 406, cell 938, ward 1 – KTM Nagar Panchayat.



The Interim Government attempted to “dismantle, block, or appropriate” the king’s ritual practices “that mark him off as a special social being” (Mocko, 2012, p. 186), and to re-appropriate these practices for the new (secular) state. This was a gradual process of replacing the king, and Mocko describes an initial ambivalence by the interim cabinet about how to handle royal responsibilities as well as an increasing boldness to replace the king as the year went on. At first the king was allowed to perform his usual routine ritual duties,<sup>339</sup> then in the absence of an elected President, the prime minister was gradually inserted into rituals in place of the king.<sup>340</sup> On Army Day (celebrated on *Maha Shiva Ratri*), for example, the king would usually make two public appearances, one as the military head of the nation and one as the ‘devotee-in-chief’ of Shiva. In February 2007 the prime minister attended the military revue at the Tundhikhel, but the king travelled to the Pashupatinath temple to worship (2012, p. 189).<sup>341</sup>

The relationship between the state, the monarchy and religion during this period is brought into focus by a public interest litigation case concerning the temple of Pashupatinath. In December 2008, Prachanda, who was now Prime Minister and also chairman of the Pashupati Area Development Trust, appointed two Nepali priests to the site (breaking the longstanding tradition at Pashupati of employing only South Indian priests). Two Nepali lawyers lodged a petition against these priests with the argument that the government had failed to comply with secularism; the court ruled that state and religion should be separate. In replacing the royal family on the PADT, Prachanda intended to sever the symbolic connection between monarchy and religion. The courts therefore affirmed the primacy of human rights over

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<sup>339</sup> At the ritual celebrations of Bhoto Jatra in June 2006 he attended in front of thousands of people accompanied by the relatively junior Minister of Education and Sports ((Mocko, 2012, p. 298).

<sup>340</sup> The Prime Minister held these roles for one year, after which he was replaced by the President from July 2008 (Mocko, 2012).

<sup>341</sup> Whereas previously the temple would be closed to the public for several hours whilst the king performed his puja, the intention in 2007 was that the temple would remain open. The priests closed the temple for the king’s visit and the incident was reported as evidence that the people were tired of the king.

religious traditions and the protection of religion from state interference (Letizia, 2015).

## **Stage Seven | the abolished monarchy (2008-2009)**

### *Transforming palace to museum*

In May 2008, King Gyanendra was still the monarch and continued to officially reside in the Narayanhiti Palace. The Constituent Assembly met for the first time on 28 May 2008, and passed a near unanimous motion (560 to 4) to abolish the monarchy and declare Nepal a federal republic.<sup>342</sup> The king was granted two weeks (15 days) to leave the Narayanhiti Palace and its new role as a palace museum was announced.<sup>343</sup> The next day, palace officials removed the royal flag that flew in front of the palace and the royal insignia from the gate (“Clashes on Durbar Marg mar republic celebrations,” 2008).

The second motion tabled at the first meeting of the new Constituent Assembly was the creation of a Presidency. In July 2008 Dr Ram Baran Yadav, a member of the Nepali Congress Party, was elected to this position as ceremonial head of state. As President, Yadav upheld many of the practices that defined the monarchy and replaced the king in national life (though he was not head of the military) and took over the prime minister’s role in religious rituals within days of taking up office. This split between the executive functions of government, performed by the Prime Minister, and the ceremonial functions of government, performed by the president, was designed to reduce concern about an all-powerful premier.

Taking over the property of the Narayanhiti Palace was extremely contentious because no one outside the palace had any real understanding

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<sup>342</sup> The four votes against the proposal all came from the only remaining pro-monarchy party, the RPP–N.

<sup>343</sup> Seemingly his ancestral home at Gorkha was also turned into a museum in 2008 (original article reads ‘Grouch’ – here assumed Gorkha) (Gurubacharya, 2008a).

of the extent of the property and valuables (financial and cultural) of the royal family.<sup>344</sup> Access to the palace had been so restricted that many members of palace staff only entered the buildings occupied by the royal family for the first time after they had left the premises on 6 June 2008.<sup>345</sup> Newspaper reports regularly cast aspersions over the king's level of cooperation with this process, speculating on the contents of the palace and in particular, what property the king might have attempted to remove from it, often supposedly in the dead of night.<sup>346</sup> Mocko describes this as in part a response to Gyanendra's unpopularity, and in part a result of confusion about "what property belonged to the political position 'king' and what property belonged to the private individual/lineage (since, prior to this moment, the king had not been a private individual). Narayanhiti Palace itself had been both the center of the state and the Shah family's private residence; as the monarchy was dissolved, to what extent should Narayanhiti be considered a government property, a political institution, or a home?" (Mocko, 2012, p. 215).<sup>347</sup> The Constituent Assembly tasked the government with ensuring the safety of all property inside the palace ("King to receive official letter to vacate Narayanhiti by Friday," 2008). A Property Evaluation Committee led by Dr Govinda Kusum was formed to create an inventory ("Gyanendra gets eviction letter: Officials inspect palace," 2008), a process that began in earnest after Gyanendra left the palace and lasted for a period of two or three months.

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<sup>344</sup> The Nepal Trust was formed in 2007 to locate and nationalize the properties either held the name of "His Majesty the King" or which had privately belonged to late king, Birendra. Its office is directly opposite the Southern entrance to the Narayanhiti Palace and new discoveries were reported in the Nepali press throughout my period of fieldwork. <http://nepaltrust.gov.np/content/about-us.html>

<sup>345</sup> Different coloured passes required to access different areas: red gave access to the main palace building and Sri Sadhan; Yellow gave general access to the palace compound; blue gave access to the Queen Mother's residence. Access to the palace had been so tightly controlled, that even members of palace staff who had worked in the main building, had only seen the state rooms and service areas. Many staff members saw the whole building for the first time, after the building was handed over to the government.

<sup>346</sup> For example, it was said that un-named members of the royal family tried to remove a Daimler Benz car given to Tribhuvan by Adolf Hitler ("Bid to take away Hitler's gift foiled at Nepal Narayanhiti Palace," 2008) and that there is an important archive ("Narayanhiti, oh-so-pretty!," 2008).

<sup>347</sup> Rumours began to fly that trucks were being secretly loaded at night to remove goods to Gyanendra's private residence *Nirmal Niwas* (Gurubacharya, 2008a).

The final negotiations between the Home Minister, Krishna Prasad Sitaula, on behalf of the government, and Gyanendra, ended with Gyanendra acceding to the demands for him to step down from office.<sup>348</sup> He was granted permission for his step-mother and his grandmother to live out their lives in separate properties within the Narayanhiti Palace grounds,<sup>349</sup> and to reside himself in the summer palace in the Nagarjun Forest Reserve. He was also offered a security detail.<sup>350</sup> It is clear that the king did take a considerable amount of furniture and possessions with him,<sup>351</sup> items he regarded as personal possessions. Some items he clearly accepted as belonging to the state, including the Asprey furniture, and gifts and photographs from other heads of state that had appeared for decades in official photographs. Notably, all items listed in the leaflet published on the occasion of the opening of the palace in 1993 are still there.

In the two weeks following the announcement of the Federal Republic, and before Gyanendra and his wife Komal Rajya Lakshmi Devi Shah left the palace, certain members of staff who were close to the royal household (for example, personal assistants to individual members of the royal family, chefs or key secretaries) were given the option of remaining in their employ.<sup>352</sup> Those who did transferred with them, first to Nagarjun, then to Nirmal Niwas (their downtown residence in Kathmandu), but some staff chose to remain at the palace, either as a way of seeing out their period of

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<sup>348</sup> It is possible that the meeting that took place at the Narayanhiti Palace on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2008 was in response to reports of palace staff hindering the work of the Property Evaluation Committee. The Committee, alongside that responsible for palace security was granted an office within the palace grounds from which to continue its work. ("Gyanendra likely to quit with public notice," 2008)

<sup>349</sup> Sarala Gorkhali – many people knew that Tribhuvan had kept a number of wives, but it was not widely known that the then 94-year-old was still alive, and resided within the grounds of the palace (Gurubacharya, 2008b).

<sup>350</sup> The government arranged the meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2008, attended also by Chief Secretary, Bhoj Raj Ghimire, Secretary at the Home Ministry, Umesh Mainali, Defence Secretary Baman Prasad Mainali, General Administration Secretary Dr Govinda Kusum, and the chief of the government panel set up to make security arrangements for the palace and joint-secretary at the Home Ministry Mod Raj Dotel.

<sup>351</sup> Ketaki Chester referred in conversation to the fact that Gyanendra's residence *Nirmal Niwas* is stuffed with furniture, for example, a crystal seat (Personal Communication, 2014).

<sup>352</sup> Personal communication with ex-palace staff.

pensionable service or, for some younger employees, as a way of maintaining what was perceived to be a more secure future.<sup>353</sup> Many more staff were not given this choice, and all those remaining in the employment of the palace when Gyanendra stepped down from office were transferred into a special section of a Ministry of General Administration within the Nepali Civil Service.<sup>354</sup> This action demarcated the ex-palace employees from all the ex-royal sites into one group, ostensibly as a temporary measure, until the Civil Service restructuring began.<sup>355</sup>

On 11 June 2008, the day he left office, Gyanendra gave his first ever press conference in the palace's main reception hall (*Kaski Baithak*). A chair was moved from an upstairs room for this purpose. Those who saw the press conference or were a part of it recall a contrast between the dignified behavior of the now former monarch reading his pre-prepared statement, and that of journalists who attempted to sit in his chair before he arrived, climbed all over the furniture after he left, and snatched souvenirs before leaving. Having marked the end of the institution of monarchy in Nepal, just before 9pm that evening, Gyanendra and his wife Komal drove out of the palace gates as ordinary citizens, in a black Mercedes car followed by a police and army escort. One member of the crowd of several hundred who had gathered was quoted saying "Tomorrow it will be a brand new beginning for Nepal." (Gurubacharya, 2008b)<sup>357</sup>

Whilst the transition itself was relatively smooth, the symbolic significance transferring the Narayanhiti Palace, the space at the centre of the institution

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<sup>353</sup> Some moved to join the ex-royal household at this point.

<sup>354</sup> The House of Representatives Proclamation of 18 May 2006, 5.5 Existing Royal Palace Service shall be made part of the Civil Service.

<sup>355</sup> This echoed the reserve pool created by Gyanendra in 2005 in order to allow Civil Service Officials to be shunted aside. (Mocko, 2012, p. 144)

<sup>356</sup> Behaviour of journalists is pointed out by the staff of the palace to visitors to the museum and Thomas Bell recalled the experiences of his wife, who was present at the Press Conference (Personal Communication, July 2014).

<sup>357</sup> Mocko argues that this transition was smooth because the institution of the monarchy had been systematically dismantled throughout the previous 2 years, preventing Gyanendra from reproducing his royalty and meaning that "he had already ceased to be a king in anything but residence". (2012, p..3).

of monarchy, into public ownership, was widely understood. On 29 May, incensed that the government had not yet hoisted the national flag at the palace, a crowd chanting anti-monarchy slogans marched to the Narayanhiti Palace to hoist the national flag, mark the end of the Shah monarchy, and complete the transfer of what had become the ultimate symbol of office, to the people. In scenes reminiscent of April 1990, police fired tear gas and used batons to push back the crowd and bring the situation under control.<sup>358</sup> They removed the national flag that had been hoisted on the main gate of the palace and prevented demonstrators from covering the statue of Mahendra on Durbar Marg with a further national flag. The contested space of the palace was marked by a governmental prohibition placed on Durbar Marg as a space for protest rallies and demonstrations.

After Gyanendra stood down, emphasis was placed first on the crown and sceptre, the symbols of office, and the Nepali print media covered the story of the authenticity of the crown being verified by an expert (*The Kathmandu Post* 2008b). The Property and Evaluation Committee promptly consigned the crown and sceptre to a room in the main palace building, where they remain guarded by museum staff during the day and by a serving army soldier at night.<sup>359</sup> The national flag was officially hoisted in front of the Narayanhiti Palace on 15 June 2008 by the Acting Head of State, Girija Prasad Koirala (1925-2010), in a formal ceremony that marked the opening of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, attended by politicians from all parties, and a select group of dignitaries, many of whom were present inside the palace compound for the first time.<sup>360</sup> This ceremony, reminiscent of royal events of the past, marked both the symbolic transfer of the palace to the people of Nepal and an attempt by the state to provide a focus for national

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<sup>358</sup> Contemporary newspaper reports suggest around a dozen people were injured.

<sup>359</sup> One Director of the Palace Museum explained that whilst four army regiments remained in the north of the Narayanhiti compound, it was at this time that the army moved out the special unit of military police, who had provided royal security since 1951. They continued to provide security within the palace compound, but the visible security presence at the main gate to the palace was handed to the police. I have seen a picture of the case in which the crown is said to be stored.

<sup>360</sup> See: ("PM Koirala hoists national flag at Narayanhiti Palace," 2008).

unity. Koirala raised the national flag, to the sound of a Nepal Army band playing the recently adopted new national anthem.<sup>361</sup>

After a period of nine months, the Narayanhiti Palace opened to the public as a museum on 26 February 2009, and this period of transition forms the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>361</sup> Flag had been raised earlier in response to public protest. See: ("Finally national flag flies at Narayanhiti," 2008).

## Chapter Five | Transforming the Palace [*Darbar*] into a Museum [*Sangrahalaya*]

On February 26, 2009, the Gaurishankar doors that mark the official and ceremonial entrance at the centre of the palace's southern facade, swung open to admit ordinary citizens into the Narayanhiti Palace. At around 10:15am a crowd of journalists and officials jostled for space on the steps of the Narayanhiti Palace as they followed the new Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Nepal, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, up to the Gaurishankar. The doors were open and a red ribbon stretched across the entrance. Ex-members of the palace staff, now working for the museum, waited on the other side to greet him. He was handed a pair of scissors, cut the ribbon between two bows tied for the purpose, and stepped across the threshold, marking the moment that ordinary citizens were admitted into the palace and the palace's transformation from royal residence to Palace Museum ("Narayanhiti Opens as Museum," 2009). Behind the crowd, on the lawn in front of the building, stood a series of large tents billowing in the breeze, each one housing a different group of official guests. The scene was reminiscent of images of the marriage of the then Crown Prince Birendra and his bride Princess Aishwarya in February 1970. The latter royal event marked the completion of the new palace building and launched it as a unifying symbol for a new Nepali nation created by the then King Mahendra. The appropriation in 2007-8 of what had been royal space and the "walk of kings" ("Open Sesame," 2009) marked the reformulation of a national identity that was no longer derived from the Shah monarch and which positioned 'the people' [*Janata*] as opposed to the monarchy at the head of the nation. It marked a clear desire, on behalf of the new government, to shift the order of power (Subedi 2009 4) and I argue, to contain the unwanted presence of the monarchical past in post-2006 Nepal.



Informed by Handler and Gable's study of Colonial Williamsburg (1997), this chapter begins my exploration of the museumisation of the palace, with a focus on the practices and politics of transforming the Narayanhiti Palace into a museum during the period of nearly nine months between 11<sup>th</sup> June 2008, when Gyanendra and Komal left the palace as ordinary citizens, and 26 February 2009, when the palace was opened to the public as the Narayanhiti Palace Museum. It begins with an account of this period, comprised of three phases, each associated with one of the processes of the institutional transition. The first phase involved the creation of an inventory of all the king's possessions, as described in the previous chapter, and continued until September 2008. This process played out publicly in the media, perhaps because it touched on negative aspects of Gyanendra's public image, as well as questions of the institutionalised integration of Shah kingship with constructions of national identity. The second phase saw the re-organisation of the palace staff of over 700 in order to meet the new functional requirements of the museum. The palace museum was positioned under the Ministry of Culture and State Structuring, and this re-organisation took place over the summer of 2008, as the interim government was formed with a CPN-Maoist Prime Minister. The third and final phase, the establishment of the legal status of the museum and the preparation of the palace to receive visitors (including decisions about what to display), culminated in a three-week intensive period in January and February 2009 during which decisions about what exhibits to display were finalised. The Constituent Assembly's announcement that the former royal palace would be opened as a museum presented the interim government with the task of enacting the transformation in a way that enhanced the public perception of its own cultural authority and historical legitimacy. As this account shows, disentangling the palace from the institution of monarchy was not always a straightforward task. Politicians and bureaucrats had to address the institutional complexity that the monarchy once entailed, negotiate the sensitivities of the palace as a site where the monarchy might threaten to return, and, against a backdrop of political, social and economic insecurity, keep financial investment to a minimum.

In order to understand the ideological propositions and interests that underlay and were reinforced by the decision to transform the palace into a museum, I draw upon two publications, each written in English by directors of the first museum in Nepal, now known as the National Museum in Chauni, to present a history of the institution of the museum in 20<sup>th</sup> century Nepal. Published in 1939 and 1967 respectively, these publications reveal that the concept of the museum in Nepal originated from a western model, and drew heavily from practice in India.<sup>362</sup> The work of Simon Knell reminds us of the importance of understanding the social, cultural and political contexts within which a museum operates (2010, p. 5) and this institutional history, recorded in English for the first time in this thesis, provides the context for an understanding of the moral positioning of the institution of the museum in the context of post-monarchical Nepal.

The analysis in this chapter is focused on those who established the museum and agreed on its contents and introduces three key groups of actors (and agents of display): the new interim government, the ex-royal palace staff, and, for this chapter only, a group of museum professionals employed by the Nepali Civil Service to supervise and advise on the transition process. Over the course of the next three chapters, I examine the different yet overlapping registers of meaning (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 138) held by each of them. Through an analysis of the state narrative as set out in official speeches alongside the practice of the museum's establishment, I suggest that the powerful global rhetoric of museums, organized around the themes of collection, conservation and display, was inverted by the interim government of Nepal to legitimate what was actually the political process of encrypting the powerfully felt absence of the monarchy. The impact of this inversion on ex-palace staff is clear from their accounts, which revealed the effect it had of tearing the palace away from the monarchy in order to create a dissociated monarchical past (of which they were a part), a past designed for visitors to pass through

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<sup>362</sup> My interviewees undertook their training and experienced their formative years of museum work during the 1970s and 1980s.

rather than appropriate. Their embodied experience of the transition is explored in further detail in Chapter Seven. Because the professional identity of the civil servants involved in the transition is linked to a globally understood set of museum standards and practices, this inversion of museum rhetoric rendered the symbolic ambiguities embedded in the transformation of the Narayanhiti Palace transparent: the king no longer ruled from the palace and the government did not use the palace to conduct affairs of state. The interim government evinced no genuine interest in upholding the recognised practices of a museum, and the decisions made by politicians and bureaucrats were instead focused on the creation of a contemporary unified identity through the construction of a collective memory.

### **A history of the museum in Nepal**

Before I go on to give an account of the processes of the palace's transition to a museum between May 2008 and February 2009, I present a short history of the institution of the museum in Nepal, in order to support a contextual understanding of the meaning of the institution of museum as applied above by Jal Krishna Shrestha, and I argue, inverted by Nepal's politicians.

The first museum in Nepal started life as an arsenal [*silkhānā*] in Kathmandu within a palace constructed by Bhimsen Thapa in Chauni, 2 kilometres west of the Hanuman Dhoka Palace, on the other side of the Bishnumati river. The arsenal was possibly established by the then Prime Minister, Jang Bahadur Kunwar (Rana) (1817-1877) in the 1860s and access was limited to guests of the Prime Minister (Gutschow, 2011b, p. 844) (Figure 24). Adopted as a mark of modernity, its establishment was almost certainly influenced by Jang's visit to Europe in 1850.<sup>363</sup> In 1928,

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<sup>363</sup> For example, he visited the Palace at Versailles and will have experienced the western tradition of showing private collections (John Whelpton, Personal Communication).

Perceval Landon reported that the displays were “not unlike the ornamental and historical armouries of any other country” (1993, p. 260). It displayed collections of weaponry, in patterns on the walls. This weaponry was associated with the Shah kings and Rana prime ministers, thereby reminding of their military successes and reaffirming the Ranas’ right to rule on the king’s behalf.<sup>364</sup>

In 1926, under the authority of the then Prime Minister, Chandra Shamsheer Rana, Keshar Shamsheer Rana (1892-1964)<sup>365</sup> turned the arsenal into a museum [*sangrahalaya*] and became its first director.<sup>366</sup> Mirroring the practices that formed the basis of the museum in India, Keshar began a collection of “pots and pans and varieties of miscellaneous art and cultural objects which ...formed the nucleus of various sections within the museum.” (Sen, 1939, p. 4)<sup>367</sup>

the necessity for making a collection of archaeological, anthropological and artistic materials from the territory and house them in the *Chauni Silkhana* (the old armoury) where one of the finest arms collection was waiting to be cared for, was first impressed upon the government by Lt. Genl, Sir Kaiser Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana. (Sen, 1939, p. 3)

As in India, the intention was to create one unified site at which flora, fauna, cultures, customs, people and arts were ordered and organized in order to advance natural and human science (Guha-Thakurta, 2015, p. 48). The central act was that of collecting, not displaying, and prospective visitors had to write to the palace for permission to enter (Sen, 1939, p. 4). The arsenal museum only existed for a small initiated circle and was conceived of as a learned, scholarly domain, serving the public through its quest for

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<sup>364</sup> Including regimental colours from the East India Company, assumed captured in 1857 (Landon, 1993, p. 264).

<sup>365</sup> Keshar Shamsheer Rana was known for his personal collection of books, said to be the largest private library in Asia (G. Rana, 1994, p. 116).

<sup>366</sup> The Sanskrit/ Nepali word *Sangraha* refers to ‘collection’ and *alaya* is a Sanskrit term for place, hence a *sangrahalaya* is a place where collections are displayed.

<sup>367</sup> Copy can be found in Major Spain’s papers in the Gurkha Museum, Winchester, United Kingdom (Spain 52/1/116).

knowledge.<sup>368</sup> Its opening to a larger public came later. Keshar used the nature of the institution of museum as a knowledge-producing institution to assert Nepal's independence and status on the world stage.<sup>369</sup> Landon noted, for example, a display of artwork that "indicates the intercommunications between Nepal and the royal families of Europe." (1993, p. 260) He also recorded his surprise at seeing on display a set of regimental colours from the East India Company: "An Englishman will probably receive a start when he is shown into a long narrow room, along the centre of which are ranged seven regimental colours, all of which are those of regiments belonging to the forces of the East India Company." (1993, p. 264). Landon explains that these were captured from regiments fleeing India in 1857 (i.e. not from the Anglo-Nepal War in 1814-16),<sup>370</sup> thereby offering an interpretation of the display as an expression of loyalty to the British (1928, p. 264). The display of objects and weapons seized during warfare was one way in which the British asserted hegemony over India (Cohn, 2015, p. 42) and I suggest that the "scrupulous care" (Landon, 1993, p. 264) offered to the regimental colours within the bounded space of a museum in Kathmandu served to directly challenge the power relationship between Britain and Nepal.<sup>371</sup>

The institution was co-opted in support of the creation of a national identity by the Prime Minister Juddha Shamsheer Rana (r.1932-1945), who "was quick to realise the value and importance of the national museum properly organized" (Sen, 1939, p. 4). He re-named the institution the 'Nepal Museum' in 1938, and opened the doors to the public on 12 February 1939,

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<sup>368</sup> As exemplified by the issuance of publications in English (copies of the first three can be found in Major Spain's papers at the Gurkha Museum, Winchester, United Kingdom. "*The Nepal Museum*" (1939) "*Handmade Paper of Nepal*" 1940, "*Tibet and her art*" 1941. (Spain 52/1-3).

<sup>369</sup> Granted acknowledgement of its independence from the British Empire in 1923. The first Nepal Museum publication starts by asserting Nepal's cultural, political and religious independence (Sen, 2)

<sup>370</sup> Landon dedicates two pages to descriptions of each of the colours and each regiment's history, in order to connect them to the rebellion.

<sup>371</sup> You can easily imagine other guests to the museum being encouraged to interpret the regimental colours as a mark of Nepal's independence.

though who the public of the Nepal Museum was, is unclear.<sup>372</sup> The Museum Keeper, Siva Narayana Sen, set out a clear relationship between the museum as a centre for scientific knowledge production and its educational responsibilities when he wrote that the museum had three clear aims at this time: display for the purposes of cultural instruction (e.g. ethnographic items displayed in terms of the methods of their production); safeguarding of a scientifically classified collection for the advancement of the knowledge by “the manufacturer, the designer, the artist, and student, as well as the ethnologist, the archaeologist, the naturalist...” (this was a period of active collecting, associated for example with the development of an archaeological programme); and education programmes that were seen as a direct corollary of the first two (Sen, 1939, p. 5). Whilst there was a separation of distinct fields, the defining paradigm of Juddha’s museum was that all was unique to Nepal (Sen, 1939, p. 7) and the knowledge produced was intended to support the “commercial, education and industrial art future of Nepal” (Sen, 1939, p. 7). The patronage of the museum and therefore the nation was to be made clear through a gallery off the central corridor that would display Juddha’s trophies (Sen, 1939, p. 9).

In 1967, the Nepal Museum was re-nationalised by King Mahendra and re-named the National Museum, and made available to the public for the price of an admission ticket (Dwivedi, 1976, p. 111,117).<sup>373</sup> In a 1976 publication about the museum in Nepal, Pashupati Kumar Dwivedi (then recently retired as the Museum’s Director) makes it clear that the educational intentions of the museum were now first and foremost.<sup>374</sup> The museum’s

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<sup>372</sup> The admissions requirements are unclear, though Sen’s publication cites a good many visitors, mostly residents of Kathmandu.

<sup>373</sup> In winter from 10am to 4pm for three months, otherwise 10 to 5. Adults 20 pice, children 10 pice. 3 pice for photography in the galleries. and students were admitted for free on Fridays and Saturdays

<sup>374</sup> Dwivedi made a direct link with the “Back to the Village” national campaign. This development campaign launched by the National Development Service required masters’ students at Tribhuvan University to perform a year of service that involved practical training, a ten-month village stay and the submission of a village report to the central government. In support of the education of village panchayats, Dwivedi suggested: displays at festivals and fairs in zonal villages could form part of national campaign, museum community clubs, museums could be associated with schools and museum representatives on educational committees (1976, p. 28).

public was now conceived of “the masses”: the museum would “educate (and) ... galvanise” them and thus “give a new speed to our progress towards the achievement of given socio-economic and cultural goals” in a “modernisation drive” (Dwivedi, 1976, p. 124). Dwivedi placed emphasis on the scientific organization of the collections, not for research, but the manner of their display as a medium of instruction.<sup>375</sup> The museum underwent changes to its organizational structure and displays, “to make it not only a place of muses {sic} but also the best centre of visual education and research.” (Dwivedi, 1976, p. 12).<sup>376</sup> These newly organized displays were intended to provide visitors with an “intelligent understanding” of themselves, and their identity as Nepalese citizens (Dwivedi, 1976, p. 124). In the late 1970s the ethnographic collection saw the addition of “life size models through dioramic display of different ethnic and occupational groups of Nepal.” These had been on display as part of Birendra’s coronation celebrations in 1975 (Dwivedi, 1976, p. 118) and were intended to “accelerate emotional integration of the nation” (Dwivedi, 1976, p. 125). Booklets were provided for children, guides for general visitors, and catalogues for specialist researchers (Dwivedi, 1976, p. 22).

The authority to establish a museum rested with the king, and subsequent museums in Nepal were established after Mahendra Shah was crowned in 1955. After 1962 they were conceived as political instruments of the Panchayat System, and intended to support the construction of a national identity, through a commitment to public education.<sup>377</sup> In 1962, four museums were established in the three Malla palace complexes to promote the construction of Nepal’s identity through a showcase of traditional arts and crafts: the National Art Gallery was housed in the Lal Baithak of the

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<sup>375</sup> Chronology was one ordering system that was favoured.

<sup>376</sup> Considering the taxidermy Natural Science displays, it is notable that the Wildlife Conservation Society was then under Chairmanship of Prince Gyanendra.

<sup>377</sup> The volume by Dwivedi is dedicated to Mahendra and begins with a chapter “*Mahendra – Architect of a New Era*” in which Nepal under the Panchayat system is portrayed as a unified nation, striving together for progress, independently, which the establishment of museums is linked to the establishment of a range of institutions, including the Royal Nepal Academy to “further enrich this great heritage of ours”.

Palace in Bhaktapur, the National Woodcarving Museum in the Palace of 55 windows in Bhaktapur, the National Bronze Museum in Patan Durbar Square, and the National Numismatic Museum in the Hanuman Dhoka Palace in Kathmandu.<sup>378</sup> A museological approach associated with modernist ideals emerged, that saw the museum as a centre of scientific specialized knowledge and that required professional training, often received in India.<sup>379</sup> All of these museums fell under the purview of the Department of Archaeology, established in 1952 under the Ministry of Education (Gutschow, 2003, p. 12; Pashupati Shamsheer Rana, 1989, p. 123).<sup>380</sup>

The institution of the museum was called upon to legitimize the position of the monarchy throughout the Panchayat era. In 1976, after Mahendra's death, the *Shri 5 Mahendra Smriti Sangrahalaya* (Shri 5 Mahendra Memorial Museum) was opened by Birendra, in a new pagoda-style building, at the National Museum (Figure 25). It aimed to "propagate the high ideals of His late Majesty ... serve as a link between the past and present ... be a great centre of research ... (for) people of all walks of life ... to study the life of the great King." (Dwivedi, 1976, p. 13) Dwivedi stated that "the future course of the Nepalese life will be determined on the basis of its close study." (1976, p. 13).<sup>381</sup> The museum, with its accompanying library, was intended as an instrument of education to instruct the population, to provide a common past, to reaffirm the rationale behind the

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<sup>378</sup> They remain present in the 1979 UNESCO listing of KTM Valley as a World Heritage Site.

<sup>379</sup> Personal Communication with: Mandakini Shrestha (29 July 2013), Prakash Darnal, Department of Archaeology (17 July 2013), Bharat Raj Rawat received his MA in Dehli (16 July 2013), Jal Krishna Shrestha received his MA in Baroda, funded by the Colombo Plan (4 July 2013).

<sup>380</sup> List of museums in appendix to Dwivedi are: National Museum, Numismatic Museum, National Art Gallery, National Wood-work Museum, National Bronze Museum, Archaeological Garden, Lalitpur; Archaeological Site Museum, Kapilvastu; Mining Museum, KTM, Geology Museum, KTM, Botanical Museum, KTM; Zoology Museum, KTM, Swayambhu Bikash Mandal Museum; Natural Science Museum, Botanical Survey and Herbarium; Postal Museum, KTM; Pokhara Museum; Biswa Nava Nirman Adhyatmik Sangrahalaya; Bhanu Memorial Museum, Tanahun District.

<sup>381</sup> Dwivedi seeks recognition for the museum profession and promotes the value of the museum as an education institution.



Panchayat system that survived Mahendra, to suggest appropriate behavior for citizens, and to uphold the position of the new king (Birendra).<sup>382</sup>

Together, objects used by Mahendra in his daily life, recordings of his speeches, copies of his poetry, foreign orders presented to him in his office as king, were displayed to demonstrate that he both embodied and served the Nepali nation.<sup>383</sup> The contents of this museum moved to the Hanuman Dhoka Palace in the late 1980s and were displayed adjoining the existing Tribhuvan Memorial Museum.

As the political landscape changed, particularly after the Jan Andolan of 1990, politicians laid claim to the authority to establish museums. For example, in 1995 there was high level political support for a proposal for a national ethnographic museum (*Nepal Rashtriya Jatiya Sangrahalaya*).<sup>384</sup>

International conceptions of heritage informed the establishment of the Patan Museum that opened in 1997, as the first semi-autonomous and financially self-sustaining museum, outside of direct government control.<sup>385</sup>

This museum took on the re-display of the collections of the National Bronze Museum within the sixteenth century royal palace in the city of

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<sup>382</sup> Dwivedi quotes Mr G F Westcott on the importance of museums as objects of education in a democracy “A knowledge of the past is of great help in understanding the present and preparing for the future... By examining the work of men of the past, of the triumphs of critical thinkers and of scientific research, visitor to a museum is bound to be impressed by the value of these methods and may be encouraged to try to use them himself... The opportunity afforded by museums for studying the actuality on which authorities have based their theories and the illustrations of the methods used to develop our understanding of the universe should help to produce a more rational attitude towards authority in general...museums could help the individual ... to discover any particular interests or abilities which he may possess, and so enable him to decide in what way he could best serve.” (Dwivedi, 1976, pp. 16–17)

<sup>383</sup> The Mahendra Museum was moved to the Hanuman Dhoka Palace Museum between 1988 – 1995 (a move funded by the royal palace. Tej Raj Tamrakar (ex-DG of the Hanuman Dhoka Palace Museum). Personal Communication, 14 July 2013) and the Japan Foundation funded a display of Buddhist art in the building. Tamrakar recalled that they were able to request items from the palace.

<sup>384</sup> This was discussed by Professor Gerard Toffin during a presentation given at the Annual Conference on Kathmandu and the Himalaya in 2014.

<sup>385</sup> Though it was still opened by Birendra on 28 October 1997. The Governing Committee of the Patan Museum is made up of a secretary from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (Chair), Director General of the Department of Archaeology (Vice Chair), Executive Officer of Lalitpur Metropolitan city, three members from the government, Dr Amatya, founder of Siddhartha Art Foundation (Sangita Thapa as at 2013). The Museum's income is from courtyard hire, its café and shop. Devendra Tiwari. Personal Communication, 10 July 2013.

Patan. This fifteen-year project was funded by the Austrian government through the Austrian Institute of International Cooperation (IIZ).<sup>386</sup> Leading the way in 1990, the Tamu Pay Lhu Sangha (association) established the Gurung (Tamu) Ethnographic Museum in Pokhara and since 2010, a number of community-led museums have emerged as a way of different groups asserting their ethnic identity (For example, Jyapu Samaj Ethnographic Museum in Lalitpur established in 2012 (Toffin, 2013) and the Chittadhar Hridaya Museum in Tangal, Kathmandu in 2013).<sup>387</sup>

## **The Processes of Transition**

### *Phase One: Inventorying the Palace*

As discussed in the previous chapter, when the Constituent Assembly announced the transformation of the Narayanhiti Palace into a museum, it tasked the government with ensuring the safety of all property inside the palace (*The Kathmandu Post* 2008a). A Property Evaluation Committee chaired by Dr. Govinda Kusum was formed to create an inventory (“Gyanendra gets eviction letter: Officials inspect palace,” 2008). The inventory process began in earnest after Gyanendra left the palace, lasting for a period of two or three months.<sup>388</sup> With access across the palace compound, and the palace and its staff under the government’s authority, the committee requested each staff section to list the contents of their own

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<sup>386</sup> A direct result of the detailed inventory of the monuments and cultural sites of the Kathmandu Valley undertaken under the auspices of the UNDP in 1975 (led by Carl Pruscha – an Austrian physical planner and architect). UNESCO were invited to send a team of consultants to prepare a conservation master plan of the cultural heritage of the Valley (led by Professor Eduard Sekler, Austrian architectural historian). This was published in 1977 with the support of the Austrian government. Sekler then persuaded the Austrian Government to contribute bilateral aid to the museum (Hagmüller, 2003, p. 9).

<sup>387</sup> Chittadhar Hridaya was a poet who promoted the use of Nepal Bhasa (the Newar language). The museum received funding from India and the opening on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2013 was attended by prominent Nepali historian Satya Mohan Joshi.

<sup>388</sup> Mocko confirms that Dr Kusum entered the east wing of the palace (Trisul Sadan) on the very evening of Gyanendra’s departure (2012, p. 220), though he must have done this through an exterior door as the connecting door from within the palace building had been plastered over.

area.<sup>389</sup> This inventory included not just the contents of the palace building, but the contents of every section of the royal institution that held executive power until 1990 and constitutional status thereafter. The inventory, which has not been published, formed the basis of decisions on the transfer of the king's assets, and the records that pertained to the day to day operation of the state, into public hands.<sup>390</sup> Boxes of documents were dispersed across 17 ministries ("Narayanhiti Museum opens soon," 2009), stores of any equipment deemed useful were emptied by army personnel (not necessarily always with the government's authority),<sup>391</sup> livestock was transferred because it was costly, no longer had any use and was awkward to care for (Mocko & Barnhart, 2018),<sup>392</sup> and any remaining personal items were offered to the ex-king's religious advisers,<sup>393</sup> destroyed, or stored. A member of ex-palace staff described to me the shock they felt when they came under this scrutiny:

We were even told to make list of everything as we may have to leave the job. We were even making list of stationary like three pencils, one stapler. But later the person who came, they said that it is not necessary. So, we were quite afraid about our job. It was just three years since I had joined.™

The anxiety that led people to list standard office stationery, with the fear that they could be accused of hiding what were by then conceived as

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<sup>389</sup> At this point the staff were still organized according to the palace structure. This was not a museum documentation exercise with contextual data being recorded for each item, according to ex-palace staff it followed the civil service audit practice in which each office undertakes an annual audit. Each item was given a label with a number on it and these labels were visible to me in all staff offices as well as on items throughout the rooms that were open for display.

<sup>390</sup> I was informed by the ex-palace staff responsible, that one copy was kept at the palace museum and one copy taken by the interim government (Personal Communication, 19 July 2014).

<sup>391</sup> More than one interviewee referred to the emptying of stores of copper piping, for example.

<sup>392</sup> It was a standing joke on my first visit to the staff canteen in 2014 that the goat served there was probably goat from the royal stock. Milk from the ex-royal dairy cattle was also reported to have made its way there, though the cows were moved to Jiri Technical Institute in 2010.

<sup>393</sup> A range of ritual specialists and astrologers were on the palace payroll. I heard from ex-palace staff who worked in the domestic service of the royal family that they were offered valuable items of furniture, such as the ex-royal family's beds.

<sup>394</sup> Ms Shah. Recorded Interview, 19 July 2014. Translation by Rukmani Gurung.

national assets, reveals something of the experience of the transition for this group of people.<sup>395</sup> For example, I enquired about an English-Nepali Dictionary stored in a cupboard in one staff office and was informed that before leaving the palace, Gyanendra had permitted certain members of staff to choose a book from the library, as a token of gratitude. The owner of the dictionary had been afraid to take the volume home for fear of being accused of stealing government property. What had been a stable institutional structure, with clear lines of reporting, quickly began to break down, and staff found new, unstable, political forces determining their future. Very quickly, branches of trade unions associated with the major political parties, starting with Nepal National Employees Organisation (UML-Maoist),<sup>396</sup> were established and became active within the palace (see image).<sup>397</sup>

#### *Phase Two: Re-configuring the ex-palace staff*

The army transferred the military secretariat out of the palace, and the security detail of the palace perimeter passed to the police on 12 June 2008 (Figure 26). Throughout the summer, the palace remained in stasis, as a suspended institution. Some ex-palace staff continued their work as before. For example, those working in the royal stables cared for the horses until they were transferred to the cavalry at Singha Darbar (Mocko & Barnhart, 2018, p. 31). Other roles were quickly reconfigured, but most people remained enmeshed in the social structures of palace life, for example, continuing to meet in the same social groups (albeit for longer breaks),

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<sup>395</sup> They saw themselves as the guardians of the ex-royal property and did not trust the other actors on-site. For example, I was shown several boxes of glass-plate negatives that had been retrieved from the Press Secretariat after apparently being dumped.

<sup>396</sup> The Nepal National Employees Organisation was officially established at the end of BS2062 (AD 2005-6) and changed its name in 2069 (2011-12) when the Maoist faction within it broke away to become the Organisation of National Employees. (Personal Communication with union representatives on the Palace Museum staff in 2015 and 2016.)

<sup>397</sup> I was informed by ex-palace staff working as union representatives (28 July 2015) that the union's rules stipulated a minimum of 20 members in order to open a branch and 12 were required to serve on the steering committee. Those on the committee had been involved politically before the king left office, and therefore whilst there was still a ban on establishing unions within the civil service. The location within the palace secretariat may have enabled this activity to remain under the radar.

make daily offerings to the Kumari shrine behind the main palace building. Once the inventory was complete, uncertain what else to do, those in the middle and lower ranks came to the office, gathered together in groups, and speculated on their future role whilst they drank tea.<sup>398</sup>

The demarcation of the ex-royal palace employees into a special group of the Miscellaneous Service, managed by the Ministry of General Administration, was formalized on 8 December 2008.<sup>399</sup> Four months earlier, the Ministry had begun to request lists of staff, a process challenged by the National Employees Organisation for its lack of transparency.<sup>400</sup> After the publication of the rules in the Nepal Gazette, all staff had forty-five days to complete and submit a schedule, signed and thumb-printed, that outlined a chronological list of the posts they had held while working in the Palace Service, and provided the names of their spouse, parents and grandparents. The reasons for requiring the provision of family particulars rather than educational qualifications could have been in response to the fact that most members of ex-palace staff had gained their position in the royal household through their family connections,<sup>401</sup> and had therefore not undertaken an entrance examination, which was the usual selection procedure for recruitment into the Nepali Civil Service (introduced

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<sup>398</sup> Many lower-ranking ex-palace staff spoke to me of their relief in being released from the strict regime of the palace. For example, they referred to the fact that they stopped wearing their uniforms, that they were able to walk freely between buildings, and took the opportunity to show other colleagues around their area of work.

<sup>399</sup> See the Nepal Law Commission for a translation of the Special Group Personnel Administration and Management Rules, 2065 (2008-9) published in the Nepal Gazette on 8 December 2008

<http://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/documents/2015/08/special-group-personnel-administration-and-management-rules-2065-2008.pdf>

<sup>400</sup> It was suggested to me by union representatives that the Nepali Congress Party was opposed to any transfers, but the CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist) maintained their position that the palace staff should have the option to become members of the civil service ("Palace Staff Want to Join Civil Service," 2008). That the government expected opposition is shown by the inclusion of section 14 of the rules which stated "The Government of Nepal, in case of any obstruction to implement these Rules, may make necessary arrangement."

<sup>401</sup> Most staff members I spent time with were members of a family that had worked for the monarchy for several generations. Those who were not had often been appointed by recommendation.

in 1956) (Joshi and Rose 229).<sup>402</sup> This meant that most were deemed ineligible for transfer into other departments.<sup>403</sup> Staff were also required to sign an oath of office in order to maintain their employment within the Special Group.

I, ..... , hereby, swear in the name of God that I, as an employee of Government of Nepal, shall discharge the duties assigned to me faithfully to the best of my knowledge and wisdom, by being disciplined and loyal to the country and the government, subject to the prevailing law without fear, partiality or favor, malice or greed, and that I shall not disclose to any one other than the authorized person any governmental secrecy related with the service which is known to me either directly or indirectly at any time, irrespective of whether or not I remain in the service.<sup>404</sup>

This process set the scene,<sup>405</sup> the rules included a predication towards the non-replacement of vacant posts,<sup>406</sup> officers of a certain class were granted tenure for five years only, and voluntary redundancy was offered to those over 52 years of age.<sup>407</sup> Copies of the completed schedules were sent to the Office of the Prime Minister, the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of General Administration. Lists were drawn up by Jay Ram Manandhar, who had been second in charge of the Master of Ceremonies department within the palace (the most senior gazetted officer)<sup>408</sup> that recommended who would stay with the Palace Museum, and in what role. By the autumn of

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<sup>402</sup> This could also have been related to the new gender friendly provisions and inclusive principles included in the Interim Constitution of 2007, but as the rules also indicate a requirement to reduce the number of staff, this seems unlikely.

<sup>403</sup> The Special Group Personnel Administration and Management Rules allow for secondments only (section 12.3). Though it would seem that some, less qualified, staff members did find themselves transferred, unwillingly, to the transport ministry.

<sup>404</sup> See the Nepal Law Commission for a translation of the Special Group Personnel Administration and Management Rules, 2065 (2008-9) published in the Nepal Gazette on 8 December 2008

<http://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/documents/2015/08/special-group-personnel-administration-and-management-rules-2065-2008.pdf>

<sup>405</sup> A group of gazetted officers from the ex-palace staff brought a case alleging discrimination to the Supreme Court, which ruled in their favour in March/ April 2015.

<sup>406</sup> A desire to reduce the palace staff by 50% had been made public in 2007. Personal communication with Palace Museum Directors in 2014 and 2015.

<sup>407</sup> The rules for voluntary redundancy were published separately. My assumption that age was a factor is based on personal communication with ex-palace staff who recalled a farewell event for 20-30 older retiring staff.

<sup>408</sup> According to ex-palace staff, Manandhar was a key player in the Nepal National Employees Organisation.

2008, the museum ended up with 196 staff in 10 sections: administration, exhibition (organized according to the private, state and guest wings of the palace), audit, technical store, garden, photography, counter, locker, communication, guide with a total of 18 section officers. This new structure was modeled on the organizational charts of other state-run museums in the capital (Figure 27).<sup>409</sup>

As Joint Secretary for Culture, Jal Krishna Shrestha proposed that the Palace Museum be made a department within the Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture which would grant it a separate status to the other national museums, which fell under the purview of the Department of Archaeology.<sup>410</sup> He explained that his intention was to ensure that the Palace Museum had the budget required for its development, because he perceived the allocation of governmental funds to have been influenced more by the status of the department within the government bureaucracy, than in response to its actual need. The museum was established on this basis under the Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture.<sup>411</sup>

### *Phase Three: Selecting the Exhibits*

Throughout this period, senior members of ex-palace staff were required to work alongside a number of civil servants who were seconded by the Ministry of Culture and State Structuring, led by Jal Krishna Shrestha (from

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<sup>409</sup> With the help of each museum's Director, the author compared the structure with that of the National Museum, Chauni (Mandakini Shrestha. Personal Communication, 29 July 2013), Chauni and the Patan Museum (Devendra Tiwari. Personal Communication, 10 July 2013).

<sup>410</sup> Jal Krishna Shrestha. Recorded Interview, 3 July 2013. Those under the Department of Archaeology were listed for me by Dr Bharat Raj Rawat: National Museum of Nepal, National Art Museum Bhatapur, Pokhara Regional Museum, Dhankuta Regional Museum, Surkhet Regional Museum, Science Museum in Kapilvastu. (Personal Communication, 17 July 2013). This could have been an attractive to politicians due to the existence of serious levels of mistrust between politicians and bureaucrats.

<sup>411</sup> Following a Civil Service restructure, from 2012, the Museum has been positioned under the re-structured Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation.

June 2008) to manage the project. They did this in a number of ways: as members of the inventory team,<sup>412</sup> by providing advice on the establishment of the museum as an organization, and by leading decisions on what to show and how to display the palace to the public. As a professional museologist, Jal Krishna Shrestha emphasized the establishment of the organizational structure and systems of a professional museum, including proper documentation.

The rhythm of the summer months was disturbed in the autumn once the make-up of the interim government was agreed and Pushpa Kamal Dahal was declared prime minister. Possession of the ex-royal palace was a potent symbol in support of the political legitimacy of the interim government, and political pressure came from the prime minister to expedite the project. A museum committee was formed in order to move the process of transition along, and so suddenly the ex-palace staff had a new purpose and the volume of activity increased. The Committee was made up of membership from the Department of Archaeology, including the Director General of the National Museum, Mandakini Shrestha, and Jay Ram Manandhar, who had been second in charge of the Master of Ceremonies department within the palace.<sup>413</sup> The committee verified the inventory, and defined the visitors' route through the palace. Deciding on the latter proved to be a significant challenge, with the combined objectives of opening as many rooms as possible (ostensibly to meet public demand),<sup>414</sup> maintaining a safe route that could cope with the predicted number of visitors, and ensuring the security of the nation's ex-royal assets (including the crown jewels).<sup>415</sup> Because, historically, access to the palace had been heavily

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<sup>412</sup> Including Kosh Acharya, then Director of the Pashupati Area Development Trust (Personal Communication, 16 July 2013) and Dr Bir Raj Pant.

<sup>413</sup> Gopal Kiranti; Kirati Buntu; Jay Ram Shrestha, Secretary of Ministry of Culture; Mandakini Shrestha, DG of National Museum; Bhesh Narayan Dahal, DG Department of Archaeology, and Jay Ram Manandhar (Confirmed in personal communication with Mandakini Shrestha (29 July 2013), Bhesh Narayan Dahal (16 July 2013) and Jay Ram Shrestha (14 April 2012).

<sup>414</sup> Mandakini Shrestha. Personal communication, 29 July 2013.

<sup>415</sup> There had been an intention to display the crown, but following conversations between the Committee and the Nepal Army, it was not deemed possible to ensure its security. Personal communication with Mandakini Shrestha (29 July 2013) and Kosh Acharya (16



restricted, committee members admitted to relying heavily on those members of ex-palace staff who had worked in the main palace building to propose the particular combination of rooms to open, and in what order they should be viewed.<sup>416</sup> Based on these recommendations, the committee proposed that the rooms of the palace should be opened in phases, starting with 19 rooms in the first phase (“Narayanhiti Museum opens soon,” 2009).<sup>417</sup> Those who had worked in the main palace building shared information about the key purpose of each room, and a short piece of text was written as a label by Mandakini Shrestha for each to explain its key function. The expectation by those involved was that a museum professional would be appointed as the director of the Palace Museum.<sup>418</sup>

Ex-palace staff were instructed by the Committee to fill any empty spaces in the rooms to be displayed, using objects from around the palace in order to ensure the rooms looked credible and would give the right impression to the public.<sup>419</sup> Interestingly, members of the committee insisted to me that no changes were made to the space of the palace during this period.<sup>420</sup> However, photographs dated July 2008, taken as a part of the inventory process, showed that some rooms were organized differently to the way I first viewed them in 2010, further supporting the ex-palace staff’s accounts of this curation of the Palace Museum displays. A booklet produced by Jal Krishna Shrestha as a visitor guide also stated “Most of the rooms and

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July 2013). Some ex-palace staff suggested that Jay Ram Manandhar was the person who guided this decision.

<sup>416</sup> Mocko (2012) suggests that palace staff made decisions about what to open, content of signs, etc. My interviews suggest a more complex process.

<sup>417</sup> At the point of writing, there has been no second phase.

<sup>418</sup> Personal communication with Mandakini Shrestha (29 July 2013) and Kosh Acharya (16 July 2013).

<sup>419</sup> For example, the bed in the Dhankuta Room (‘the royal bedroom’) was found from elsewhere in the palace and the curtains from library were installed in the Gulmi Room. Ex-palace staff recalled debates between themselves and committee members about what should, or should not be shown. Mandakini Shrestha, Director of the National Museum in Chauni was one of the museum professionals brought in to enable the establishment of the museum (Chapter Five), is said to have suggested that the ex-palace staff highlight to visitors that in the Sindhuli Room there had been a flat screen television, in order to show that this was taken away from the palace when the building was vacated by Gyanendra and Komal.

<sup>420</sup> Personal communication with Mandakini Shrestha (29 July 2013) and Kosh Acharya (16 July 2013).

corridors of the palace have been adapted for the permanent display galleries” (2011, 5).<sup>421</sup> It would appear that as long as the objects or items of furniture had been inventoried, they were at liberty to be used in the re-creation of rooms for display. The members of the committee did not lie: for them, the spaces were authentic. During this period, the foundations of Tribhuvan Sadan (the site of the massacre that was demolished under Gyanendra’s orders in 2005) were excavated, and each wall raised up to the height of two or three courses of brick, in order to reveal the ground plan of the building (Figure 28).<sup>422</sup>

In January 2009, a political decision was made at the highest level of government to expedite the ‘museumisation’ process and open the palace as a museum by the start of the Nepali New Year, with no concern about meeting any professional museum standards.<sup>423</sup> During the three-week period that followed, a leaflet was produced,<sup>424</sup> tickets printed (see Chapter Six), and a two-day training session was held for 70 (predominantly public-facing) members of ex-palace staff in Mangal Sadan, the public reception hall to the south west of the main palace building, on 14-15<sup>th</sup> February 2009. The training comprised of a series of talks that included: an overview of the nature of a museum; how to work as a member of museum staff; an overview of the tourist industry in Nepal; and the historical significance of various metalwork sculptures in the palace.<sup>425</sup> Staff were taken through the

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<sup>421</sup> Government of Nepal, Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture (2011). *Narayanhiti Palace Museum*. Kathmandu. Copy shared with me by Jal Krishna Shrestha, 11 April 2012. Interestingly when this came up in my second conversation, 6 July 2014, he said this referred only to the route.

<sup>422</sup> Evidenced by photographs of the process shared with me by Mr Shrestha on 23 July 2013.

<sup>423</sup> Personal communication with Bharat Raj Rawat (17 July 2013), Kosh Prasad Acharya (16 July 2013). The re-use of palace visitor books as the Palace Museum’s visitor books was one example given to me by ex-palace staff of how rushed this process was. Dr Rawat and Kosh Prasad Acharya cited pressure from (CPN-Maoist) politicians, who then held the majority in the Constituent Assembly, to hastily open the Palace Museum.

<sup>424</sup> Copy of the leaflet in both English and Nepali provided by ex-palace staff. The author of the leaflet may have been Dr Bir Raj Pant (Personal Communication with group of ex-palace staff, 24 July 2016). It is notably different to the content of the 1993 leaflet. The text begins with an explicit reference to the “People’s War”, and the opening of the museum by Nepal’s new (Maoist) Prime Minister.

<sup>425</sup> Whilst no ex-palace staff were able to share their notes from this training session. They recalled presentations given by Mr Prakash Darnal from the National Archive (about the

19 rooms that had been included on the visitors' route, and instructed on the structure and script of what was to be a guided tour for all visitors. Each member of staff received a certificate on completion of the training and the museum opened to the public 10 days later, with Jay Ram Manandhar as both Secretary and Director and other ex-palace staff working as museum employees.

Ex-palace staff explained to me that they hadn't really believed the transition was taking place until they experienced the visitors to the museum for the first time. They described their experience up to that point as being like "a frog in a well", as if life behind the palace walls was the only world, and that no other reality existed. They had gained a sense of security both by remaining together as a group, and being able to quite literally hide behind palace walls. The opening of the museum was their first collective experience of being exposed to public view since the monarchy had been abolished. After Pushpa Kamal Dahal officially opened the museum, the remainder of the first day was a preview day for government officials and the media (Figure 29). The next day, the palace opened as a museum, for four to five hours a day, five days a week, with an entry cost of NRs100 for Nepali citizens.<sup>426</sup> All visitors were shown around the palace by guides (members of ex-palace staff who had completed the training), in groups of up to 15-20 people, an encounter that was, as I will argue in more detail in the next chapter, skillfully orchestrated to guide visitors in re-membering Nepal's royal past.

I go on to analyse the content of Pushpa Kamal Dahal's speech alongside other official representations of the Museum around the time of its opening.

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sculptures on display), Professor Bir Raj Pant from Tribhuvan University, Bhes Narayan Dahal from the Department of Archaeology, Buddhi Bahadur Gurung and Kailash KC from the ex-palace staff (explaining how each room was used).

<sup>426</sup> Kartik 16 to Magh 15 (winter) from 11am to 3pm, Magh 16 to Kartik from 11am to 4pm. Discounted entry for students at NRs.20. Chinese nationals and residents of SAARC countries NRs.250, all other nationals NRs.500. Government of Nepal, Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture (2011). *Narayanhiti Palace Museum*. Kathmandu. p. 16.

## The Palace Museum Opened as a National Legacy

*Opened in the name of the people*

As a political project, it might seem fairly straightforward that as an act of victory, a declaration of a new democratic era, the palace would be re-opened as a museum in order to consign the royal past to oblivion.<sup>427</sup> But why did the government choose the institution of museum in particular, as opposed to converting it into a presidential palace, casino, hotel, or government office (just some of the suggestions mentioned in the contemporary Nepali press)? How was this change of use linked to the political shift from monarchy to nascent republic? I argue that the institution of museum was used to legitimize the state's appropriation of this symbol of kingship. In a direct inversion of the Shah king's previous claims that the palace was for the people of Nepal, either in the manner of its design (Chapter Three) or by opening it to the public (Chapter Four), the Constituent Assembly claimed possession of the palace, in the name of the people, as a museum.

At the Narayanhiti Palace, Nepali democracy was granted on one hand (during the *andolan* of 1990 and 2006) but just as easily taken away at others (during states of emergency in 1962, 2002, and 2005). One Nepali public intellectual, Abhi Subedi, wrote about the connection in the public imagination between the fate of the Palace and the nature of the new, Republican, Nepal:

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<sup>427</sup> Topkapi Palace in Istanbul was "musealised" on the official date of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in Turkey and the staff continued to the new institution (Aronssen, 2010). The Forbidden City (Palace Museum) in Beijing, China on the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 (Hamlish, 2000). During the period of this research a presidential country estate just outside Kiev, Ukraine was overrun by protestors in 2014 with plans to auction off the site, and one of Saddam Hussain's palaces in Basra was opened as a museum in 2016.

After the last king of Shah dynasty, Gyanendra left the palace, this place and the bungalows behind the steeple, made by King Mahendra in Gorkhali style were central to people to know what is going to happen in Republican Nepal. This venue as the centre of Kathmandu's metropolis' civilization remained tangled in our vivid imagination. (Subedi, 2009a)

This entanglement can best be explained through the Shah monarch's model of kingship, in which symbols of the monarchy (including the palace) were interconnected with the body of the king and the national imaginary (as discussed in Chapter Two). As the site of state activities, the official home of the monarchy until 2008, and the location of the military secretariat from 1951 (Koirala, 2001, pp. 39–42), the palace was the most important centre of political power. It remained the nexus for a variety of political, social and religious practices throughout the 1990s (Chapter Four) and from 12 June 2008 the palace continued to embody these past structures of meaning, though this was now an embodiment of the king's absence. For 239 years, the nation's history had been continuously constructed and tied to the Shah monarchy. Pierre Nora writes that in times of democratisation "It is no longer genesis that we seek but instead the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer." (1989, p. 18) The concept of a museum, as outlined above, developed in Nepal as one of a fundamentally public institution. Thereby, by transferring the palace immediately into public hands, the new government made clear the reversal of the order of power and attempted not to settle but to contain the nation's royal legacy, by throwing open the palace's gates in the name of the people. The authority to enact this conversion legitimised the political authority of the state. The transformation is a particular instance of the reconstruction of a Nepali national identity, no longer dependent upon a Hindu monarch. When the Nepali writer Manjushree Thapa wrote about her first visit to the palace museum in 2011 she referred to her "sense of pride in entering these rooms" that the palace was now, "rightfully our house" (2011, p. 213).

*Symbol of national unity*

“Ordinary” Nepalis were encouraged by official speeches to consider the site their own. For example, when the national flag was raised at the Palace on June 15, 2008, four days after Gyanendra had left, Prime Minister and Acting Head of State, Girija Prasad Koirala (Nepali Congress) stated in his speech: “Ordinary hands have hoisted the flags. The flags belong to the people. These flags will not bow. We Nepali people will not surrender to others” (“PM Koirala hoists national flag at Narayanhiti Palace,” 2008). Pushpa Kamal Dahal inaugurated the Palace Museum in February 2009 as a symbol of the Nepali citizens’ fight against feudalism and the “beginning of victory,” staking a claim for a re-evaluation of the site as a symbol for the struggle of ‘the people.’ (“Narayanhiti Opens as Museum,” 2009) Once in public hands, the palace was made available for the collective identity of the citizenry as a symbol of national unity.<sup>428</sup> In his speech Koirala stated that the palace and its contents now belonged to “the people of Nepal,” presenting “the people” as a unified population despite increasing demands for identity-based federalism and anxiety over the survival of the unitary state apparatus. Koirala’s speech recognized the potency of the museum in forging a national self-consciousness (Kaplan, 1994, p. 1). The transformation of the palace into a museum was intended to create an imagined community by emphasizing the opening up of a space that was previously closed, while at the same time consigning the monarchy to the past.<sup>429</sup> Contemporary newspaper reports also suggest an affinity with this way of ‘imagining’ national unity (R. Sharma, 2009).

The association between the openness of the space of the palace and post-2006 constructions of national unity had already been hinted at, in the aftermath of the royal massacre in June 2001. The Nepali historian Yogesh

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<sup>428</sup> The text in the visitor leaflet starts: “Ten year people’s war and the nineteen days people’s movement established The Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. After that Narayanhiti Royal Palace was turned into Narayanhiti Palace Museum and was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala on 15 June 2008. The exhibition of the museum was opened to public inaugurate by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal “Prachanda” on 26 February, 2009.”

<sup>429</sup> At the inauguration, an AFP reporter asked the Maoist’s second-in-command, Dr Baburam Bhattarai if it felt strange to be strolling through the royal gardens. It is reported that he answered, “It’s not a palace anymore. It’s a museum”.

Raj described the personal significance of the publication of an aerial image of the Narayanhiti Palace in the media following the massacre. For him, this press coverage provided his first glimpse into a previously inaccessible world.<sup>430</sup> The lack of official information released to the public and the widespread disbelief in the veracity of the only official report was used by politicians to contrive a sense of unity based on exclusion from the truth (Lakier 2009). Some of the political rhetoric surrounding the museum when it opened eight years later directly linked the massacre and the opening of the Palace Museum. Pushpa Kamal Dahal, stated in his opening speech:

This is one incident that every Nepali individual has the right to know the truth of... Being the first prime minister of federal democratic republic of Nepal, I pledge to all of you that the royal massacre will be investigated again and the clear picture of the incident will be brought to the public. ("PM Vows to Probe Royal Massacre," 2009)

The Palace Museum, as the site of the massacre, formed a locus for the political need to hark back to the unity contrived in 2001 as a way of avoiding the recent past. No such investigation took place, and in the eyes of much of the Nepali population the events of 1 June 2001 remain unexplored and unexplained (Hutt, 2017b; Subedi, 2016). Dahal's declaration of an official investigation into the murder of Birendra and his immediate family within the palace promised to "bring the facts to light," and offered a new and open future. Dahal's speech shows the political treatment of the palace as an eyewitness to the massacre. It presented the Palace Museum as a space for visitors to experience the evidence for themselves. By representing the palace museum in this way, they created a social space defined by contemporary political needs: it offered an imagined stability in the face of urban and political instability.

The emphasis on openness made it imperative that the property of the royal family, in particular the symbols of the king's office (including the palace),

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<sup>430</sup> Yogesh Raj. Personal communication, 3 July 2013.

were transferred into public hands as a national legacy, secured and consigned to the past. As outlined in the previous chapter, speculation in the Nepali print media about what items the king would take with him when he left the palace revealed some confusion as to which property related to the king's office as head of state and therefore belonged to the nation, and which belonged to Gyanendra as an individual, and to the Shah family. Through a focus on the palace and a decision to utilise the institution of museum, the government was able to shift the locus of legitimacy away from the uncertainty surrounding the palace's contents onto the space of the palace itself. After the palace had been declared a museum in May 2008, and in the nine months before it opened, I found no further debate in the Nepali print media about how the palace should be used.<sup>431</sup> Whilst the contents of the palace may have altered as a result of recent events, the physical space of the palace, where the Shah kings had lived and worked throughout the twentieth century, appeared the same, enclosed by the compound's high walls. It is in this context that the authorities were able to project an image of the palace as 'frozen in time' (K. M. Dixit, 2011, p. 142) and the monarchy as relegated to history (Jha, 2014, p. 66), therefore concealing the skilful orchestration of the space. Rather than an intention to meet the professional expectations of a museum as an active site for the production of knowledge, the remembering, suggested by concern over 'preserving' the contents of the palace, in fact served as a prelude to forgetting and eventually erasure.

### **A museum in name only**

In the guidebook prepared by Jal Krishna Shrestha, he wrote "This museum and its natural surrounding area will be designed full {*sic*} fledged museum

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<sup>431</sup> Press interviews with museum staff, in the months after the museum's opening emphasized the number of visitors to the palace museum, and discussed plans to open more rooms in subsequent phases, for example: ("Visitors Flock Former Palace," 2009).



as per modern museum concept.<sup>432</sup> That the palace was a museum sponsored by the government at the highest levels was a source of increasing concern to civil servants working in other museums and heritage institutions, or directly for the Department of Archaeology in Kathmandu. The standing of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum was measured by my interviewees against the concept of the institution of a “modern museum”, as developed in Nepal during the twentieth century. This was in line with the then definition offered by the International Council of Museums:

Any establishment which has the goal of collection, protection, study and exhibition of objects of artistic, historical, scientific significance for public information according to general taste. (cited in Dwivedi, 1976, p. 57)

The Narayanhiti Palace Museum’s ability to educate was questioned due to the lack of any education programme or schedule of temporary exhibitions; its ability to inform due to a perceived incompleteness of its collections, the lack of an ongoing collections policy, and the lack of an adequate collections documentation system; its ability to protect due to a lack of facilities and care. My Civil Service interviewees prided the other museums in Nepal (under the auspices of the Department of Archaeology), on their ability to accumulate appropriate artefacts and specimens, to carry out research into their collections and to carefully classify and assemble them, ready for display. They held great store in their objectives to serve the public as educational institutions, and cited a number of exemplar public programmes. The Narayanhiti Palace Museum’s galleries were criticized by Dr Rawat, as being “like a grocery shop, on show, but not providing information.”<sup>433</sup> Each room has just one label, and the visitor’s leaflet, given out alongside the ticket for entry, is primarily comprised of a reproduction of this information. Guha-Thakurta argues that the way in which museums in India were situated vis-à-vis their ‘public’ challenged the official line that

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<sup>432</sup> Government of Nepal, Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture (2011). *Narayanhiiti Palace Museum*. Kathmandu. p. 4. Jal Krishna Shrestha had previously worked for both the National Museum in Chauni, then as Director of the Patan Museum. Jal Krishna Shrestha. Recorded Interview, 6 July 2013.

<sup>433</sup> Bharat Raj Rawat. Personal Communication, 17 July 2013.

these were educational institutions where visitors came away with specific knowledge (2015, p. 78). The political intentions behind the Narayanhiti Palace Museum exposed a similar lack. Dwivedi placed great emphasis on public education in his volume that stated “the museum should see how best it can make its displays useful and educative: Otherwise, the museum will be no more than a warehouse.” (1976, p. 53) When Dr Rawat and Dr Acharya cited the superficial level of interpretation at the palace museum, this was because it touched a nerve lodged right “at the heart of the museum’s self-conception” (Guha-Thakurta, 2015, p. 78) in Nepal.<sup>434</sup> The rooms of the palace, poorly interpreted and unscientifically organized, were visited by hundreds of thousands of visitors. By allowing people to see, but not learn, they were perceived to be failing the intended educational role of museums in Nepal. For my Civil Service interviewees, if a museum was not educational, it was by definition, not perceived to be useful, a discourse that went back to the introduction of the modern museum concept in Nepal. In 1939, the then Director of the Nepal Museum wrote:

Heretofore the prevailing conception of the purpose of a museum was that of a repository for “any old junk and native curios” (Sen, 1939, p. 9)

The concept of the “modern museum” as introduced in Nepal was reliant from the start on its projection as an educational body. In 1975, Dwivedi insisted on the value of museums as educational institutions, expressing concern that:

We have ...by and large, not grown out of the misnomer that museum is a storehouse of ancient things and fossils. (Dwivedi, 1976, p. 125)

The ‘modern museum’ in Nepal is justified by a particular set of professional practices, and its status as a public education institution. My interviewees were concerned that the process of the Palace Museum’s establishment,

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<sup>434</sup> Kosh Acharya. Personal Communication, 16 July 2013.

and the lack of accepted museum practice taking place showed no attempt to meet expected standards. The Narayanhiti Palace Museum's ability as an organization to fulfil the functions of a museum was doubted, because the ex-royal staff left in charge were not professionally trained, and therefore lacked what my interviewees deemed to be the requisite expertise in how to secure or conserve the collections, interpret them for visitors, or enable serious research. By 2012 the Palace Museum reported directly to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation. It was positioned outside of the institution of the Nepal Trust, set up to account for and manage all ex-royal property. For this group of civil servants, then, not only it was a museum in name only, it was a museum situated at department level (higher than the country's other state-run museums), with high-level political involvement. Dwivedi's volume includes a whole chapter on museum administration that defines the respective roles of a museum director and a series of specialists (1976, pp. 46–55). These civil servants accused the staff of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum of attending merely in order to receive their salary. To them, the Narayanhiti Palace Museum was a purely political project that had the potential to undermine the standing of the museum as an institution in Nepal.<sup>435</sup> Of course, the position of the interim government and the ex-royal palace staff was quite different, and I will go on to explore this in Chapter Seven.

Fear of the implications of the Palace Museum continuing to bear the title 'museum', with its current governance structure and 'untrained' personnel, were reflected in a proposal to create museum legislation. In 2013, the Director General of the Department of Archaeology, Bhesh Narayan Dahal, proposed to define the nature of the institution of museum in Nepal,

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<sup>435</sup> Outside of this professional group, many expressed a similar conviction, that the Narayanhiti Palace was different. A common reason given to explain this, was the date of the building and its contents, which at under 100 years of age, does not meet the legislative definition of a monument in Nepal (Gutschow, 2003, p. 13). For example: Chiran Thapa, Principal Palace Secretary under Birendra (Personal Communication, 1 August 2014), Prabhakar Shamsheer Rana, owner of the Soaltee Hotel (Personal Communication, 29 July 2014), Dr Amatya, retired civil servant from the Department of Archaeology who worked his way up to Joint Secretary (Personal Communication, 27 July 2013).

according to the rational, scientific, modern institution described above.<sup>436</sup> Legislation was intended to also bring the management of all museums together under the auspices of one, new, department. It would recognize the value of museums as producers of knowledge, and afford the title 'museum' statutory protection. This proposal would have challenged the Palace Museum's status as a museum. Should new legislation have come into force, the Palace Museum would have been brought under the purview of the Department of Archaeology, under professional control and with an educational remit.<sup>437</sup> Throughout my period of fieldwork, no museum legislation was forthcoming, and the reasons for this are easy to understand, with almost continuous rounds of political change at the highest levels and the political challenges of federalizing the governmental structure and indeed of promulgating a new constitution, let alone the impact of the natural disasters of 2015. The implications of the construction of a contemporary, post-monarchical, identity out of the construction of a collective memory facilitated by a museum conceived "as a place of incarceration" (Harris, 2012, p. 4) will be explored in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

It was Nepal's Constituent Assembly who had the power and authority to decide to re-designate the Narayanhiti Palace as a museum in 2008 thereby breaking down one of the monarchy's key privileges and sources of power. This was a decision, I argue, that was borne out of a perceived political need to contain and house the recent past and the royal ghosts of the nascent republican nation. The presentation of the palace to the public as its own house (M. Thapa, 2011), accessible to anyone prepared to pay the entrance fee, solved a political problem: how to sever the royal past from the republican present, whilst maintaining a connection with the

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<sup>436</sup> Both Bhesh Narayan Dahal (Personal Communication 16 July 2013) and Bharat Raj Rawat (Personal Communication, 16 July 2013).

<sup>437</sup> I don't know whether this plan was ever proposed to the minister or cabinet, but according to the Director of the Palace Museum in 2016, this was off the table.

cultural institution from which the nation's identity has for so long been derived. I have argued that the institution of the museum was used by Nepal's interim government to mark the palace as the site where the monarchy ended, to dissociate the palace from its history as the seat of power and to consign the monarchy to the past.

The Palace as a museum still sits behind its walls, its perimeter closely guarded, the key difference is that its gates are open from 11am to 4pm, 5 days a week. The "museumization" of the monarchy in Nepal, using the space of the palace, was a highly political move used to justify the interim government's claim of political control over the space of the palace. Nepal's newly elected politicians understood that once the king left the Narayanhiti Palace, what had been the most powerful space in the country would embody a powerful absence in the capital's landscape. The local museum rhetoric, with its connection to a global museum discourse, provided a powerful tool for legitimising the government's occupation of the former royal palace as a symbol of political (and moral) authority.<sup>438</sup> The museum's authority as a public institution was called upon to make it clear that the government was acting in the public interest, directly inverting previous attempts by the monarchy to present the palace as being 'for the people'. As an institution 'of the past', the museum was used to promote the obsolescence of the monarchy, and to immediately render the space of the palace harmless. The understanding of a museum as a place where the past is preserved, enabled the government to provide a public space that illuminated discontinuity (Nora, 1989, p. 16), in an attempt to disassociate the royal past from the republican present. In this transformation, what the government intended to preserve was not the palace, or its contents, but its symbolic significance as a sign of political authority and legitimacy.

The establishment of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum responded to a history of the political use of the institution of museum in Nepal. Previous

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<sup>438</sup> The ex-king, Gyanendra, had after all only moved several kilometres up the road

state-led initiatives connected museums to patriotic education campaigns and the dissemination of a national narrative designed to be shared by all. As the first state-run museum not to have been sponsored by the king, it simultaneously challenged the monarchy's authority as the source of all cultural institutions and claimed the right to re-write the past.<sup>439</sup> The divergence in the practice of its establishment, however, reveals the way in which the government resisted the hegemony of the "modern museum", utilizing it for its own ends. Rather than adopt professional museum practices in order to control the production of knowledge, once the palace was named a museum, politically, it almost didn't matter what happened next. Its redesignation ensured that the palace was no longer seen as the possession of the Shah monarchy, but as the property of the new Nepal. Its position as the place where dynamic markers of the monarchy could be consigned and thus deactivated, was sealed in 2012, with proposals to remove a bust of Tribhuvan from the *Shahid* [Martyrs] Gate (a monument constructed in the late 1960s ) and re-locate it in the Narayanhiti Palace Museum ("Tribhuvan not to find place at Shahid Gate," 2012).<sup>440</sup> Over time then, the Narayanhiti Palace Museum was seen by the civil servants I interviewed as a threat to the concept of the museum in Nepal, and therefore as a threat to the post-monarchical state's ability to control the production of knowledge – in this case the construction of a shared understanding of the nation's past, that will impact its future.

Whilst the Palace Museum might not be coterminous with political ideology, it bears its imprint. The political process of democratization that was taking place outside the palace related directly to the decision to retain the ex-palace staff to run the museum. That they were all sidelined into a Special Group within the Miscellaneous Service of the Ministry of General

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<sup>439</sup> Though can draw parallels with Mahendra who took over the Rana Museum by opening it up to a wider audience, with the purpose of mass instruction. I don't count the Patan Museum here, as although independently funded, it's committee is Chaired by a government representative and the museum was officially opened by Birendra on 28 October 1997.

<sup>440</sup> Shanker Nath Rimal. Personal Communication, 5 July 2013. The Supreme Court later ruled against this decision.

Administration, with plans to run down the number of personnel, is indicative of the lack of a future plan for the development of the museum. They were, in effect, museumised with the rest of the palace, neutralised along with the rest of the king's possessions. However, I argue that the significance of their role in defining what should be shown to the public, and their continued presence, has evoked ghosts through their own selective remembering of the royal past through the place of the Narayanhiti Palace.

The opening of the Palace Museum did more than mark the transition of Nepal from a monarchy to a republic; it also created and curated public narratives in Kathmandu through a re-articulation of the past. Subsequent chapters will show how the act of re-naming marked the beginning of a social process by individuals and social groups that gave a shape to felt absences, fears and desires, the palace's transformation into a place of memory.

## Chapter Six | Remembering Nepal's royal past

The history of Nepal's royal past displayed within the space of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum is both distant and immediate. It reveals a political effort to promote an idea of the obsolescence of the royal past, and a use of the institution of museum as a primary vehicle for encouraging a public act of amnesia through an active process of forgetting, disguised by its open gates.

This chapter focuses on the ambiguities and contradictions that emerge from the recollection of Nepal's royal past in the curated spaces of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum. It rests upon an understanding of museums as spaces within which visitors engage in carefully choreographed performances, generating a limited range of both personal and collective memories (Annis, 1986; Bouquet, 2001; Duncan, 1995). I begin with an outline of the visitors' route through the Palace Museum, to simultaneously orient the reader and to draw attention to ways that it traces Nepal's royal past as the state meant it to be both remembered and forgotten. Emma Tarlo's written tour of the state-sponsored forgetting of the 1975 Emergency imprinted into the landscape of the city of Delhi offers an example of how narratives can be structured to trigger collective amnesia, either through the removal of evidence of the recent past, or its replacement with substitutes that serve to divert memories (2003, pp. 22–23).<sup>441</sup> I argue that the official narrative presented at the Palace Museum relies on such acts of erasure and substitution to resolve the central paradox embodied in the Palace Museum: the need to sever the royal past from the republican present, while at the same time preserving a sense of connection to and continuity with an institution from which the national identity was derived. This narrative discourages the construction and survival of any memory of

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<sup>441</sup> Tarlo uses an account of a tour through the City of Delhi that takes in the residences of two ex-Prime Ministers (Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi) to identify things once remembered and now forgotten, in order to interpret what she presents as a series of absences both in time and space.



Gyanendra as king, through the cultivation of a memory of Birendra. It also directs visitors to forget the political role of kingship, by focusing interpretation instead on the ceremonial requirements of the role. Together, these emphases make possible a public act of remembering (and forgetting).

By January 2017, the Palace Museum had received 2,095,849 visits by Nepalis, mostly from rural areas of Nepal who ex-palace staff say came to see, “they don’t want to know”.<sup>442</sup> Written comments in the Palace Museum’s visitors’ books and my observations and conversations with ex-palace staff suggest that the majority of these visitors experienced the royal past in the popular mode of early twentieth century museum visiting in South Asia, where museums were perceived by the mass public as places of wonderment (Guha-Thakurta, 2015).<sup>443</sup> These visitors have all shared the opportunity afforded by the interim government to enter the previously enclosed space of the palace, and in doing so, have all become part of a remembering of a royal past that legitimizes the political, cultural and historical legitimacy of newly republican Nepal. Theories of performativity suggest that there is no essence, origin, or reality prior to or outside of the enactment of a multiplicity of performances. It is the recurring regularity in performances that makes certain social norms acquire their authority, their aura of inevitability (Butler, 1990). I argue that the collective understanding of a royal past enacted within the spaces of the Palace Museum has become a reality *precisely because it is perpetually enacted*.

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<sup>442</sup> The official press release published in *Republica* newspaper on 5 February 2017 cites a total of 2.3 million visitors: 1.13 million Nepalis, 995,549 students from Nepal, 130,188 visitors from SAARC countries (including China), 55,224 visitors from the rest of the world.

<sup>443</sup> I observed visitor experiences on my own visits to the Palace Museum in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016, through the comments left in the Palace Museum’s visitors’ books (2009-2015), and through interviews undertaken with the help of research assistants in 2014. Visitors’ books (empty volumes left-over from the operation of the royal palace, used in the absence of anything new being provided) were held in the busy locker room, where visitors were required to deposit their belongings before entering the Palace Museum. Visitors could request to leave their comments, or were sometimes approached by ex-palace staff to do so.

This is not to suggest that visitors do not see, experience and interpret the Palace Museum in different ways, that they passively accept the official narrative on display, or that they have been oblivious to the ideological agendas that produced the Palace Museum. Whilst I cannot claim to understand the multiplicity of individual ways in which visitors have made sense of the Palace Museum, in this chapter I explore the accounts of visitors and reveal what is an uneasy co-existence of the original intention of the official narrative and its re-articulation within individual private memory. What was expressed by visitors as a sense of nagging doubt, usually obliquely, either as a feeling that something is missing or being withheld, or in relation to the poor upkeep of the palace building and grounds, I associate with their encounters with the absences produced through the process of displaying the museum. Published accounts of visits to the Palace Museum in 2008-9 by three prominent intellectuals, Professor of English literature and playwright Abhi Subedi (2009), essayist and author Manjushree Thapa (2011) and author, playwright and academic Sanjeev Uprety (2009) each used the Palace Museum as a space to think through recent events (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1992).<sup>444</sup> These educated, articulate English-speaking Nepali visitors are certainly an exception to the norm, but each reflect the ways in the memories evoked at the Palace Museum were unsettling to a contemporary Nepali audience through explorations of the contours of absence left behind. Like all those who had lived through recent events, for Subedi, Uprety and Thapa the curated absences were palpable. I draw on their accounts to make sense of the mostly fragmentary comments left by other visitors

Despite the political attempt to sever the palace's connection with the monarchy by deliberately placing it in the past, the voices of visitors to the Palace Museum suggest that royal memory risks being what Jan Assmann describes as "contra-present": It can highlight what is felt to have gone

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<sup>444</sup> Those by Subedi and Uprety were published in 2009 in Nepali in the Nepal daily, Kantipur. Thapa's account was published later, in 2001 and in English, as part of a collection of essays exploring Nepal's political transition.

wrong, what has disappeared or what has become marginalized (2011, p. 62). As put succinctly by Subedi, “challenged by history, they [successive government leaders] left it [the Palace Museum] alone with all the spectres of power of the bygone days to remain vying for visibility there.” (2016) The spectres of power Subedi refers to are the Shah monarchs and I argue that the vying for visibility is an active process made real by the actions (or non-actions) of the ex-palace staff who were left alone to run the Palace Museum day-to-day. Their actions are at the root of many of the nostalgic evocations recorded by visitors because they highlight the gaps of temporal distance and displacement created by the palace’s existence as a museum.

### **The Official Route**

When the palace opened as a museum, staff used a guided tour, a forty minute to one hour walk-through, to provide visitors with an overview of the Palace museum. The “conducted tour” was included within the cost of the ticket. All visitors were grouped into groups of 15 to 20, and taken through the palace building by an ex-member of palace staff. The staff were expected to follow the official script outlined to them in a short training session in February 2009 (Chapter Five), and the fact that ex-palace staff led the tour (whether they had actually worked in the main palace building or not), was intended to add an air of authenticity to the experience. The tour introduced visitors to the palace’s function as a symbol of office of the monarchy, presented an idyllic royal memory, and ended with the deaths of Birendra and eight members of the immediate royal family in 2001. It offers, as at Colonial Williamsburg (Handler & Gable, 1997), a “kinetic map”: an “official, managed overview... designed to focus the visitor’s attention – to make sure that newcomers... saw what [the interim government] wanted them to see.” (1997, p. 50).

By the time I undertook my first tour of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum in July 2012, at the outset of my research, the ex-palace staff had stopped

giving tours to all visitors, and had made the decision to allow most visitors to experience the spaces of the palace for themselves. Officially, I was informed by one Director of the Palace Museum that this decision enabled more people to visit the palace safely at a period of high demand (the museum received over 85,000 visitors in the first three months).<sup>445</sup> I later learned privately from other members of the ex-palace staff that this decision was influenced by their discomfort in presenting the officially sanctioned narrative and responding to visitor questions, comments and behavior (particularly questions about the 2001 palace massacre).<sup>446</sup> My tour was conducted by a member of staff officially designated as a tour guide.<sup>447</sup> By this time, tours were available on request, and tended to be offered only to foreign visitors, or those of a particular standing. In July 2013, 2014, and 2015 I was able to follow similar tours that all followed the official route through the site. I will now set out the “kinetic map” of the Palace Museum in order to both show how visitors literally enter and move through the Palace Museum, and the key tactics that work to create a temporary, shared identity amongst visitors.

The entrance to the museum is through the southern gate to the palace compound, at the north end of Durbar Marg (Figure 30). The route starts in the Kaski Baithak, the main state reception room on the first floor of the main palace building and immediately diverts from the central state wing, through parts of the guest wing (western wing), before using a set of back stairs to reach the throne room (central wing) and a few rooms within the

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<sup>445</sup> An article in *The Kathmandu Post* recorded 86,011 visitors, including 48,709 students and 5,015 foreigners between February 16 and May 14 2009 (“Visitors Flock Former Palace,” 2009). Presumably this had also been the explanation presented to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation. Mr Karki. Personal Communication, 11 July 2014.

<sup>446</sup> First expressed to me by Ms Lama. Personal Communication, 14 April 2012. These feelings of the ex-palace staff were expressed publicly for the first time in an interview in *Republica*, within days of my interviews with senior staff at the Palace Museum. This describes the way that they felt that visitors crossed “the line and ask questions that have no answers” (Upadhyay, 2014).

<sup>447</sup> Those giving the tours undertook additional training in early 2014. I was informed by them that this training entitled them to hold official Kathmandu city guide badges (and therefore earn additional income in their own free time). Mr Gurung. Recorded Interview, 20 July 2014.

private wing (eastern wing). It then exits the building and continues past the remains of Tribhuvan Sadan, the site of the royal palace massacre, and into the garden, where its route is less defined.

### *Negotiating Ambiguities*

After queuing outside the Palace Museum in scenes reminiscent of the annual festival of *Dasain*, visitors handed in their belongings (only drinking water is allowed to be carried inside) (Figure 31) and passed through a security check where a sign read “Visitors are not allowed to carry any kind of weapons and animals inside the museum.”<sup>448</sup> Walking up the sweeping drive, underneath a canopy of trees, visitors approached the left of the main marble staircase. Underneath a projection from the building that covers an entrance on the ground floor, was a table labelled: “The desk, used by H.M. The King to offer tika to the public on the occasion of Dashain {sic}.” Visitors were reminded that whilst the monarchy was in existence this was the only opportunity that the public had to enter the grounds of the palace.

Although the red carpet was no longer in place on the main staircase, pairs of metal fixings on each stair revealed its absence and visitors climbed the steps with a sense of anticipation. As they passed through the entrance to the building they were offered a leaflet, which informed them that 19 of the 52 rooms are open to the public, immediately revealing a contrast between what is seen and what remained unseen. Visitors did not see the rooms and buildings that have yet to be curated, as well as those used as storage spaces or offices for the museum’s staff – the circumstances of daily life in the palace complex today. They were left to wonder whether the unopened rooms, and the remainder of the palace complex, contained vast quantities of treasure, or were simply empty. Despite the sense that the palace is now open to public view, that view is carefully circumscribed.

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<sup>448</sup> The reference to the fact that ex- Maoist combatants still had the right to bear arms in 2009 when the Palace Museum opened. They used to leave them in the locker room, which made staff feel very uncomfortable.

Each time I visited the Palace Museum<sup>449</sup> it was extremely busy, with a continual stream of people (mainly Nepalis) walking through it at least two abreast.<sup>450</sup> Attendants stood back from the crowd, intervening only to keep visitors on the route outlined by the schematic map shown in figure 18, forcing them to experience each room 'in order'. Rather than proceeding from the Kaski Baithak (Figure 32), up the main staircase to the Gorkha (throne) room (as on the route opened under Birendra in 1993), the route turned to the west, entering the guest wing preventing visitors from imitating the king's route to the throne.

As visitors moved through the palace one label (in both Nepali and English) for each room identified a particular function. For example, in the Gorkha throne room at the centre of the tour, the label only referred to the ceremony of announcing the Crown Prince and not to other occasions, for example, the ceremony of the proclamation of the 1990 Constitution of Nepal which also took place here. In the Kaski Baithak, the label rather benignly told the visitor that it was here that the king received visiting Heads of State, and swore in the Prime Minister and the Chief of Justice. In 2012 there was no official reference to the last official function held in this space, which was an event presumably lodged in the minds of many Nepalis: the press conference at which Gyanendra officially confirmed to the Nepali public that he was stepping down, ending 239 years of monarchical rule. Instead the hall was set out as seen in earlier official photographs. Though my tour guide in 2012 did point out to me a cracked mirror on one of the columns, damage caused by the unruly behaviour of journalists at the press conference. This changed in 2013 when the chair used by Gyanendra was brought downstairs, and the scene of the press conference was partially re-created.

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<sup>449</sup> I did not obtain a ticket for each visit, but my ticket serial number (indicating the number of visitors from outside of Nepal and other SAARC countries) from 2010 is 10851 and from the start of my period of research in 2012 it is 22042.

<sup>450</sup> The Palace Museum had significantly fewer visitors in the summer of 2015 in the aftermath of the earthquakes that devastated areas of the country.

When built, each of the rooms at Narayanhiti were named after administrative districts of Nepal, the palace acting as a three-dimensional map of the kingdom, with the king ruling from Gorkha (Chapter Three). All but two of the 19 rooms included on the official route through the building are named after districts in central or western Nepal. In addition to following the path of the Gorkhali conquests in the late eighteenth century, 12 of these rooms have the names of districts within which the Maoists declared people's governments during the people's war (S. Sharma, 2004, p. 42), offering a clear symbol of the reversal of power.

Visitors were kept from fully entering the room by barriers that prevented them from picking up a photograph to examine the contents more clearly (Figure 33), to brush their fingers over the bedspreads, or to admire the view from a window. Each room was viewed from a particular vantage point, becoming an image, thus turning it into a still life (Gregory & Witcomb, 2007, p. 268). The Palace Museum claims to be in the business of actuality, but visitors enter the 'real' palace only to experience 'virtual' displays that evoke a sort of timelessness (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 167). A visitor might have had the feeling of getting close to the daily life of the royal family, but in practice could only imagine. This imagining was further prompted by the fact that the items within each room were unlabelled and often quite distant from the visitor's vantage point (Subedi, 2009b). In the Myagdi Room, labelled 'tea room for Heads of State and Ambassadors', for example, shelving units on either side of the window were covered with official photographs from visits from heads of state, presented as gifts in their frames. These were too distant to read any printed text on the photographs and so visitors spent time discussing and debating those people in the photographs that they can identify, remembering Nepal's diplomatic relationships supported by the role of the monarch.

My guide in 2012 emphasised the route of an official guest to the palace: for example, the label for the Parbat Room in the guest wing stated that this is

where visiting Heads of State and other dignitaries would sign the Palace visitor's book – though the book itself was not on display here. On the tour, she pointed out certain gifts given to Birendra and Aishwarya, such as a model of the Taj Mahal in the Rolpa room said to have been given by Girija Prasad Koirala to Birendra on the occasion of his 54<sup>th</sup> birthday (Figure 34).

The corridor that runs from the Rolpa Room to the Baitadi Room was lined with photographs of visiting heads of state in chronological order of their visits. It started with Pakistan in 1971 and ended with Mongolia in 2001, most photographs were therefore with Birendra and Aishwarya, highlighting the absence of any information about Gyanendra's time in the palace.<sup>451</sup> Room labels referred generically to the position of 'the king', and there were few references, either material or textual, to Gyanendra, or to any events after the date of the massacre in June 2001. Memorialization in museums is always selective and necessarily accompanied by amnesia (Shelton, 2006, p. 489). As king between 2001 and 2008, Gyanendra certainly left an imprint on the palace,<sup>452</sup> (in fact he was the only king to reside there), but his traces were left largely unmentioned, as conspicuous silences.

During the studies of the present royal palace, it is observed that, there are many gaps in chronology and therefore {sic} good deal of efforts will have to be made in order to present as complete picture as possible of the different dimensions of former royal palace... The rate of acquisition of the exhibits or collection is negligible {sic} in this museum.<sup>453</sup>

There is a question about the level of official consciousness of this amnesia. Jal Krishna Shrestha's document, referenced in the previous chapter, suggests pragmatic reasons for the focus on the office of the king, and the omission of evidence of Gyanendra's rule, i.e. they can only display what they have in the collection. Gyanendra was the only king to leave the palace

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<sup>451</sup> However, ex-palace staff pointed out to me that there were no formal state visits during the period 2001-2006.

<sup>452</sup> For example, Gyanendra re-organised the Dhanusha Room where he had display cabinets installed to show a collection of medals and orders. Personal communication. Ex-palace staff. 2014.

<sup>453</sup> Government of Nepal, Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture (2011). *Narayanhiti Palace Museum*. Kathmandu. p. 8.



alive, and with the opportunity therefore to take items away with him (which of course, he did).<sup>454</sup> International definitions of a museum, for example used by the International Council of Museums highlight the role of a museum as an institution that actively ‘acquires’ or ‘collects’ in the service of society. Shrestha stated “there must be a clear policy of making exhibits and collection in order to fulfil accepted objectives of the museum.” By virtue of the largely unchanging displays, and a lack of active collecting, the narrative that focuses on the office of the king and omits evidence of Gyanendra’s direct and unpopular rule as king has become normalized.

Upstairs, the route started in the Dolpa room, from which members of the royal family could discreetly view the programmes held in the throne room. This room contains a window that allows people to look through, but it acts as a mirror from the other side, providing privacy. Whimsical objects that were on display upon sideboards in this room from 2013 seemed incongruous with its stated official function, including a ship in a bottle and an elephant’s foot containing 4 brightly coloured candles. My guide in 2013 explained that some of these objects, taken from Tribhuvan Sadan, had been placed here recently.

### *The creation of an idyllic royal memory*

Passing through the Gorkha throne room in 2012 (Figure 35), I first noticed a number of five-rupee notes on and around the throne, which looked as if they had been offered by visitors. After two years, those responsible for staffing the Gorkha room admitted that they regularly placed them there, in order to encourage visitors to follow suit.<sup>455</sup> Next door, the small Mugu room

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<sup>454</sup> On a visit together to the Palace Museum on 21 July 2014, Ketaki Chester, granddaughter of Tribhuvan and a member of the ex-royal family, referred to a crystal swing-seat and a collection of clocks that had been in the main palace building and were at that time at Nirmal Niwas, Gyanendra’s new residence in Kathmandu.

<sup>455</sup> Whilst I was told by Mr Dalal that visitors believe the throne is of Laxminarayan (the Shah king’s were connected to Narayan/Vishnu (god of universe) and queen as Laxmi (god of wealth)), it was not clear to me if this was an enterprising venture on behalf of the staff, or a method of encouraging deferential behaviour towards the erstwhile monarchy. Personal Communication, 12 July 2014.

was labelled “personal collection of late Tribhuvan” and set out like an office, with a desk as the central feature. Originally arranged in 1993 when the palace was opened to the public by Birendra (Chapter Four), the desktop was covered in objects such as globes, ashtrays and inkstands, and the room felt like a shrine with flowers in a vase to the side of the desk chair and display cabinets surmounted by photographs of Tribhuvan and his wives. As a visitor, the effect of seeing the throne, followed by the personal belongings of Tribhuvan, reactivates a memory that links the office of king with Tribhuvan as the ‘father of democracy’. Traces of the previous opening of the palace to the public, for example, a labelled Vishnu mandala on the main staircase also refer to the Shah model of Hindu kingship.

Several rooms in the Palace Museum were set up as if they were still in use. For example, in the Lamjung dining room one of the three tables running down the centre of the long room was set out for 14 people for a 5-course meal (with no linen) and the label read “State banquets in the honour of visiting heads of state are held in this hall that can be seated about a hundred people”. In this room heads of state formally addressed each other. On my visit visitors expressed admiration as they peered in. During the period before the palace opened as a museum, staff re-shuffled furniture and objects from across the palace compound (Chapter Five) to recreate settings and give the impression of the palace being ‘lived-in’ by the royal family. Here, the king and queen are evoked in their role of host and hostess.

After returning downstairs, visitors entered the Gulmi Room (Figure 36), a study, which a label identified as the king’s private office, used for the planning of functions in the Kaski Hall. The desk appears to show personal objects, such as a lighter in the shape of a cannon. Manjushree Thapa recalled stopping in this room to reflect on whether this was the location from “where they [the kings] had – again and again – quashed the popular aspiration to democracy” (2011, p. 220). Even during the period of renewed multi-party democracy of the 1990s, Birendra was heavily involved in the political process, and the palace was the centre of the state. During the civil

war, Gyanendra authorised the Royal Nepal Army to kill civilians. Thapa lingered, trying to discern meaning from the objects on display, for example “a tapestry of the Potala Palace, with ‘The People’s Government of Tibet Autonomous Region China’ embroidered in” and a rare memento of Gyanendra, “a touristy memorial plaque of Gyanendra and Komal Shah in Singapore.” (2011, pp. 220–221) Tour guides always made it clear to visitors that there was another office in the building now occupied by the foreign ministry from which important decisions were made, i.e. this did not happen here.

One of the last two rooms on the route is the Dhankuta Room (Figure 37) where the label read “the bedroom used by the former king and queen”. In fact, neither Mahendra nor Birendra and their respective queens slept in the palace, except on state occasions. Gyanendra and Komal used the adjoining rooms in Trisul Sadan, the eastern wing of the palace, not open to public view. This room was the one in which I regularly witnessed visitors engaged in animated conversations that appeared to demonstrate a voyeuristic interest in the daily life of the royal family, an interest that my guide confirmed ex-palace staff made efforts to cultivate. Either side of the bed are displayed a series of family photographs of skiing and climbing holidays, a vase of flowers and a telephone. Together with the musty smell, they infused the room with an air of another, expired, time. There is one framed photograph of Gyanendra and his wife, the other photographs are all of Birendra and Aishwarya. Above the bed is hung a painting with a poem said to be signed by Chandani Shah (the pen name used by Aishwarya) that visitors often try to read. The placement of personal effects here suggests a value placed on preserving attitudes, rather than historical accuracy.<sup>456</sup> Knell suggests that, as in the theatre where we might imagine and believe, “in the museum our imagining can be so much more believable because we are led to think that all around us has arrived objectively and all is as it seems to be” (Knell, 2010, p. 4). Through this intimate encounter

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<sup>456</sup> Photographs seen by the author, dated from July 2008, show the room bereft of photographs.

with what is understood to be the 'royal bed', visitors are encouraged to recall what they know about the personal attributes of Birendra. These memories are inflected by a pervasive narrative that encourages his presentation as a modest and patriotic king. For example, Sanjeev Uprety wrote of his encounter "The room was small, with attached bathroom and a wardrobe, simple like late King Birendra." (Uprety, 2009)

On the ground floor of the palace in the Dhanusha Room, my guide reminded me that this is where the king would offer *tika* (a smudge of powder or paste on the forehead), in this case, as a blessing from the king, to high ranking officials on Vijaya Dashami, the 10th day of the national festival, Dasain and confer medals on other occasions. By calling to mind this act, the museum positions the king as the 'father' of the nation (by giving *tika* not just to his blood relatives, but also to his citizens). Visitors are asked to recall images of people (citizens, officers, military personnel) beholding the king in his ceremonial roles. They become complicit in upholding the image of a 'gift-giving' monarch. I then left the building through a small entrance hall and the museum attendants were replaced with armed soldiers, stationed around the perimeter of the building.

Exiting the building, after passing around the side of the palace past its western entrance, visitors walked past the remains of a building, labelled "Tribhuvan Sadan, the site of the royal palace massacre. This building was dismantled after the incident." A large display board included a plan drawing of the building, with 4 numbered points marked up. These gave the locations at which the bodies of various members of the royal family were discovered. People gathered at the sign, pored over the information given there, and discussed the remains of the building in front of them (Figure 38). This was followed by a series of labels that claimed to mark the exact spot on which each person was killed, injured or from where they were fired upon, e.g. "4: Dry pond where seriously-wounded Crown Prince Dipendra was found in a critical condition." At each of these points a small crowd gathered and people pointed to bullet marks still visible in the masonry. As

discussed in the previous chapter, official articulations of the museum when it opened seemingly invited ‘the people’ of Nepal to find out what happened there, yet it is the bullets that are the object of the sentences here, not people. For example, “the spot in which the bullet was fired on Queen Aishwarya,” does not mention who fired the bullet.

Some trees and shrubs in the gardens that follow are labelled and my guide in 2012 quickly drew me into the garden, away from the site of the massacre, informing me that many plants were brought by the king and queen from foreign visits. She identified particular plants such as *Brunfelsia uniflora* (as she pointed out, appropriately known commonly as yesterday, today, tomorrow).

At the end of my visits, after collecting their belongings from the small, one-storey building by the southern gate, visitors gathered, on the outside of the internal gates, to take photographs of themselves. The exterior of the palace building became a photographic backdrop, obscured by the presence of the metal latticework of the gate. The sight of the exterior of the palace building constituted both the end point and a high point of a visitor’s journey through the Palace Museum. This state sanctioned viewpoint has the effect of placing the visitors in the foreground, and the palace, behind the gate, firmly in the background, out of reach (Figure 39).

The spaces of the Palace Museum contained very little textual interpretation, creating a space for discussion and negotiation. Visitors were left free to assimilate the spaces for themselves and much interpretation took place through discussion. Very few visitors visited alone, and most are with friends or relatives. A visit to the Palace Museum was characterized by dialogue and interaction among the visitors, as well as between them and museum staff: “a major feature of the museum ‘tour’ was the speculation from visitors about what some of the pieces were.” (P. Dixit, 2010) Visiting the Palace Museum is a communal experience, that draws upon common images in the minds of visitors.

## **The mass appeal of the Palace Museum**

The Palace Museum has three different ticket categories, according to nationality. Each category of ticket is printed with a set of rules of behavior on the reverse. The ticket for Nepali citizens has the most rules (six) on the reverse, indicative of the anticipated mass audience to the museum (Figure 40):

1. We request you to cooperate to the inspection by the security.
2. Visitors should put their items inside locker.
3. Please don't touch items in exhibition room.
4. If you lose key of your locker box, you will be fined as specified to get your items back.
5. It is prohibited to take photographs inside Museum.
6. You will be penalized in case of any damage inside Museum.

The attempt to prevent behaviours such as exhibit-touching reflected an expectation of a mass, largely uneducated, public, rather than the educated middle class/ elite (Mathur and Singh, 2015, p. 5). The Palace Museum was dependent on a mass audience, both financially, and in order to fulfil its purpose of consigning the monarchy to the past.

The institution of museum was adopted by Nepal's politicians because its accepted, and widely understood place in a transnational order had the power to consign the monarchy to the past. But unlike the civil servants involved in establishing the museum who were concerned about the Palace Museum's ability to educate, or the ex-palace staff who called upon the museum's civilizing force to generate respect for the monarchy, the interim government actively encouraged the Palace Museum's popular image. In 2009, a television documentary was filmed at the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, and thereafter broadcast regularly on the state-owned television

station, Nepal TV.<sup>457</sup> The programme juxtaposed archive film footage of Birendra undertaking the ceremonial roles of office within the space of the palace with scenes of museum visitors then passing through the same spaces. It guided viewers to see the Palace Museum as a place where they could see, wonder at the building that had once been the centre of power, and understand the new order, for themselves. This wonderment mode of museum visiting (Chapter Five), served the state, as people came to stand in, touch, and see for themselves, the hallowed spaces of the ex-king.<sup>458</sup> For example, in her account, Manjushree Thapa recalls being overcome by emotion when walking up the steps. She overheard another visitor, speaking to his family: “With wonder in his voice, he said, ‘We’ve come to the palace, *hai?*’” Feelings of amazement were also regularly evoked through comments left in the Palace Museum’s visitors’ books, for example this visitor from on 10 April 2011:

It’s so beautiful ... like a dream. I really feel like some great thing observing life. Thanks.<sup>459</sup>

In the context of Indian museums, the behaviour of visitors has been partly attributed to the mutual gaze of *darsan*, “the exchange of vision between a devotee and a deity that lies at the heart of Hindu forms of worship.” (Mathur & Singh, 2015, p. 9). I don’t use the concept here to suggest that visitors to the Palace Museum perceived the ex-king as an incarnation of Vishnu, and seized the opportunity to apprehend the divine within the sacred space of the palace. Rather, if the act of seeing in this context is a form of contact (Pinney, 2004, p. 193), I suggest that the population of

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<sup>457</sup> The majority of the visitors interviewed in 2014 stated that they visited the Palace Museum after seeing its interiors broadcast on television. The author viewed a recorded copy of the TV programme in question, shown to her by ex-palace staff on the occasion of her first visit in 2013. The programme was broadcast on Nepal TV, the producers are unknown.

<sup>458</sup> Manjushree Thapa writes “A sign beside the [alligator] skin said, clearly enough, ‘Please do not touch’. The man patted the skin and walked on.” (2011, p. 216)

<sup>459</sup> This comment was written in English. Visitors left comments in both English and Nepali. The majority of the comments in the books I saw were in Nepali and I indicate which have been translated.

Nepal was encouraged to visit the Palace Museum in order to enable them to fully comprehend the demise of the monarchy. By experiencing for themselves the formerly forbidden spaces of the palace, the transfer of the space of the palace into the hands of the people is completed, and it is embodied as their national property. The ability of the official historical narratives on display in the museum to affect a collective memory of a royal past is supported by this mode of museum visiting by the way it “creates bonds of intimacy and allegiance that transcend the specifics of what is displayed or narrativised in any given context.” (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1992) In this case, allegiance to the new, republican Nepal, as communicated by a visitor from Biratnagar in 2013 in one of the Palace Museum Visitors’ books:

Royal palace is national property, and ours all Nepali. I want to suggest that king’s crown should keep in main gate. I want to say concern agency for my request. Anyhow it must manage to keep crown in main gate. It is voice of my friends too.

The request by this visitor, and his friends, for the crown to go on public display in the museum, was common throughout the period of my research and has been repeatedly articulated in the Nepali print media since the Palace Museum opened in 2008.<sup>460</sup> The symbolic power of the crown as a representation of the monarchy is described in this extract from a publication written in English on the occasion of the coronation of Birendra in 1975.

The crown may thus be said to be the very soul of Nepalese social and national life...the unifier, co-ordinator and consolidator of diverse tastes, talents and forces in the nation... (Singh, 1975, p. 2)

That visitors (and non-visitors) repeatedly call for its display, and asserted their “right to view”, as stated by one visitor, is suggestive of a desire for

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<sup>460</sup> For example, Mani Neupane quoted by Pratibha Rawal: “The way government authorities have been evasive about the crown fuels speculations in people’s minds... Some people have even begun to wonder whether the crown is still in Nepal.” (“Delay in exhibiting crown, other valuable items fuels speculation,” 2013)



visitors to gain proximity, to see (and touch) this ultimate symbol of kingship, an act that would finally enable an end to the monarchy in their collective imagination.

Most of the Nepali visitors who wrote in the Palace Museum's visitors' books came from outside the Kathmandu valley.<sup>461</sup> Canclini writes about the role of state-sponsored visual organisations of knowledge within societies with high illiteracy rates, providing the scenography and motivation for a set of rituals that naturalises the patrimony (Canclini, 1995, p. 115).<sup>462</sup> He describes museum visitors as being deceived by the illusion that the museum's authority rests upon its objective representation of the past. It is certainly true that at the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, no effort is made to expose the artifice of the displays and visitors are encouraged to believe that they are experiencing the reality of royal life, as demonstrated by these three visitors to the Palace Museum:

In the past, ordinary people cannot enter inside the palace but now all public can enter inside and can see the royal life style. (Padam Thapa, age 30, from Pokhara)

I am able to see the photos of kings and queens. Chair; table the things which kings and queens were used. Guest's dining room, cup and plate. Rooms are too good. (Bahadur Sen, age 72, from Kathmandu)

In the village we are not educated one and we don't know much about it before coming here. Indeed, I had a curiosity about the royal living style. (Bimal Bolekha, age 29, from Makwanpur)<sup>463</sup>

Despite the individual qualities of any particular visit, all visitors share the opportunity afforded by post-monarchical Nepal to enter what was a palace reserved exclusively for the royal family and their staff. Shuffling through state rooms or peering at the so-called official bed of the king and queen,

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<sup>461</sup> This echoed the fact that few people I engaged with in Kathmandu during the period of my research had visited the Palace Museum.

<sup>462</sup> UNICEF record the total adult literacy rate in Nepal from 2008-2012 as 57.4%. See: [https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nepal\\_nepal\\_statistics.html](https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nepal_nepal_statistics.html) (accessed 30 August 2018)

<sup>463</sup> All three visitors' comments translated by Rina Chaudhary in 2014.

everyone becomes part of re-remembering a royal past that legitimises the political, cultural, and historical authority of the nascent republican state.

### **Contours of absence**

Taken individually, the accounts by Abhi Subedi, Manjushree Thapa and Sanjeev Uprety offer some sense of the individual ways in which visitors make sense of the space of the Palace Museum. Taken together, these accounts reveal the contours of absence produced by the official narrative described above.

Uprety's account addressed the very definite message intended by turning the palace into a public place. He used both the physical space of the palace and the analogy of time as narrative devices to highlight what he saw as a separation of the palace (and therefore the monarchy) from the citizens of Nepal and the changing political situation (2009). Referring to the *Jan Andolan* of 1990, he recalled looking back to the buildings on Durbar Marg as he entered the Palace Museum, and wondering if "the king had seen the mass of people participating ... shouting against him...He might have seen but couldn't read the time on the clock tower." (Uprety, 2009) Referring to the Ghantaghar clock tower on Durbar Marg that was visible from the southern entrance to the palace, Uprety reflected that "the attitude of the palace and its surrounding failed to understand and address the changes that time was demanding."<sup>464</sup> He then drew attention to the contrast between the re-creation of a stable imagined past in the museum, preserved in an atmosphere of cultivated neglect behind palace walls, and the political instability of the capital in newly Republican Nepal. Referring again to the Ghantaghar clock tower, but this time in the present, as he exited the museum, he stated "The time of nation was dynamic. Past incidents and accidents were left behind. Time is moving ahead." (Uprety, 2009)

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<sup>464</sup> Interesting, all three authors reflected on the different perspective on the city from inside the gates of the palace compound.

Despite recognition that the time of the monarchy was now in the past, the events of the recent past were for many too conspicuous to forget. In a seminar given later in 2009, Subedi reflected that his response to the Palace Museum bore a direct relationship to his “experience of the turbulent and important historical moments experienced in the last three years and more.” (Subedi, 2009a) Uprety’s account makes it clear that he was not alone in visiting the museum in order to seek answers.

Many visitors, like me felt that the tour inside the palace museum was incomplete. The place where the royal massacre took place was all empty. The face of history has been hidden somewhere inside this emptiness. It is hard to understand the history. (Uprety, 2009)<sup>465</sup>

Uprety was also not alone in finding the vacated rooms of the palace as spaces where furniture is allowed to gather dust, where the atmosphere of abandonment was palpable.<sup>466</sup> One contemporary newspaper headline, two years after the museum opened, read, “*tyaha raja rani hunthyo*” (K. R. Thapa, 2011), meaning “the king and queen used to be there.” The title suggests a corollary question, what was there to see and understand? The author of this piece, Kalam Rabi Thapa, concluded that “Bereft of royals, Narayanhiti Palace is simply a junkshop of mediocre art. But it is still possible, if you find yourself in a quiet corner, to imagine how it must have been before the fall. When kings were gods, life must have seemed simpler, and Nepal’s problems less insurmountable.” (2011) Monica Risnicoff de Gorgas observes that historic houses invoke “a particular type of mental and emotional reaction” which is “produced by the presence and absence of the people who once lived in the house” (2001, p. 10). She highlights the importance of absence to the ability of the museum to invoke the presence of the past. In the case of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, the absence

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<sup>465</sup> Echoed by visitors interviewed in 2014, and by entries to visitors’ books between 2012-2014

<sup>466</sup> This description bears an uncanny resemblance to Clare Harris’s account of the Dalai Lama’s Summer Palace, the Norbulingka, abandoned when he fled Tibet in 1959 and now part of what she argues is a carefully controlled cityscape that both creates and curates public narratives (Harris, 2012, p. 183).

experienced by visitors actively encouraged them to fill the space of the museumised palace with their own imagination, and draw upon their own understanding of past events.

In my experience, most visitors to the Palace Museum do not spend their time inspecting the objects in each room. Rather, they seem preoccupied with “remembering” palace life, represented in the palace. Thapa described the voyeurism of “peering into rooms and visualising Birendra or Gyanendra (take your pick) taking a nap or perusing the latest district development reports (stacked up impressively in the study). Did the child Dipendra ever run through Myagdi and Parbat to peer at his father, who he might have been warned (by his mother) not to disturb on any account? Did he come across the late monarch amusing himself by flicking the globes on either side of his desk, and think, "That's what I want to do one day"? (M. Thapa, 2011) A record of individual remembering that referenced only a royal past and did not consider the guardianship, and authority, of the state in the creation of the displays at the Palace Museum.

The accounts by Thapa and Uprety exemplify the absence of the state in popular constructions of the former palace. Like my interviewees, both authors framed their experiences solely in terms of the building’s former royal inhabitants. Subedi was alone in using his account to raise questions about the construction of these absences (2009b). He has described museum visiting as a form of mental travel, a way of understanding the world around him, through the representation of its past (2009a). When Subedi described his journey through the palace, he referred directly to the mechanisms of display, for example, the lack of textual interpretation, the presence of rope barriers, and the role played by staff. Gregory and Witcomb write that curatorial decisions to leave a site empty demand a more inquisitive response from visitors, “requiring them to produce their own interpretative narratives as a means to breach the gaps left open.” (2007, p. 269) In order to draw a comparison with museums that actively interpret their exhibits to visitors, using text and visual means, Subedi describes the

distance, both physical and metaphorical, between visitors to the Palace Museum and the history of the monarchy in Nepal.

I saw a waterfall-like painting, maybe made by Balkrishna Sama, but couldn't read the name properly. Many things displayed in this museum are far from visitors, unlike in many other museums, it seems from the beginning, the museum is frightened. The king's chair at Gorkha room has been kept very safely. The ceiling has been portrayed with the ancient Hindu pictures. Nobody can read them.

He drew the reader's attention to what the museum might be frightened of, and therefore not presenting, "the hard years of violence and killings" (2009b), for example the king deploying the army against his own citizens, or the Maoists' role in the conflict. Subedi viewed the Palace Museum as having the potential to open up new dialogues with the institution of monarchy, at once "cultural, artistic and political." But his visit, like Uprety's, revealed the ambiguity of the space, within which he found it impossible to fully uncover the history of the monarchy, as he knew it.

### *Nostalgia*

The constructed absence of the period 2001-2008 enabled ex-palace staff to give shape to the absences discussed above. Their actions (or non-actions) prompt a nostalgic response from visitors to the idyllic royal memory on show. This is exemplified in Manjushree Thapa's account of her experience of the Dhankuta Room (the royal bedroom) on her visit to the Palace Museum:

The next room, the Dhankuta Room, was a bedroom. And not a bedroom, I realised. *The* bedroom. The bedroom of the king and queen. It was all so paltry: The scent of mildew in the air. The stained carpet on the floor. The small lumpy bed. The hideous paintings and chintzy bric-a-brac. 'But where did they change their clothes? Where are the closets?' I sputtered to the attendant. She pointed at a built-in closet along one wall. It was quite small. 'That's all? All their clothes fit in there?' I asked, aghast. 'And that's the bathroom,' she said, pointing at a closed door. 'It used to be open, it used to be part of the tour, but you know how people are. They began to use the bathroom,' she said.

'Terrible, terrible,' I said.  
She pointed at a hideous painting above the bed. 'That's an imaginary image painted by Queen Aishwarya' she said.  
'And this really was the king and queen's bed?' I asked, still quite unable to believe it.  
My bed, at home, was bigger than this.  
She nodded.  
'They both slept here?' I said.  
'Yes,' she said. She did not share my sense of amazement.  
'It just seems so – small,' I explained.  
'Eh, it only looks small because it's square,' she said. 'In reality, it's very big – seven feet by seven feet.'  
She was, like me, just over five feet tall. And indeed, most of the visitors to the museum were no taller. This was, after all, a country of short people. Malnourished people who seemed impressed enough with the palace. (2011, pp. 221–222)

Thapa's experience is typical. I overheard dialogues like this, between visitors and staff, on each of my visits to the Palace Museum. The official room labels make no mention of any of the individuals who inhabited the palace, but mention of the painting above the bed, as well as the positioning of family photographs, have the effect of recalling memories of Birendra as king. In order to maintain the believability of the space as a royal bedroom, staff offered varying explanations for the modest size of the bed and 'simple' nature of the interior decoration. These explanations have ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous, including this quite extraordinary rationale given by Buddhi Bahadur Gurung in his published guidebook:

To make it earthquake proof this room is smaller than the other rooms of Narayanhiti Royal Palace. As the belief goes that if the room is small then its ceiling is also small hence there will be less chances of it falling. Taking this into account this Dhankuta room is small compared to other rooms of the Royal palace. (Gurung, 2013)

When Mahendra commissioned the palace, it was the larger Dhading room, next door, that was to be the royal bedroom. But this fact, alongside the fact that he stayed in Mahendra Manjil, Birendra in Sri Sadan and Gyanendra in Trisul Sadan were irrelevant. It was imperative to the ex-palace staff to have a space in which the personality of Birendra as modest and patriotic could be recalled.

The term 'nostalgia' comes from the Greek for a painful longing (*algia*) to return home (*nostos*). Interventions like these by ex-palace staff encourage visitors to experience nostalgia, defined by Susan Stewart as a form of sadness without an object, something that exists as a narrative that attaches itself to an impossibly pure belief (1999, p. 22), in this case reflecting the uncertainty of the political present, through continued interest in Birendra following his death. A common response to the cultivation of the memory of Birendra was for visitors to imagine a previous period of stability and security, to associate this with his reign, and to yearn for the return of the king. This is expressed here, in a comment left by a visitor to the Palace Museum from Birgunj in September 2012.

The palace was not as we imagined.  
I was overwhelmed by the memory of King and Queen.  
Memory of the whole family of King Birendra.  
We missed King Birendra very badly. I feel very sad and my soul wishes he shall come back again.

This was immediately followed by the following comment from an anonymous visitor, who wrote:

We need Monarchy.

Of course, as Stewart wrote "Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack." (Stewart, 1993, p. 23). The 'felt lack' of the monarchy was used by ex-palace staff to draw attention to historical incongruities between the past and present. It was a "reflective nostalgia", that drew attention to the painful longing of 'algia' by offering an intimate experience of the dead ex-king, in compensation for the temporal distance created by the museum, and a memory of Birendra as a king who embodied care for the people, in compensation for the displacement of the monarchy for new, and as yet uncertain state structures (Boym, 2001, pp. 44–45).

The state-sponsored narrative used restorative nostalgia to retain a connection with the nation's distinctive royal heritage, but would have visitors consign the monarchy to the past. According to Boym (2001), restorative nostalgia focuses on 'nostos', and aims to reconstruct the lost home, disabling engagement with the present through an idolization of the past. The selective presentation of an idyllic royal memory through the reconstruction of the spaces of the palace was intended to re-establish a stable image of the past, in this case a royal past. The "reflective nostalgia" was not a narrative the interim government intended to create, but one that was prompted by ex-palace staff who recalled the presence of the ex-royal family, in order to draw attention to their absence, and repeatedly re-created by visitors, as they walked through the spaces of the Palace Museum.

Manjushree Thapa recalled a conversation with a soldier on guard duty, who speculated on the return of the monarchy. She writes:

In the same mournful tone, he said, 'The thing is, if the same King' – he meant King Birendra – 'were alive now, none of this would have happened.' The monarchy would not have been abolished, he meant. (2011, p. 224)

Thapa is clear in her belief that "The abolition of the monarchy was the one clear achievement of [her] generation." That she felt disconcerted by this melancholic relation to the past is revealing of the potential of reflective nostalgia to disrupt the museumising project, which is intended to disengage Nepal from a national identity bound to the monarchy. Whether consciously or unconsciously enabled, it marks a refusal on the part of ex-palace staff to accept the dominant narrative, that intends to render the monarchy obsolete.

### *Contested Memories*

One effect of ending the guided tours, and leaving visitors to the Palace Museum to produce their own narratives, is that the memories visitors create can contest the meanings of the objects, histories and memories provided by the official route through the museum. The difference between



the political attempt to secure an image of a unified national identity under the banner of transparency, and the reality of a space notable for what it does not say, is brought into particular focus at the remains of Tribhuvan Sadan.

Sanjeev Uprety recounted a list of questions about the massacre that went through his mind whilst walking through this space, questions that were at the forefront of most visitors' minds in 2009:

How was the response of bodyguards when they heard the firing? What did the ADCs do once the crown prince was high on so called black drug? Will the marks and signs of bullets remain mysterious? Can citizens be informed about the massacre? Will they know the truth? Or will this remain mysterious? (2009)

Manjushree Thapa recalled her visit, when, "Everyone around him stared at the brick outlines [of Tribhuvan Sadan], which said nothing, nothing at all" (2010, 223), here visitors are left with royal ghosts.

Ashish Dhakal Upadhyay was six years old when the massacre took place and it was a forbidden topic of conversation at home. Ten years later, visiting the palace with his school, he wrote an account of his visit, that for him was haunted by the presence of 'royal ghosts'. He visited the museum, in the hope of getting close to the truth of what happened:

I went to have a look at the place where the massacre had taken place. But to my dismay, the place, or Tribhuvan Sadan as it was called, had been pulled down. Piles of tenebrous debris lay at the place where the building formally stood. I returned, disheartened.<sup>467</sup>

Ex-palace staff informed me that the ruins of Tribhuvan Sadan were not seen by visitors to the Palace Museum to offer the "clear picture of the incident" promised by Prime Minister Dahal in his speech. They felt that

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<sup>467</sup> Ashish Dhakal Upadhyay was an intern at the *Republica* newspaper in 2014 who interviewed the second in command of operations and security at the Palace Museum. We met to discuss his motivation for the interview and he kindly shared with me a report he wrote as a school pupil in 2011.

because photographs of the official investigation of the crime scene could be found on the internet, the contrast with the information presented at the site encouraged visitors to believe that the ex-palace staff and the government had conspired to hide information and evidence.<sup>468</sup> This is supported by these comments in the museum's visitors' books.

I think Bullet's marks are keeping for show, it is not real (Shiva Paudel from Kalanki, 2012).

It's glad to observe the palace but the royal massacre is not well revealed in the palace (Sumitra Rimal, Sanu Ram Pandey 2013).

A building of the Royal Palace, where Royal Massacre took place was completely destroyed. Observing the destroyed palace, we felt as if it was a step to hide crimes committed. (name illegible 2013)<sup>469</sup>

And this comment made by a visitor during an interview:

While I saw the place where king and his family dead I felt so sad and came sympathy in my heart. The palace is so solitary and silent. (Bhagawat Devi Kumar from Birgunj 2014)<sup>470</sup>

These accounts serve to destabilize the official narrative of openness, intended to unite, as visitors continue to question whom and what they can trust. Analysis by Lakier (2009) and Hutt (2006) demonstrated how the person of King Birendra was actively delinked from the institution of the palace in the aftermath of the 2001 massacre by re-casting what was a familial conflict as a threat to national sovereignty. Lakier argued that the martyrdom of Birendra gave people a space to voice their dissent against

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<sup>468</sup> Ex-palace staff noticed that as visitors interpreted the numbered locations within the remains of Tribhuvan Sadan, they realised that they were not consistent with the published chronological order of events on that evening, and therefore immediately distrusted what they saw. Mr Shrestha. Personal Communication, 10 July 2014.

<sup>469</sup> Sumitra Rimal and anonymous translated by Radhika Thapa in 2014.

<sup>470</sup> Interviewed and transcribed by Rina Chaudhary in 2014.

the institution of the monarchy (2009, pp. 228-9) by retaining affection for the murdered king. While the political decision to end the public route through the palace at the site of the murder of Birendra intended to conscript the “essential mystery of royal authority” (Lakier 2009, p. 229) into the service of the nation, these visitors’ voices reveal a transference of doubts away from the monarchy and onto post-royal hierarchies, and serve to highlight the political instability of the ‘new Nepal.’

In July 2009, Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal (CPN Unified Marxist Leninist) declared his intention to rebuild Tribhuvan Sadan (“Nepal to save royal massacre home,” 2009). During this period of postwar political transition, claims to be able to offer the ‘truth’ of the massacre carried with them an opportunity to garner political credibility.<sup>471</sup> With no further investigation planned into the events of the massacre, the intention was to adopt the method of display used inside the palace building by re-creating the rooms of Tribhuvan Sadan, and thereby render believable people’s imagining of the official account of the events of that night, as published in the report produced by the Chief Justice and Speaker of the Nepali Parliament.<sup>472</sup> For Nepal’s politicians, reconstructing Tribhuvan Sadan offered an imagined stability in the face of urban and political instability.

According to the Director of the Museum in 2014, architectural drawings of the Tribhuvan Sadan were commissioned directly by the Prime Minister in 2013, but the Finance Ministry refused to provide a budget for the project and it was allocated instead by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation. The re-building project began in 2014 and was divided into three

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<sup>471</sup> The reconstruction was seen as the ultimate legacy project for the Palace Museum Director. Lekh Bahadur Karki, Director between 2011 and 2014 who stated proudly “I had made the Tribhuvan Sadan.” Personal Communication, 01 August 2014.

<sup>472</sup> In my conversations with both the Museum Director from 2011-2014 (Lekh Bahadur Karki) and from 2014 (Rohit Dhunghana) it became clear that there was no intention to provide any further evidence, for example to display the photographs from the investigation. There was also no intention to use the space to commemorate members of the ex-royal family.

stages, each lasting one financial year.<sup>473</sup> As no technical drawings of the building were available and so few people had access to the site, the first stage saw the commissioning of a government engineer to create drawings based on examination of the remains of the building, existing photographs and the recollections of staff. The drawings and accompanying report showed no attempt to reconstruct the whole building as it was in Tribhuvan's time: it was to be a selective reconstruction of the parts of the building where the shootings took place.<sup>474</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the previous chapter, I wrote about the way in which the institution of museum was used to effectively consign the monarchy to the past, thereby removing any threat of its return, disengaging the monarchy from construction of national identity, and legitimizing the new republican regime. In this chapter I have explored the relationship between institutional mediation of the past and contemporary public recollection. It presents a Nepali experience of opening new dialogues with a site that has a very old cultural heritage (Subedi, 2016).

Nepal's transition from a monarchy to a republic required the re-collection of a royal past that was distinct from the present: a royal past that was readily expressed in the ex-official spaces of the Narayanhiti Palace because it played on jointly held memories of the place. Under the monarchy, ordinary Nepalis could only imagine how the royal family lived and died. The spaces of the palace were visible only through tightly controlled media coverage, intended to uphold the position of the monarchy and that focused on the ceremonial role of the king (Chapter Four). Within the Palace Museum we

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<sup>473</sup> I visited the site of the reconstruction in 2015 and was surprised that the funds for 2015-16 were released (budget year starts in mid-July), despite the relief effort required after the earthquakes of the same year that left hundreds of thousands of Nepalis without homes. In 2016 ex-Palace staff took me to a store room in Naniganj (just behind Tribhuvan Sadan) to show me the wooden window frames that came from the building. Their intention was to highlight that the carving of new window frames for the reconstruction was unnecessary and a waste of money.

<sup>474</sup> Report seen by author in July 2014 and 2015.

find a narrative of Nepal's royal past staged in a series of state rooms that present the ceremonial roles of kingship but not its political decision making. It is a past that substitutes the memory of one king in lieu of another. The production of absences and use of substitutions manifests itself in the form of a myth, an idyllic royal memory that can be used in the present. This myth is not the past as it was, but marks an attempt to resolve the contradictions inherent in the museum by enabling a connection with the cultural institution of the monarchy whilst making it clear that the king no longer rules Nepal. The aim was to construct a collective memory that would support a sense of unity and a sense of security.

When visitors enter the palace, on one hand everything is there for them to see and experience for themselves. They participate in the continued creation of a collective memory that disassociates the royal past from the republican present in their hundreds of thousands. But whilst the Palace Museum was intended to become a depoliticised space of culture and tradition, not all visitors have reimagined the past as Nepal's politicians intended. They notice the rooms and national symbols that are not on display, they question the lack of information at the site of the massacre, and when confronted with opportunities to recall Birendra, they express feelings of loss and longing.

The Palace Museum, as the site of the massacre, has formed a locus for the political need to hark back to the unity created in its aftermath. The destabilising impact of not being seen to offer the 'truth' of the massacre is recognised in the numerous political attempts to do so. The state's attempt to manipulate the past in order to "conquer and spatialize time" (Boym 2001 49) was challenged from the outset, by ex-palace staff who were involved in decisions about what to display, and how to interpret the rooms of the palace. The function of the idyllic royal past is inverted through their actions in order to highlight the irrecoverability of the monarchy and the disjunction. Visitors make sense of the spaces of the Palace Museum within the context of an unstable present and the presence of two interpretive projects. Whilst many do just come and go, there are certainly those who in their expression

of a sense of longing destabilise any certainty that the government will provide a stable future. I go on to explore the position of the ex-palace staff in the next chapter.

## Chapter Seven | Behind the Scenes at the Palace Museum<sup>475</sup>

For those who worked first as part of the Palace Service, became an estranged member of the Civil Service,<sup>476</sup> and then bore the responsibility to run the Palace Museum, the experience of the re-designation and transition of the Narayanhiti Palace to the Narayanhiti Palace Museum was a lived one. Their experiences, which they shared with me over a period of four years, revealed the personal impact of what for them felt like a tearing of the palace away from the monarchy in order to create a dissociated monarchical past, of which they became a part. I have argued that their continued presence has undermined the official narrative because of their own selective remembering of the royal past through the place of the Narayanhiti Palace.

Managing a collective representation of Nepal's royal past at the Palace Museum entails managing staff and staff expectations, as much as visitors and visitor expectations. This chapter is the result of my sustained attempt to understand what it meant to be a member of ex-palace staff, now working for the interim government in the Palace Museum. It adopts a long view of their experience of the transition from monarchy to republic, from inside the unchanging space behind the walls of the palace compound, culminating in the cabinet decision on 5 May 2016 to offer all ex-palace staff permanent positions within the Civil Service.

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<sup>475</sup> The title of this chapter is inspired by the work of Sharon Macdonald, whose ethnographic analysis "*Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*" tracked the cultural production of a particular museum exhibition (2002).

<sup>476</sup> They were formally transferred to the Special Group under Miscellaneous Service in the Ministry of General Administration in December 2008, and left to run the Palace Museum (Chapter Five).

As Handler and Gable point out in their landmark study of Colonial Williamsburg, “most research on museums has proceeded by ignoring much of what happens in them.” (1997, p. 9) Instead, it is generally based on finished displays, with a tendency to assume that official meanings are somehow written into these. In this chapter, I examine the institutional life of the Palace Museum from behind the scenes, with a focus on the actions and intentions of the ex-palace employees. By asking “what does it mean to show?” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 2), I make visible particular sites of intersection between the official narrative promoted by the state and the challenges to that narrative registered by ex-palace staff. The chapter is largely concerned with teasing out what Macdonald describes as an “authorial puzzle” (2002, p. 93), i.e. the complex processes involved in cultural production, and rests on the differing configurations of the notion of authenticity identified in the previous chapter. For the civil servants of the interim government, authenticity was “a question of creating and maintaining the right appearance” (Handler and Gable 1997: 45), whereas, for the ex-palace staff, authenticity was about revealing the life of the palace as a working institution: the ‘truth’ as they knew and experienced it.

It is the central contention of this chapter that the official interpretative project described in the previous chapter was not the only one in existence at the Palace Museum. The official project was based on history as a story - a play, of which the plot was carefully staged in romantic terms at the time of the transition to preserve a particular impression of the royal past, transforming memory in the interests of an emergent democratic future (Shelton, 2006, p. 486). The ‘unofficial project’ is based on history as a collection of memories, revealed through a sustained series of modifications and changes to the displays made by the ex-palace staff, who were driven to tell their story because of the gap between their shared identity and the official narrative displayed resemblance of the royal past on display. I examine the way in which the actions of the ex-palace staff interacted with the attempt to maintain a stable imagined past, by considering a series of



changes, both proposed and enacted, to the ways in which the Palace Museum is presented to the public.

In order to remain in the employ of the Civil Service, the ex-palace staff took an oath of office (Chapter Five). The same people expressed their loyalty to the royal family when they worked in their service, and have continued to participate in practices that reproduce their identity as members of ex-palace, rather than museum staff. They made small, largely unnoticed, adjustments to the displays that are arguably incidental, but I suggest they are significant in the way they shaped and changed what Macdonald defines as the “political legibility” of the displays, “the politically significant readings which the exhibition seemed to invite or inhibit.” (2002, 120) The authority to make changes to the displays at the Palace Museum came from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, but, left largely to their own devices, the ex-palace staff were able to make daily decisions about both what to show to visitors and how to show it, and thereby continued to insist that the history of the palace, as they knew it, was heard. I argue that the most powerful means of revealing a collective construction of memory and identity at the Palace Museum has arisen from challenges registered by the ex-palace staff.<sup>477</sup>

No historical production, even one sustained through popular identification as part of a collective, can be sustained over time without making allowances for upkeep (Halbwachs, 1992). The challenge of maintaining the idyllic royal memory at the Palace Museum takes us into the prosaic world of budgets, staff composition, and visitor numbers. Between 2012-2013, instigated by the cabinet on 3 July 2012, a five-member committee prepared a masterplan for the Palace Museum, which was submitted to the

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<sup>477</sup> The potential for those whose lives are on display to disrupt the construction of collective memory has also been noted at Robben Island Museum (Autry, 2017).

Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation for approval in July 2014.<sup>478</sup>

The masterplan aimed to fix the boundary of the museum area, with the objective that as much of the palace complex as possible should be preserved and opened to visitors. In particular, it aimed to present a rounded picture of the palace as an institution and lengthen the duration of the monarchical period on display. In its detail, this document reveals tensions with the Nepal Army, which continue to share the Narayanhiti premises, the bureaucracy of decision-making when it comes to deciding what the Palace Museum should display, and the commitment felt by the ex-palace staff to re-connect the place of the palace with the institution of monarchy. The masterplan has not progressed, and this chapter charts a range of unsuccessful attempts by ex-palace staff to present the Palace Museum in a way that would guarantee the preservation of the buildings that they believe can tell the true story of the royal past.

### **Who are the staff of the Palace Museum?**

In July 2014, the Palace Museum had 163 employees, all of whom had worked for the palace before the transition, for a period that ranged between three and 32 years.<sup>479</sup> Whilst I was unable to access an organization chart for the Palace Service, it is perhaps best conceptualized as a miniature city, with its own health clinic, rice fields, cow sheds, bank counter, security force, and bio-mass plant. Each of the government ministries reported into a central secretariat, which in turn reported weekly to the king. The ex-palace staff I interviewed and spent time with had experience of a wide range of occupations, very few of which had direct relevance to the operation of a museum, for example: livestock manager,

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<sup>478</sup> Narayanhiti Darbar Sangrahalaya Guruyiana Tyari Samitiko Pratibodana 2071 (Report of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Master Plan Preparation Committee 2014). Unpublished Document.

<sup>479</sup> Of those, the largest group, by rank, were the non-officers (74 employees), with the office assistants numbering 58. The smallest group were the officers, of whom there were 17 at section officer level and 3 at undersecretary level.

telecommunications officer, personal cook for members of the ex-royal family, accountant at the treasury, secretary, chief of protocol, store supervisor, chamber maid. Whatever their role, they all experienced the prestige that came from working within the Palace Service, prestige that, as expressed in this newspaper article, disappeared very publicly on the day the palace opened as a museum:<sup>480</sup>

Once they were employees of the powerful royal palace. But with the monarchy gone, the grandeur associated with a job in the palace has vanished. What now stands around them is just a pink palace sans royalties. ("Ex-palace staff accept change," 2009)

The ex-palace staff I interviewed were, on the whole, grateful at first to have been kept in employment; but as the years went by, many increasingly expressed a feeling that the transformation of the palace to a museum trapped them within the official story being told, and made them feel vulnerable, as described by the Museum Director from 2011-2014 here:

We used to be proud for the work we did when king was here. We were proud working with head of the state but now there is no more king and queen. We are now working under Nepal's Government as step son and daughter. We don't have secured future. Nepal's Government has no fruitful work for royal household employees. We are not royal household's employees any more but they still treat like we are not Nepal's Civil Servant. Even we have Nepal's Government job, we feel humiliated.... The employees in this museum are not posted here permanently. We all have been working here temporarily... here is no future. We don't have any kind of career development in here.<sup>481</sup>

The feeling that there was a disparity between the respect with which they were held as a member of palace staff, the impact of their relegation to the Special Group within the Miscellaneous Service as part of the Ministry of General Administration (an arrangement they understood as temporary), and the lack of value now placed on their individual and collective

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<sup>480</sup> One section officer described their position as like being "in a zoo". Mr Shrestha. Personal Communication, 10 July 2013.

<sup>481</sup> Mr Karki. Recorded Interview, 18 July 2014. Translation by Rukmani Gurung.

experience, described above, was common to all my interviewees.<sup>482</sup> Their shared comparative experience of working first for the royal palace and then for the Nepal Government brought them together. Each person also shared a range of individual views, values and motivations, which it would be unfair to diminish by treating them collectively. However, in terms of their priorities for the future, it is possible to group the ex-palace staff I met into two broad communities: the unskilled workforce,<sup>483</sup> who were more likely to exhibit concern for job security and fair working conditions, and the skilled workforce, who exhibited a higher level of concern about opportunities for professional development and a desire to be both effective and respected in their roles.<sup>484</sup> Staff from both communities had much in common. They spoke to me of their continued pride in their previous role, the feeling of loss that resulted from the transformation of the palace to a museum, and the differences between the working environment in the palace and their new roles in the museum. However, those ranked as Section Officer or above consistently articulated the connection between their present situation and the country's political leadership. These comments, both from a section officer, are demonstrative of an overtly critical position held towards the government and the Palace Museum:

Actually I loved my old job. It was quite scary, any moment our job would have gone if we did anything wrong but still I like those times.

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<sup>482</sup> For example, one gallery attendant stated: "There are so many differences. There was fear inside but prideful outside and now it's prideful inside but nothing outside". Mr Dulal. Recorded Interview, 18 July 2014. Translation by Rukmani Gurung.

<sup>483</sup> The non-officers working as gallery attendants and in a variety of maintenance roles.

<sup>484</sup> For example, the Museum Director from 2011-2014 responded: "About this museum, Nepal's Government has not shown any kind of notion about its development. If there is no development of the museum, there will be no development of staffs either, from which they can't think of development of museum and an individual as well. Day by day, they will be near to their retirement or they will leave job then there will be lack of staff after which museum can't operate..." Recorded Interview. 18 July 2014.

It [the Palace Museum] is helping a lot for revenue collection and according to that there is nothing for employees as part of motivation, it is like a cash cow.<sup>485</sup>

When asked about their views on the value of the Palace Museum in present-day Nepal, many of my interviewees compared the Palace Museum with other museums and heritage sites in Kathmandu. These comparisons invariably saw the Palace Museum as ambiguously positioned as neither a heritage site (the structure of the main palace building wasn't old enough),<sup>486</sup> or a fully functioning museum (for example, there was not enough interpretation for visitors). Such comparisons demonstrated a feeling that the transformation was not complete and that further development was required to enable it to fulfil its potential. Those in higher ranking positions went further and shared their ambition for the Palace Museum to show the palace as "it really was". By virtue of their rank and position in the Palace Museum structure, it was this relatively small group of staff who were in the position to authorize small changes to the displays, to decide which groups of visitors were "worthy" of a tour, and for some, who contributed to the masterplan. They were also the group with whom I spent the most time during my research behind the scenes at the museum, and their views therefore inform this chapter rather more than others'.

### Divided Loyalties

In late 2008, all of the palace staff were re-organised into their current museum roles, without any formal selection process (Chapter Five). The strength of the Nepal National Employees Organisation within the institution at the time of the transition is cited by the staff I spoke to as the main factor that kept them together in the Special Group.<sup>487</sup> The rules of the Special

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<sup>485</sup> Ms Shah. Recorded Interview, 19 July 2014. Translation by Rukmani Gurung.

<sup>486</sup> The date of the building and its contents, which at under 100 years of age, does not meet the legislative definition of a monument in Nepal (Gutschow, 2003, p. 13).

<sup>487</sup> Supported by quotation from the chairman of the Nepal National Government Employees Organisation in the *Himalayan Times* newspaper which attributes rumours that

Group Personnel were focused on its Administration and Management, delegated to the most senior member of staff. There was no staff development plan in place and what was at first understood by the ex-palace staff to be a reasonable lack of clarity over the nature of their roles, over time left them feeling increasingly frustrated and disenfranchised. They felt that any efforts to develop the Palace Museum were thwarted by unintelligible layers of bureaucracy,<sup>488</sup> and they exhibited extremely low levels of motivation.<sup>489</sup> All ex-palace staff at the Palace Museum remained in the Special Group until 2016, with a gradually dwindling staff resource and little opportunity for training or promotion.<sup>490</sup> They were ‘mothballed’ inside the Palace Museum.

These staff joined the Civil Service at a time of significant state reform, and their complaints are echoed in a report jointly published by the Nepal Government and the United Nations Development Programme in 2014, as weaknesses of the wider Nepal Civil Service. In its recommendations for the restructuring of the Nepali Civil Service to meet the challenges of federalization, the authors of the report made clear the scale of the challenge facing the Nepal Government (P. Bajracharya & Grace, 2014, pp. IX–X). Within the context of a complete state government restructuring, the

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ex-palace employees would be made redundant often to the Nepali Congress party (“Palace Staff Want to Join Civil Service,” 2008).

<sup>488</sup> This was complicated by the fact that their reporting lines were split between the Ministry of General Administration for human resource matters, and the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation for decisions relating to the running of the museum, which made it hard to hold individuals responsible.

<sup>489</sup> By 2016 it was common for the core group of ex-palace staff I spent time with to clock in (which they did using a thumb-print reader), then carry on with their personal lives elsewhere in the city, returning in the afternoon to clock out again.

<sup>490</sup> For example, in 2013 there was computer training for staff at a certain level though none were sure why. I only saw computers in the palace in the administrative offices. This ties into the UNDP/ Ministry of General Administration Option Paper’s comment that the Civil Service workforce was largely unskilled and digitally illiterate and appears to have been merely a futile effort to tick a box (P. Bajracharya & Grace, 2014, p. 30).

future of the Special Group of ex-palace staff at the Palace Museum was not high up on the political agenda. They had simply been safely isolated, their fate compounded by the political decision that had placed the Palace Museum outside of the usual governance structures for museums.

The majority of the people I interviewed obtained their positions in the royal household through a process of recommendation, usually by a family member.<sup>491</sup> This was a major source of consternation in my interviews, primarily because ex-palace staff felt that the fact they had not undertaken an equivalent of the Civil Service recruitment examination was used as a reason by others to undervalue their experience.

Actually, it was difficult to join royal household service without anybody's contact in here. It was also about belief that the person would be loyal and security would be maintained if they join on somebody's reference rather than free competition.<sup>492</sup>

As explained by this section officer, trust was paramount within the palace, and these bonds of personal loyalty continued to have relevance after the palace was transformed into a museum. Most of my informants expressed their continued sense of loyalty to the monarchy, either directly or obliquely, with one conversation between a group of officers in 2015 concluding that 25% of staff are loyal to the museum and 75% to the monarchy. More senior members of staff participated in Gyanendra's coronation in 2001, publicly offering their allegiance to the new king through a ceremony known as *dām rākhne*, literally 'placing a coin'.<sup>493</sup> Alongside officials from the government and military, beginning with the Prime Minister and continuing in order of precedence, they each bowed deeply whilst placing a gold coin

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<sup>491</sup> This was not to say that they were not suitably qualified for their roles in the palace, but that personal loyalty was a primary criterion for recruitment.

<sup>492</sup> Mr Adhikari. Recorded Interview, 24 July 2014.

<sup>493</sup> As *dām* coins were no longer in circulation, the palace itself provided a number of gold coins for this purpose (Mocko 2012 250).

at the feet of Gyanendra.<sup>494</sup> One section officer who was present at this ceremony implied that the ex-palace staff saw themselves as the last bastion of the monarchy by referencing the ex-palace staff alongside Gyanendra.

We could have been sacked by the government, but we still have a salary. Our sacrifice is not as great as his [Gyanendra's]<sup>495</sup>

This section officer's suggestion was that the institution of the palace had worked together with the monarchy to serve the best interests of the nation. If Gyanendra's sacrifice was to hand over the country's governance to the people, that of the ex-palace staff was to remain with the palace and ensure the preservation of a positive image of the monarchy, through the protection of palace property and the accurate presentation of palace activity to the public.

### **Collapsing the distinction between palace and museum**

Borrowing from Pierre Nora's discussion of physical spaces of remembrance (*les lieux de memoire*), historian Jay Winter contends that museums, monuments, memorials, and other sites of memory represent social efforts to formalize meanings and incorporate them into a common language (1995). Each site, as Winter observes, has its own histories that need to be considered. Indeed, the state-sponsored construction of a collective memory of Nepal's royal past at the Palace Museum must be understood in relation to the practices, representations and traditional structures of power that were deeply embedded in the site.

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<sup>494</sup> *dām rākhne* was used in a number of ceremonies, including the swearing of palace officials into office. Ex-palace staff who worked for the Master of Ceremonies informed me that a ceremony was held by Gyanendra, in the Dhanusa Room at the Narayanhiti Palace, for further members of the royal household of lower ranks.

<sup>495</sup> Mr Shrestha. Personal Communication, 19 July 2013.



A powerful instance of the connection with the historic institution of the Shah monarchy at the site of the Narayanhiti Palace can be found in the terms used by staff to denote the museum. Throughout my fieldwork, employees of the Palace Museum consistently referred to their place of work as 'the palace,' collapsing any distinction between palace and museum and maintaining a link between the post-monarchical present and the monarchical past. Ex-palace staff working as gallery attendants were observed to use the special Persian-derived royal honorific pronouns when making reference to members of the ex-royal family.<sup>496</sup> These observations from my time at the Palace Museum highlight the depth of what were more than metonymic usages by ex-palace staff. A number of practices supported a continuum that binds construction of a royal past in the present to traditional structures of monarchical power.

My fieldwork visits took place in July each year, thereby coinciding with Gyanendra's birthday on the 7<sup>th</sup> of the month. On this occasion in July 2013, 2014 and 2016,<sup>497</sup> the ex-king opened his home, Nirmal Niwas, in Maharajgunj (about a 20 minute drive north of the palace compound) to the general public, an event advertised publicly through the use of posters around the capital (Figure 41) and attended by a number of ex-palace staff.<sup>498</sup> Reminiscent of the previous practice of opening the palace grounds of the palace to the general public, people queued for hours for their opportunity to personally wish the ex-king a happy birthday (S. A.

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<sup>496</sup> The Nepali pronominal system has a first, second and third person, as in English, each has multiple levels that relate to a scale of politeness to indicate the relative status of the speaker and addressee. A specific set of high honorific pronouns was reserved for members of the royal family.

<sup>497</sup> Although I visited the Palace Museum 2012, I had not yet been granted access behind the scenes. Gyanendra chose not to do hold this event in 2015, out of respect to the over 9000 victims of the earthquakes that occurred in April that year.

<sup>498</sup> It is not clear to me if they attended as part of a separate group in the morning, or queued up early in the day with other members of the general public.

Bajracharya, 2008, pp. 144–146).<sup>499</sup> During the monarchical period, the royal birthday was a national occasion, with a number of specific practices that had direct implications for both the king's status and official relationships (Mocko, 2012, p. 335). Skipping work to join the queues at Nirmal Niwas to offer their felicitations each year, and ensuring they had their photograph taken with the ex-king, the section officers I spent most time with both re-confirmed to him their personal loyalty, and continued to uphold the position of the ex-monarch as the head of the ex-royal household. In the week that followed, there was always a buoyant atmosphere in the offices at the Palace Museum as people discussed their individual encounters. Photographs were taken by a section officer at the Palace Museum, who worked on these occasions for the ex-king. Staff were in and out of the Palace Museum's photography section to view their personal photograph with Gyanendra and order a printed copy.

The Museum's Director occupied an office in the building previously used by the 'Master of Ceremonies' department. What distinguished this office from any other governmental office that I visited were not the portraits of Birendra and Aishwarya, which were still displayed in a few other offices too, but a series of framed national symbols from the Panchayat period hung around the room from a wooden picture rail, about two feet beneath the height of the ceiling. One Director offered the following explanation:

The photographs you can see hanging in the wall ... are from Royal Property Fund Department. It was hanged in my room and again it is here in my room after I came as a museum chief. Asta Bar Maan Singh Shakya made this all. He ... was assistant secretary. He is no more now. When he was going to leave this office, I came here in his place. You can see the national symbols in one of these pictures. It was put in store after the king left. Later when we found this in store, we decided to hang it here.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> In 2013, I witnessed groups of supporters gather on buses laid on at Patan Dhoka (presumably by the royalist party, the RPP) to carry them directly to the ex-king's residence.

<sup>500</sup> Mr Karki. Recorded Interview, 19 July 2014. Translation by Rukmani Gurung.

These national symbols were heavily promoted during the Panchayat period (1962-90), and I believe that these particular illustrations were commissioned by the Department of Publicity and Broadcasting in the Ministry of Panchayat Affairs in the early 1960s.<sup>501</sup> They included the crown, scepter, royal standard, royal crest, national flag, national anthem, national flower, national colour, national animal, and national bird, in addition to the coat of arms of the Royal Nepal Army. Displayed within the space of the office of the Director of the Palace Museum, they construct a symbolic symmetry between the institution of the monarchy and the institution of the Palace Museum. Any member of staff who needed to talk to the Director did so in this space; any external visitor to the Palace Museum, including representatives from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, whose role it was to define the public narrative of the past, met the Director here. This was a very particular choice of historical images with which to adorn his office walls, that he could argue was intended to showcase the collection, or even to recreate a space (the approved method of display in the main palace building). I suggest that the display of these symbols was intended to establish a direct connection between the Director of the Museum and the previous hierarchy of power, and represented an early attempt to challenge the authority of the interim government and declare independence from the official representation of the monarchy as being of the past. This visual connection to the monarchical past in the Director's office intended to keep alive what was perceived by ex-palace staff to be the highest level of authority: that of the ex-monarch.

On 4 August 2014, I was invited to attend the retirement ceremony of a senior member of ex-palace staff. He spent the morning visiting the Secretariat Building now used by the Foreign Ministry, next to the western gate to the palace compound, where he reminisced about old times with

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<sup>501</sup> The same illustrations were published in a 1963 booklet called "*National Emblems of Nepal*". Copy available in the collections at the Gurkha Museum, Winchester, United Kingdom.

colleagues. In the afternoon, the Palace Museum closed to visitors slightly earlier than usual, to enable all staff to attend a ceremony for him in Mangal Sadan (the building used by the king to meet those from outside the Palace Service). Staff gathered to hear speeches that reflected on his career within the garden section of the palace.<sup>502</sup> Many presented him with flowers from the Palace Museum grounds, recalled events from the past, and expressed feelings of sadness not only about his departure, but about the ending of the Monarchy as an institution. Events like this continued to bring the ex-palace staff together as ex-members of the royal household and helped to sustain a sense of identity and belonging. As posts were often not filled when the post-holder departed, the loss of every colleague was keenly felt. Each departure reminded everyone of the uncertainty of their future, in comparison to the relative security of their past tenure within the Palace Service.<sup>503</sup>

### **Subverting the official narrative and keeping royal memory alive**

#### *Attempts to re-connect the palace with the ex-royal family*

In 2012 I noticed a large television set in the Dhading Room (the king's dressing and resting room) that had not been there on my visit to the Palace Museum in 2010. In 2014, the television was labelled with the name of the manufacturer and its model number.<sup>504</sup> On all of my visits, visitors appeared fascinated by it and often posed questions to each other and the nearby gallery attendant about the 'ordinary' life of the ex-royal family: for example, what television programs did they watch? I inquired about this addition to

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<sup>502</sup> Notably on this occasion, despite its prominent position at the centre of a raised platform at the head of the room, no-one sat in the chair that would have been occupied by the king.

<sup>503</sup> Section 11 of the rules for the administration and management of the Special Group outline a process for reducing the total staff number through a process of natural attrition.

<sup>504</sup> The label read: "SHARP Nicam Digital Stereo Dolby surround made in Japan Super Drive A Intelligent Controller System – Japan"

the officer in charge of this section of the Palace Museum displays. I was informed that the king watched the television in this room whilst waiting for the start of ceremonial proceedings in the main reception hall, the Kaski Baithak. The television set was added to this room, this officer said, in response to visitors' desire to relate to royal life in the palace.

The Palace Museum visitor books confirm this kind of curiosity on behalf of those visitors who recorded their remarks, but I suggest that the act of adding the television set to the display was motivated by something deeper than a desire to please the public. As identified in the previous chapter, rather than engendering forgetting, absences in the official narrative provided spaces for visitors to question what was on show. After all, most households now had a television: if this was the house of the king and queen, where was their television set?<sup>505</sup> These two members of ex-palace staff explained that they felt challenged by the number of visitors who, having seen the spaces of the palace set up with a focus on the ceremonial role of the king, began to question what they were shown.

Most of the visitors talk rudely. Some of them say this type of place cannot be the place where king lives.<sup>506</sup>

They get disappointed and they think that we removed things in here. So, we have to tell them it's the same.<sup>507</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> That the television set held a particular cachet as a marker of modernity at the time of my research was evident at the airport in Kathmandu where I saw flight after flight of young men returning to Kathmandu from the Gulf, each wheeling at least one flat screen television on their luggage trolley.

<sup>506</sup> Ms Gurung. Gallery Attendant. Recorded Interview, 18 July 2014. Translation by Rukmani Gurung.

<sup>507</sup> Ms Shah. Section Officer. Recorded Interview, 19 July 2014. Translation by Rukmani Gurung.

The television set was added by ex-palace staff who staffed the rooms when the museum was open, in an attempt to re-connect the space to the person of the king – someone who “watched the television news and programs {sic}.” (Gurung, 2013, p. 79) The ex-palace staff gently subverted the official narrative, providing what visitors expected to see out of respect for the institution of the monarchy, of which they felt they were a part. In so doing, they hoped to encourage what they perceived to be a more positive line of questioning from visitors.

Plans to open more rooms to visitors within the main palace building (plans that did not come to fruition during the period of my research) formed a constant theme in my interviews with both serving Museum Directors. On 14 July 2014, the officer in charge of one part of the Exhibition Section showed me the Sindhuli Room (the Queen’s dressing room) prepared for display, including the requisite rope barriers and room label. The room had been empty, and staff had gathered what were predominantly personal items from across the palace compound in order to create a visual impression for visitors. The personal nature of the display of this private space contrasted with the formal presentation of the other rooms on the official route. The Sindhuli room remained unopened in 2016, and I was afterwards informed by the Museum Director that the Ministry had not given permission to open it, a situation that seemingly arose because the Museum Director had directed his staff to prepare the display without first gaining approval from the Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation.<sup>508</sup>

### *Re-membering Gyanendra*

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<sup>508</sup> There would have been both practical and ideological considerations at play. In addition to the fact that opening the contents of a private room would have marked a departure from the official narrative, the request would have also required more gallery staff in order to manage the route.

When I visited the museum in 2013, the chair used by Gyanendra for his last press conference had been moved into the Kaski Baithak, the main reception hall, and labelled with a laminated piece of A4 paper: “The ‘chair’ Ex-King Gyanendra used in the Press Conference June, 2008.” This notice, which was visible to visitors as they passed back down the stairs from the Gorkha (throne) room, is a direct reminder of the end of the monarchy, and particularly of Gyanendra’s departure from the palace on 11 June 2008. One might assume that this relates to the dominant narrative of victory over monarchy, and in particular over this monarch who imposed autocratic rule, most recently during the period of emergency in 2005. However, my discussions with the officer who authorized the placing of the chair revealed that the ex-palace staff involved construed his final act as king as a gracious one. Their intention was to present Gyanendra as the king who gifted the nation to the people and to draw attention to his continued presence in the country, in direct contradiction to the official narrative that seeks to forget the period of Gyanendra’s reign and the controversial political role he played.

Whilst permission is required from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation in order to make any changes to the displays at the Palace Museum, ex-palace staff exercised agency to make small changes that often went unnoticed, even by the Palace Museum’s Director. I noticed a number of small unauthorized changes,<sup>509</sup> and whilst some were pragmatic, many were explained to me as either attempts to show more objects; to avoid accusations of staff hiding items from the public; or as marks of respect to the ex-royal family that would encourage deferential responses from visitors. Their actions signal a belief that the collective memory of Nepal’s royal past could be stewarded by those who claim a direct connection to the operation of the institution of the palace. Certain members

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<sup>509</sup> This was a source of much amusement to some ex-palace staff working as gallery attendants who started to test me each year when I arrived.

of the ex-palace staff saw this as their particular responsibility and legacy borne out of the decision to abolish the monarchy.

*Jostling for control over the official narrative*

In 2014 a guidebook went on sale to visitors from staff situated in the Gorkha (throne) Room. This privately published volume, titled *Historical Introduction of Narayanhiti Palace Museum* in English and *Mero Anubhabamaa Narayanhiti Darbar Sangrahalaya* (My Experience of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum) in Nepali was written by Buddhi Bahadur Gurung, a member of ex-palace staff.<sup>510</sup> The author introduces this book as an attempt to provide the true facts of the palace, as well as information about the history of the monarchy.

Due to lack of understanding means {sic} both the local and foreign visitors who visit here observe the objects within the museum in their own way and develop their own concept related to the Narayanhiti Palace Museum when they make an exit. (Gurung, 2013)

This excerpt from the preface describes the author's concern that visitors to the Palace Museum could come away with what he felt to be the wrong impression. The contents intersperse historical photographs with images of each of the rooms in the main palace building, and provides further information about the actions of both Birendra and Gyanendra as king. There is also included biographical information on each of the Shah kings, indicating that this alleged lack of understanding may not relate only to the operation of the palace, but also to the 239-year role of the Shah dynasty. I observed that Gurung would take a lot of interest in visitors and would often accompany them around the Palace Museum himself if they showed

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<sup>510</sup> The cost to me was 400 NRs for both the English and Nepali editions. There is no price recorded on the Nepali edition.



sufficient interest.<sup>511</sup> His role in the royal household was within the Master of Ceremonies Department, and as such he had regular access to the state rooms in the palace. He was said to have played a key role in informing colleagues and the museum committee about the formal uses of the spaces of the palace during the time of transition.<sup>512</sup>

Having prepared the content of the book, with the knowledge of the Museum Director, Gurung approached the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation for financial support to publish it. No support was offered and at this point the museum management washed its hands of the project.<sup>513</sup> The book was therefore self-financed and all proceeds from its sale went directly to the author's family. He was advised not to sell the book from the Gorkha Room, and to change the title of the publication. The title change is reflected in the difference between my copies of the English and Nepali editions, purchased in 2014 and 2015 respectively – the latter emphasis on personal experiences distinguishes it from the official history.<sup>514</sup>

This attempt to suppress the public expression of an alternative narrative by an ex-member of palace staff reveals a jostling for control over the public narrative of Nepal's royal past. The construction of collective memory involves an imagining of boundaries between past, present and future: but these boundaries are porous and vary across people and groups. For ex-

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<sup>511</sup> For example, before knowing who they were, he came across two of my research assistants who were expressing an interest in the spaces on display and gave them impromptu guided tours.

<sup>512</sup> Letters from two former colleagues from the royal household are reproduced as prefaces to the publication, in order to authenticate the veracity of his account.

<sup>513</sup> However, Gurung stated that senior officials from the Palace Museum staff attended his book launch that was held off-site. Personal Communication, 14 July 2014.

<sup>514</sup> The title was not the only change between the two editions. The first edition bore a picture of the front of the palace building during Birendra's reign, prominently bearing the royal standard; the second has an image of the Palace Museum (with national flags flying), encircled by small vignette images of paintings of each of the Shah kings.

palace staff like Gurung, the monarchy is a living memory and when making decisions about what to show at the Palace Museum their actions intersperse the official narrative with personal anecdotes that reveal the boundaries of the official narrative. In 2014, Nepal's civil servants chose not to present anything but a stable past of an obsolete institution, and ex-palace staff who wanted to ensure their voice was heard had to do so privately. The book was still on sale in the Gorkha Room in 2016, apparently because "no-one cares".<sup>515</sup>

## **The Masterplan**

### *Formation*

On 3 July 2012, the decision was taken by the Cabinet to form a committee to make recommendations for the future of the Palace Museum. Its terms of reference focused in particular on what parts of the Narayanhiti compound should be accessible to the public. The background to the report, which was presented to the Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation one year later, stressed the superior historical importance of the palace, as a site associated with the reign of the Shah monarchy. It clearly reflects both the ambition of ex-palace staff to develop the Palace Museum in a way that reveals the functioning of the palace as an institution, and a contemporary understanding of a museum as an educational institution (Chapter Five).

When former King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah left the palace on 2008/06/11, in accordance with the decision of the Government of Nepal to establish it as a museum and open to public for observation, it was very important to manage the exhibition by opening an attractive and informative rooms. To show importance of contemporary royal culture, diplomacy, social and administrative activities a long-term master plan is needed to inform accurate facts to public and develop the museum as a knowledge gathering space for internal and foreign tourists, intellectuals, public, researchers and students.

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<sup>515</sup> As well as being the room most associated with the kingship, it is also at the heart of the building, so attendant staff could presumably give notice of a Ministry official's arrival and remove the books from show, if necessary.

As the Narayanhiti Place was built as a palace of Shah Kings, this premises can be developed as a research centre by establishing a museum and managing it to study their culture, religion, diplomacy and various political activities. Among those, the museum should be managed by including buildings used in various situations and timings, places and buildings developed for various activities, places and buildings used for recreation, materials used for contemporary activities and other subjects managed inside the palace.<sup>516</sup>

One Director of the Palace Museum informed me that two committees had been formed previously, but that neither had been successful in producing a report.<sup>517</sup> As the person responsible for the Palace Museum, he was frustrated with what he perceived to be a lack of interest or support from the government. For example, he compared the income raised by the Palace Museum through ticket sales, around 300,000 Nrs per year, to the lack of financial investment in its operations. He explained that he felt estranged from the government in his position, and saw the committee's report as offering the leverage needed to persuade the Ministry to protect the site in the long term, commit to developing the museum to show the relevance of Nepal's royal past, and enable the museum to maintain a level of independence.<sup>518</sup> Whilst this extract from the introduction to the report does not overtly criticize the official narrative on display at the museum, it suggests that the need to open the palace quickly meant that more buildings and collections should be made accessible in order to accurately present the facts of Nepal's royal past to the public. The ambition for the Palace Museum to be self-financing was reflected in a commitment to look

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<sup>516</sup> *Narayanhiti Darbar Sangrahalaya Guruyiana Tyari Samitiko Pratibodana 2071* (Report of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Master Plan Preparation Committee 2014).

Unpublished Document. Section 1.2

<sup>517</sup> Both Museum Directors explained that, with the ever-changing administrations, as soon as they got to know a new Ministerial Secretary they would leave office.

<sup>518</sup> It was generally understood amongst the ex-palace staff that the Director's rank and seniority carried little weight because he was a member of ex-palace staff, i.e. not a true member of the Civil Service, and therefore was not taken seriously by the Ministry.

at a range of income-generation activities, including “entertainment, fitness, cafeteria”.<sup>519</sup>

The focus on the whole Narayanhiti site can be explained by the fact that in 2013 there were proposals on the table to move the cavalry (over 124 horses) from Singha Darbar (the main government compound) to within the palace compound, thereby increasing the portion of land occupied by the Nepal Army.<sup>520</sup> Land had already been granted by the government for the construction of the *Ganatantra Smarak* (Republic Memorial) in the North East of the palace compound.<sup>521</sup> There was also a suggestion that the passport section of the foreign ministry would move out of the secretariat building (just inside the west gate),<sup>522</sup> and the Department of Archaeology (responsible for all the other museums under government control) would move in.<sup>523</sup> The ex-palace staff conceived of the palace as an institution that operated across the whole palace compound, and to them these proposals felt like encroachments that threatened both the security of their legacy and the independence of the Palace Museum as an institution. It would appear that the Narayanhiti Palace compound, as a significant area of government-

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<sup>519</sup> Patan Museum, established in 1997 with funds from the Austrian Government, is run on a self-financing model (see Chapter Five).

<sup>520</sup> The Ministry of Land Reform and Development granted 30 ropani to the Nepal Army for this purpose in BS 2065/12/26 (AD 08/04/2008). Letter recording decision attached as annex to *Narayanhiti Darbar Sangrahalaya Guruyana Tyari Samitiko Pratibodana 2071* (Report of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Master Plan Preparation Committee 2014). Unpublished Document.

<sup>521</sup> The Ministry of Land Reform and Development granted 82 ropani for this purpose in BS 2068/12/03 (AD 16/03/2012). Letter recording decision attached as annex to *Narayanhiti Darbar Sangrahalaya Guruyana Tyari Samitiko Pratibodana 2071* (Report of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Master Plan Preparation Committee 2014). Unpublished Document.

<sup>522</sup> This was confirmed at a cabinet meeting on 8 May 2014 (B. Shrestha, 2017).

<sup>523</sup> Rohit Dhunghana informed me that this included plans to create an updated version of the diorama displays at the National Museum in Chauni, with one room per ethnic group, specifically aimed at tourists. Personal Communication, 25 July 2016.

owned, underused land in the centre of the capital, was a valuable piece of real estate for the interim government.

A Taskforce was created by the Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, with the following aims:

1. To carry out a macro analysis of the Narayanhiti Palace premises and situation of the museum
2. To recommend for spatial study, the concept of comprehensive museum inside the Narayanhiti Palace premises
3. To establish the Narayanhiti Palace premises as an important and historical museum
4. To support and manage relevant human resources for the Narayanhiti Palace Museum
5. To recommend for the easy and comfortable provision of observation by incorporating physical infrastructures used by former royal family inside the palace inside the Narayanhiti Palace Museum<sup>524</sup>

The Taskforce was chaired by the Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, and its membership included representatives from the Ministries of Defence, Land Reform, Urban Development, Physical Infrastructure and Transportation, and three from the Department of Archaeology, as well as a representative of the Nepal Army as an invited member, giving an indication of the bureaucracy involved in deciding on the future use of this site. The taskforce met five times between April and June

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<sup>524</sup> The membership of the Taskforce was: Coordinator, Joint Secretary, Mr. Bharat Mani Subedi, Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation/ Representative Member, Under Secretary, Mr. Bhagwan Thapa, Ministry of Defence/ Representative Member, Under Secretary, Mr. Laxmi Prasad Gautam, Ministry of Land Reform/ Representative Member, Chief Division Engineer (CDE), Mr. Machakaji Maharjan, Ministry of Urban Development/ Representative Member, CDE, Mr. Jeevan Kumar KC, Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport/ Representative Member, Under Secretary, Mr. Shyam Sundar Rajbanshi, Department of Archaeology/ Member, Engineer Purna Bahadur Shrestha, Department of Archaeology/ Member, Architect Engineer Shova Maharjan, Department of Archaeology/ Representative Member, Major Mr. Bikash Pokhrel, Nepal Army/ Member Secretary, Under Secretary, Mr. Lekh Bahadur Karki, Chief, Narayanhiti Palace Museum. *Narayanhiti Darbar Sangrahalaya Guruyiana Tyari Samitiko Pratibodana 2071* (Report of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Master Plan Preparation Committee 2014). Unpublished Document. Section 3.2.

2013,<sup>525</sup> inviting representatives from different ministries to join the discussions, as deemed appropriate. In order to ensure a commonly held understanding of the area and historical structures in question by those in authority, they organised a field visit<sup>526</sup> for key officials (mostly ministerial secretaries, but also the Chief of Army Staff, and four army generals).<sup>527</sup> After five years of operation, no decisions had been made about the future purpose and extent of the Palace Museum, and the fluidity of the boundaries within the palace compound was stated as a key factor that hampered any effective forward planning. The field visit was specifically intended to encourage decision making by improving communication between the relevant authorities, governmental ministries and the Nepal Army, and to garner high level support for the committee's recommendations, which were to follow.

The official minutes of the taskforce's meetings show the development of proposals intended to prevent further building on the site, and the design of a "one day package" for visitors to the Palace Museum that was intended to provide a fuller understanding of the history of the monarchy and enable a comparison with the republic, through the opportunity to subsequently view the *Ganatantra Smarak*. This proposed tour would take in a number of buildings in the palace compound that were not yet open to the public, including (Figure 42):

1. Birendra's residence Sri Sadan

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<sup>525</sup> Meeting One: BS 2070/01/10 (2013/04/23). Meeting Two: BS2070/01/17 (2013/04/30). Meeting Three: BS 2070/01/29 (2013/05/12). Meeting Four: BS 2071/02/23 (2013/06/06). Meeting Five: BS 2070/03/10 (2013/06/24).

<sup>526</sup> This took place on 12th June 2013.

<sup>527</sup> Mr. Leelamani Paudyal (Chief Secretary of the Government of Nepal), Mr. Gaurav Shumser JBR (Chief of Army Staff), Tilak Sharma (Defence Secretary), Sushil Ghimire (Minister of Culture), Kishan Thapa (Minister of Urban Development), Finance Secretary (name not given), Bharat Mani Subedi (Joint Secretary from the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transportation), and Generals, Naresh Basnet, Nayash Bikram Karki, Purna Chandra Thapa, Yogendra Khand.

2. Mahendra's garages (and vehicles)
3. *Pharas Khanna* taxidermy store for animal skins confiscated under hunting laws.
4. Sections of the old Rana palace, occupied by Sarala Gorkhali until her death in 2013, including the section of the palace where Ranoddip Singh was murdered in 1885
5. Swimming pool installed by Tribhuvan
6. Temple to Ganesh said to have been established by Mahendra to encourage the birth of a son and heir
7. Shooting range
8. Farm and livestock area

Four different routes, each taking in a slightly different combination of these buildings, were created for discussion and presented to the high-level delegation who attended the field visit. The minutes of this visit make clear the power the Nepal Army had at this time to determine the future use of the palace compound. The Nepal Army representatives stressed their historical precedence, i.e. that they already occupied a significant portion of the site, and had been located within the palace compound since before the Palace Museum was created.<sup>528</sup> They stressed the Palace Museum's dependency on their security services for its operation, and made clear their intention to use some of the area under discussion for the cavalry. They also stated that they did not agree with the government's decision to allocate 82 ropanis of land for the *Ganatantra Smarak*, and gave verbal permission for the use of only 35 (the amount of land eventually used). They also expressed some frustration at not having permanent representation on the masterplan committee.

### *The Bureaucracy of Display*

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<sup>528</sup> Occupied by the Valley Pritana regiment, Kali Bahadur regiment, Purano Gorakh regiment and the Special Security Force.

The first item in the report's conclusion deals with the recommendation to display the crown within the fiscal year 2013-2014<sup>529</sup> and reveals the disputed status of the monarchy during the period of political transition. In 2009, Jay Ram Manandhar, as Palace Museum Director, publicly expressed the Museum's intention to display the crown jewels ("Ex-palace staff accept change," 2009). Funds for this purpose were released in 2011 and by July 2013 a bullet-proof display case had been constructed within the Kailali room on the ground floor of the main palace building for this purpose.<sup>530</sup> The Director from 2014 stated that "[the crown's] security and safety is our prime concern." To enter the room, visitors would have to pass through three detection systems, described here by the Palace Museum's then head of security:

All the installed equipment is from American company, Honeywell. Some of the equipment we have used are like slide door contact, intrusion alarm, access control system which are used by NASA. Door contact is the type used by Boeing aircraft.<sup>531</sup>

The masterplan report reveals that the display of the crown was delayed because of objections, presented as security concerns, raised by the Nepal Army. The crown jewels were under the security of the Nepal Army within the Palace Museum. Once the Kailali room was prepared for their display, a letter was sent to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation. The Ministry's reply requested consultation with and consent for the security arrangements, by the "concerned responsible security agency in the

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<sup>529</sup> As the fiscal year ended in July, the timing of this recommendation suggests that this was seen as a potential quick win.

<sup>530</sup> The Masterplan report records that this was discussed by the National Planning Commission on BS 2067/68 (2010/11) and funds set aside. The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation began the process of designing the space and building the showcase on BS 2068/10/13 (27/01/2012).

<sup>531</sup> A report was made by the Chair of the Committee of the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs regarding the security of the crown jewels (Crown, Sceptre, Parasols) that included representatives from the Gold and Silver Dealer's Association. Rohit Dhunghana. Recorded Interview, 28 July 2014.



palace”.<sup>532</sup> A meeting followed with representatives from the Nepal Police Palace Security Force (who provide security from the gate to the inner perimeter) and representatives from the Kali and Bharat Regiments of the Nepal Army (who provide the internal security).<sup>533</sup> The Director of the Palace Museum then followed up with a letter to the Kali Bahadur Regiment of the Nepal Army to request their support in providing the arrangements agreed. The reply that came stated that authorisation for any request for public display would only be accepted from the Ministry of Defence. The Palace Museum Director sent a copy of this letter to the Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, asking them to request the Secretary of the Ministry of Defence to provide this written authorization. By 13<sup>th</sup> May 2013, no response had been received. It is possible that the Ministry of Defence requested that the responsibility be shared amongst the security services.<sup>534</sup> At the time of my last field visit in July 2016, negotiations were said to be ongoing between the Museum, the Ministry, and the army and the crown was not yet on display (Baral, 2016; Dhakal, 2018).

The army’s institutional loyalty to the monarchy is well documented (I. Adhikari, 2015) and it was the feeling of the Director of the museum in 2015 that the army would not agree to the public display of the crown jewels until it is convinced that the king will never return to office. The same symbolic power that motivates some ex-palace staff to offer visitors the opportunity to gain proximity to the monarch, by displaying the crown jewels (Chapter Six), is reflected in the army’s deflective actions that aim to prevent their full

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<sup>532</sup> *Narayanhi Darbar Sangrahalaya Guruyiana Tyari Samitiko Pratibodana 2071* (Report of the Narayanhi Palace Museum Master Plan Preparation Committee 2014). Unpublished Document. Section 5.2.a.

<sup>533</sup> This took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2013.

<sup>534</sup> In an interview given for the Republica newspaper, Karki refers to a security committee, including the Nepal Police (Rawal, 2013).

transfer into public ownership and continue to exert their authority.<sup>535</sup> These negotiations draw into focus the fact that the remembering, suggested by concern over 'preserving' the contents of the palace, in fact serves as a prelude to forgetting and eventually erasure.

### *Reflective Nostalgia*

The masterplan report also concluded that Birendra's home, Sri Sadan (Figure 43), located within the palace grounds, should be opened to the public.<sup>536</sup> Again, the necessary approvals were not forthcoming and in the winter of 2014 the Director of the Palace Museum established a new committee to focus on the development of a proposal to open Sri Sadan with the explicit intention of influencing the Ministry to do so.<sup>537</sup> The committee's proposal to create a route between the main palace building and Sri Sadan marks a second attempt to guarantee the preservation of other historic structures in the palace compound:

If the historical Sri-Sadan can be brought into exhibition, the visitors would enter the main gate of Sri-Sadan via the route beginning from the Fountain garden and through the Bombay-Chowk, the backside of Tribhuvan Sadan, Worshipping-room, and the garages containing the vehicles used by ex-royal-family members. This would lead to the preservation and promotion of all the places in between. It also increases their importance. If these cultural and historical heritages can be brought into exhibition, they will be well preserved. In absence of the necessary preservations there exists threat of conversion of historical buildings into the dead zone.<sup>538</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Nepal has an established order or protocol, in which the Chief of Staff of the Nepal Army had been just one level below Government Ministers, but since 2013 he has been six levels below. ("New order of precedence in force," 2018)

<sup>536</sup> Sri Sadan was built in 1966 for Birendra to live in as Crown Prince (he was proclaimed Crown Prince in 1956).

<sup>537</sup> The committee membership comprised of all members of ex-palace staff: Undersecretary Adwait Prakash Shrestha -Chairman/ Section Officer Buddhi Bahadur Gurung -Member/ Engineer Purna Bahadur Shrestha -Member/ Accountant Gauri Poudel -Member Nayab subba Bimala Gurung -Member/ Section officer Archana Khadka-Member.

<sup>538</sup> Section 1.1 of the Committee's Report. Title unknown. Unpublished document.

The report is explicit in its intention to “help to kill the curiosity in general people regarding the life style of king {sic} Birendra who is said to possess a very simple life-style.” Information about Birendra’s personality, taste and career is peppered throughout the report, in places where it is clearly surplus to requirements. For example, the addition of this comment to a point about the potential income that could be generated from opening this building.

Increase in revenue is expected after converting the private resident of later king Birendra, *who also proposed Nepal as a peace zone*, into an exhibition. (emphasis added)<sup>539</sup>

The report also stresses the “traditional” elements of the form of the building and the characteristics of the former king that were considered modest. This building held particular significance for the ex-palace staff, who informed me that when Nepal’s politicians were taken to visit Sri Sadan on 26 February 2009, rather than acting as “kids going for candies”, as they apparently had throughout the main palace building, they were moved to silence. I was referred to the surprised expression on the face of the CPN(UML) leader Madhav Kumar Nepal in a series of photographs of the visit. Inside Sri Sadan, it was said that the politicians were struck with feelings of sadness and loss. This was interpreted by the members of ex-palace staff present as the ability of the space of Sri Sadan, a building designed by Birendra when he was Crown Prince, to change people’s opinion of the monarchy, and it was posited that this might explain why it remained closed. Rather than the focus on the educational purpose of the museum in the masterplan report, this report hinted at the power of the space to influence values and attitudes:

It will encourage people to live a simple life after observing the lifestyle of king Birendra in Sri-Sadan.

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<sup>539</sup> Section 1.2 of the Committee’s Report. Title unknown. Unpublished document.

It generates positive effects in the nationality by improving the feelings of people towards Nepali culture and tradition.<sup>540</sup>

I was first shown inside Sri Sadan in 2013, then again in 2014 and 2015. Through these visits to Sri Sadan, I can confirm that the rooms and the artefacts they contain do not reflect the pomp and ceremony of official engagements. Instead, personal items like a bottle of Oil of Olay cream and a chest expander in the bathroom, and a homework schedule on the wall, encourage you to reflect on a family which did ordinary things together. Here you are encouraged to imagine the lives of people who proudly displayed their daughter's artwork, slept with their dog in the bedroom and took pleasure in listening to cassette tapes. The rooms are musty, and the furniture is covered by a film of dust, together infusing the building with an air of another, expired time.

As a foreign researcher, it was not because of the potential of the space to influence feelings towards Birendra's family that I was shown inside Sri Sadan by ex-palace staff. It was precisely because it is not currently open to the public. In choosing to open up this most private of spaces for me, the then Director of the Palace Museum was able to demonstrate the last vestiges of his authority. This became especially apparent on my second visit, when I was rather forcibly encouraged to climb the small metal ladders that ran from both Princess Shruti and Prince Nirajan's rooms into the roof space, offering them private space. Whilst I precariously balanced on a ladder and simultaneously pushed up a hatch to receive a faceful of dust as I peered up into the gloom above me, the then Director of the Museum looked up at me, smiling, and said, "climb up, no-one else has had the opportunity to go there." The fact that providing access to these small, dusty spaces, in the roof space of Birendra's old home, was so important to him, merely revealed to me how little formal control he had in his role as Director.

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<sup>540</sup> Concluding section on strengths from the Committee's Report. Title unknown. Unpublished document.

The Sri Sadan development committee interviewed household staff who had worked in Sri Sadan. They also worked in partnership with the photography section to identify a series of family photographs set within the spaces of Sri Sadan and proposed to display these within each of the rooms. Like the main palace building, the planned labels for each room stated their function, but instead of a generic reference to the office of king, the text included the prefix 'sv' (short for the Nepali *svargavasi*, translated as 'late') e.g. 'Late King Birendra's Dressing Room' or 'Bedroom used by Late Princess Shruti'.<sup>541</sup> Rather than presenting a coherent re-creation of the royal past, as in the rooms of the Palace Museum, the proposed display of photographs of the former royal family in Sri Sadan would appeal to frameworks of memory shared by the last generation of Nepalis to have lived under the rule of Birendra. This imagined royal past, hung on the material remnants of Birendra's family, was created entirely by ex-palace staff, in direct response to what they felt were glaring absences from the royal past that was on display at the Palace Museum. Susan Stewart defines nostalgia as a form of sadness without an object, something that exists as a narrative that attaches itself to an impossibly pure belief (1999). The memories of ex-palace staff are defined by a mourning for that which can no longer be present. The motivation for reflective nostalgia is a desire "to narrate the relationship between past, present and future" (Boym, 2001, p. 50). This proposal for the display of Sri-Sadan is an attempt by ex-palace staff to create material traces that would mediate others' experience of the royal past in ways that would enable what the ex-palace staff see as the essential qualities of the monarchy to persist into the future.

The ex-palace staff are overtly conscious of the gap between their experience as part of the institution of the palace and the image of the monarchy placed firmly in the past, created by the Palace Museum. There are those who are concerned with the increasing irrevocability of what they

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<sup>541</sup> I was given a copy of these in 2013, and they were later included as an annex to the Committee's report.

understand to be the real royal past. The sense of distance that has driven multiple individual members of staff to evoke memories of Birendra in the Dhankuta Room (Chapter Six) provided the motivation for the proposal on behalf of all of the ex-palace staff to open Sri Sadan to the public.

In 2016, Sri Sadan was still not open to the public. In practical terms, to open this building would require financial investment in creating, maintaining and staffing a new route for visitors through the palace compound, including a requirement for further security from the Nepal Army.<sup>542</sup>

### **Moving On**

The Report of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Master Plan Preparation Committee concluded that:

Without identifying the long term vision, only reform activities cannot make any desired change in any organization. Hence, this historically important palace museum shall be managed with a strategic long term plan to develop it as a touristic and economically important place.<sup>543</sup>

Having been unsuccessful in persuading the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation to finance any of the projects that would in the eyes of the ex-palace staff make the Palace Museum a “Comprehensive Museum” (buhat sangrahalaya) in 2015, a group of about 25 officers within the staff of the Palace Museum commissioned a lawyer to present their case to the Supreme Court. This case focused on their deployment to the Special

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<sup>542</sup> In order to reach Sri Sadan, visitors would have to pass Mahendra Manjil, the current residence of the ex-Queen Mother. It is highly likely that this proximity forms an additional influence on the decision whether to open Sri Sadan to the public. Practical concerns would include the provision of security along the route, which would have to be provided by the Nepal Army.

<sup>543</sup> *Narayanhi Darbar Sangrahalaya Guruyana Tyari Samitiko Pratibodana 2071* (Report of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Master Plan Preparation Committee 2014). Unpublished Document. Section 5.2.

Group, i.e. their museumisation along with the palace and its contents. The court ruled that their treatment had been discriminatory, and that they should be permitted to work across all government offices (according to their rank), thereby opening the possibilities for promotion they had been denied for seven years.<sup>544</sup> The decision to dissolve the Special Group and make the staff full members of the Civil Service was finalized by the Council of Ministers in July 2015 (“No Title,” 2015). What followed was a series of individual interviews, organized by the Public Service Commission, for each member of staff in early 2016, to assess their level of ability, previous qualifications and training. Following these interviews, in July 2016, each employee received a letter from the Ministry of General Administration, confirming their deployment:

In accordance to the Government of Nepal (Cabinet) decision on 5 May 2016, this is to request you as per decision of the Government of Nepal (Respected Minister level) on 5 June 2016, you have been deployed to the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, Kathmandu as you have been classified to Nepal Administrative Service, General Administration Service, same level from Nepal Miscellaneous Service, Special group until next provision by arranging the position right to additional group of this Ministry.

In July 2016, there was a very real sense that this decision marked the end of an era for ex-palace staff. Some were working with the National Government Employees Organisation to appeal against postings to regional development offices throughout the country. My informants felt that 99% of staff wanted to stay, but with the terms and conditions of the rest of the Nepal Civil Service that enabled promotion and the autonomy to develop and run the Palace Museum in such a way that it could accurately show “royal culture, diplomacy, social and administrative activities.”<sup>545</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the actions of the ex-palace employees who were tasked with presenting the palace to the public (see Chapter Five).

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<sup>544</sup> I was informed by ex-palace staff that the ruling took place on 5<sup>th</sup> Feb 2015.

<sup>545</sup> Copy seen and translated by author. 16 July 2016.

They experienced, through being sidelined at the Palace Museum, the ways in which entering the new republican Nepal, was predicated on the condition of forgetting Nepal's royal past, a past that included them. Collectively and individually, they have made repeated attempts since the transition to disrupt the formation of a collective memory based only on the official narrative, primarily with moves that aimed to re-insert memories of the palace as an institution that served the country along with the Shah monarchy. What initially felt like a duty to their former employer gained momentum as a full-blown sense of crisis, as they increasingly felt their identity as ex-palace employees was being overwritten through the persistent inaction of a series of administrations.

That the ex-palace staff were able to continue practices that demonstrated their ongoing respect for the ex-king, and make modifications to the displays in the main palace building, was symptomatic of the governmental understanding that they had been consigned to the past along with the institution of the monarchy and its most prominent palace. Having allocated them role titles and left them to run the palace as a museum, they were expected to do very little. All the evidence points to a sense of inertia, at best, on behalf of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation when it came to making any decisions that would see the Palace Museum managed or developed in any way that deviated from the official narrative. The ex-palace staff who informed the basis of that narrative were paralysed into inaction, a situation that they eventually acted to address through the Supreme Court.

The same triggers of memory used by the interim government to conquer and spatialize a frozen image of the monarch were also adopted by ex-palace staff to challenge and, on occasion, subvert the state-sponsored official narrative. Whereas the state-sponsored narrative actively supported the creation of a myth based on the shared assumption that the monarchy was a ceremonial institution in the past, interventions made by ex-palace staff disrupted the creation of a consensus by inviting visitors to relate to



members of the ex-royal family, consider the operation of the palace on behalf of the nation, and at least question the ex-king's intention towards the nation. Their loss was never completely recalled, but their actions highlighted a series of absences that visitors responded to (Chapter Six). The refusal of ex-palace staff at all levels to engage in the official process of remembering reveals both the fractured nature of memory, both personal and collective, and the power relationship between the two projects of remembering.

That the collective memory expected to be generated from the opening of the Palace Museum had a coercive nature is highlighted by the repeated attempts to prevent ex-palace staff from publicly sharing their way of remembering. For example, the room that was dressed for display and left unopened, the guidebook that was published privately, and ultimately the masterplan that never progressed. In the public sphere the commitment of the ex-palace staff to re-connect the palace with the operations of the institution of the monarchy risked exposing the state-sponsored interest in the past as merely that which doesn't exist anymore. I contend that the consistent lack of government commitment to support any other interpretations of the royal past at the Palace Museum was at least in part due to an official need to present a stable snapshot image of the past.

The interactions between the interpretive project outlined in this chapter and those with a vested interest in the official narrative have shown the relative stability of the displays at the Palace Museum to be the result of an active process of forgetting. The potential to access different interpretations of Nepal's royal past at the Narayanhiti Palace Museum is evident in the efforts that were made to contain them.

## Chapter Eight | *Ganatantra Smarak* (Republic Memorial): The politics of memory

The damage caused to the perimeter wall of the Narayanhiti palace compound by the 2015 earthquakes revealed the construction site of the *Ganatantra Smarak* (republic memorial), to anyone walking past its North East corner (Figure 44).<sup>546</sup> These glimpses, snatched between strands of barbed wire, are representative of the lack of public visibility this project had throughout its design and construction.<sup>547</sup> The design competition for a memorial “to symbolize [the] people’s victory over the autocratic monarchy system in Nepal” was launched in 2009 with initial fanfare by the (then Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) led) government. In April 2009 five shortlisted design teams were invited to give presentations to a jury. The winning design was that proposed by Abhishek Bajracharya and Shekhar Dongol of John Sanday Associates. Since 2012 construction and design has continued under successive coalition governments, concealed behind the walls of the palace compound, The *Ganatantra Smarak* was due to be inaugurated on 28 May 2016, Republic Day,<sup>548</sup> but construction has been delayed and at the time of writing in August 2018 the memorial is not

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<sup>546</sup> The earthquakes that struck on April 26 and May 12, 2015 caused around 9,000 deaths and around half a million families in the central region of the country lost their homes. Buildings and infrastructure across Kathmandu was destroyed

<sup>547</sup> Writing about local memorialisation projects in Nepal, Simon Robins (2013, 2014) states that there are no official memorial projects in progress, despite the fact the *Ganatantra Smarak* was already under construction (Robins worked in the field and headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross). At the Constituent Assembly meeting on 25 July 2014, the Minister for Law, Justice and Peace Narahari Acharya and Shankar Pokhrel, the Central Committee member of CPN-UML said the victims of the decade-long insurgency should be remembered through various articles, songs, memorials, parks and monuments that celebrate them and the sacrifice they made as a part of the post-conflict memorialisation initiative." No mention was made of the *Ganatantra Smarak* ("Calls to memorialise war victims," 2014).

<sup>548</sup> Republic Day was first celebrated on 28 May 2009 (15 Jesth 2065 BS), on the anniversary of the Constituent Assembly’s decision to abolish the monarchy and found a new republic, and has been celebrated every year since.

yet open to the public.<sup>549</sup> This chapter examines the design competition, design process and memorial-making process between 2009 and 2016, to reveal the politics of a memory project that embodies the problems of re-imagining the nation and proposing a credible resolution to the recent conflict.

Museumising the Narayanhiti Palace enabled Nepal's government to deactivate the site as a marker of monarchical power: The intention was to ensure that the palace and other accoutrements of power associated with the monarchy were no longer seen as the possessions of the King of Nepal, but as the property of the Republic of Nepal. In this chapter I will argue that the space of the palace is being used to support the exchange of one national identity for another as the construction of the Ganatantra Smarak inscribes a new interpretation of the past onto the national landscape. It is not just the consigning of the monarchy to the past through the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, but also the fact that Nepal's monarchical past can be forgotten at all that is in part constitutive of the new republican identity (Ankersmit, 2001). As a final attempt at dissociation from the monarchical past, the Ganatantra Smarak is to mark the adoption of a new Nepali national identity and the beginning of a new phase in the meaning of the palace.

Through examination of the period that pre-dates the Ganatantra Smarak's completion and opening to the public, this chapter aims to make visible the activity of a state-sponsored memory that aims to affirm the righteousness of the new Republic and thereby the 'People's War' through the construction of a symbol, in the form of a monument. Modern nations, as demonstrated by Benedict Anderson, are bound together by imaginative, narrative and symbolic means (2006). In order to be imagined, of course, they must be represented, and the more precarious or contrived the national community is that is being imagined, the greater the burden on

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<sup>549</sup> Notices declaring the Government's intention to open the site on the next Republic Day and subsequent notices announcing the delay by one year have been an annual occurrence in the National Nepali press since 2014.

representation will be (Mumford, 1949). Such imaginary representations are always called upon to perform the well-nigh impossible task of eradicating any sense of the nation as a constructed entity. Anderson notes the particular way in which the nation transforms “fatality into continuity, [and] contingency into meaning”, for example through the construction of cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers (2006, p. 11). Nation-building in Nepal during this period was precarious precisely because the political transition from monarchy to federal republic revealed the end the Hindu Kingdom and the start of another national formation. By commissioning a national monument, the post-conflict CPN-M-led government sought to utilise the past selectively to portray a unified national narrative that put the people rather than the monarchy at its heart. The presentation given by the winning architects to the panel of the jury mentioned above described the purpose of the Ganatantra Smarak as being “to celebrate the victory [of the new republic] and to memorialize the *anonymous* heroes of the country” (emphasis added),<sup>550</sup> thus signifying unity through the emblem of sacrifice and enabling the nation to be both ‘new’ and ‘historical’ or to use Anderson’s words, “loom[ing] out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glid[ing] into a limitless future.” (Anderson, 2006, pp. 9–12)<sup>551</sup>

The burden of representation on the Ganatantra Smarak was threefold. First, to present the new republican Nepal as timeless would not be easy because the historic processes of State formation and nation-building centred on the model of Hindu kingship embodied by the Shah monarchy (Burghart, 1996, pp. 226–260). Second, a national monument conceived in 2009 was also obliged to address the concept of an inclusive ‘new Nepal’ to represent all Nepalis. The idea of Nepal had for centuries been built in the image of a narrow ethnic and caste elite and the sub-text of the transition was that of a challenge to their power. The conflict and the subsequent

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<sup>550</sup> Anderson writes specifically about the anonymity of the dead (2006, p. 10). He states that this avoids the need to specify the nationality of the often-absent occupants of tombs to unknown soldiers. This is one way in which states deal with the aftermath of conflict in order to avoid the state being blamed.

<sup>551</sup> See Booth (2006) and Edkins (2003) for further discussion of this trope in post-conflict memorials.

incorporation of the leaders of the Maoist insurgency into Nepal's political establishment brought about a rise in political consciousness evidenced in the public expression of multiple loyalties along regional and ethnic lines (Hachhethu, Kumar, & Subedi, 2008). The construction of a national monument presupposed a singular national identity, but debates over competing forms of federalism led to a prolonged process with lack of agreement between the political parties. There was no singular view on what an inclusive 'new Nepal' would mean or be constituted of. This chapter is concerned with how the construction of a new national formation impelled a state-sanctioned reinterpretation of history and how that history came to be staged within the grounds of the Narayanhiti Palace. Finally, the monument was intended to represent an end to the 'People's War, both as a monument to heroism and a memorial to tragic loss.' (Young, 1993, p. 3). This task was compromised both because both parties to the conflict were responsible for violations of humanitarian and human rights law and also because those responsible for the monument's commission and implementation sat at the highest levels of the political structures of the state and the CPN-M during the conflict.<sup>552</sup>

I draw upon the work of James Young in order to structure this chapter. Young treats monuments as a subset of memorials: "A memorial may be a day, a conference, or a space, but it need not be a monument. A monument, on the other hand is always a kind of memorial." (Young, 1993, p. 4) He adopts a biographical approach to the study of Holocaust memorials across four countries in order to acknowledge the life of a memorial in order to make visible the "activity of memory" and thereby recognise its significance as a "never-to-be-completed" process. Young believes that the best way to do this is to:

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<sup>552</sup> During the period in question, the Nepali government became subject to criticism by human rights agencies for a lack of political will to implement meaningful transitional justice measures and for the extent of state-sanctioned impunity (M. Sharma, 2012, 2017). Whilst an individual's membership of a party does not necessarily mean that they were actively involved in lethal conflict or that they committed rights abuses, Sharma notes that 80 percent of the members of the Constituent Assembly in 2008 were members of the three largest political parties, who fought on either side of the conflict.

enlarge its life and texture to include its genesis in historical time, the activity that brings a monument into being, the debates surrounding its origins, its production, its reception, its life in the mind. (2016, p. 16)

Young's biographic approach draws attention to the debates surrounding a monument's existence and understands memory as relational, dynamic and related to the present (Young, 1993, pp. 14–15). His comparative work explains the function of a monument in the creation of national identity and how its' performance is embedded in the local context. In 1989 he highlighted the "viewer's responses to the monument, how it is used politically and religiously in the community, who sees it under what circumstances, how its figures are used and re-cast in new places." (1989, p. 67) He went on to conceive of the life of a memorial in multiple dimensions as revealing what he defines as its "texture of memory" (1993): its conception and literal construction, its form, its place in the constellation of national memory; and its ever-evolving life in the mind of its community over time (2016). These dimensions will frame the perspectives discussed here and help to address three interrelated questions: How is the Ganatantra Smarak intended to shape the memory of the recent past (including the People's War and the political transition from monarchy to republic)? How does this memory of the recent past shape understandings of today's post-monarchical Nepal? And for what purpose is this memory (re)told?

Much has been written about the 'People's War' and its effect on Nepal (Aditya Adhikari, 2015; Hutt, 2004b; D. Thapa, 2012); including internationally supported peace-making and peacebuilding efforts (Aditya Adhikari, 2017; Martin, 2012) and local perceptions of the limited transitional justice mechanisms put into place, such as the integration of ex-Maoist combatants into the Nepal Army (2006-2012), and the establishment of a Ministry for Peace and Reconstruction in March 2007 (Hutt, 2004a; Neelakantan, Ramsbotham, & Thapa, 2016). There is a limited amount of material available on memorialisation of the conflict that focuses on the CPN-M's use of martyrdom as a political tool (De Sales, 2003; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2006; Ogura, 2004; Shrestha-Schipper, 2012). Simon Robins

explores the nexus of local memory practices in the Terai region and transitional justice, critiquing elite-led institutional recognition processes (2013, 2014).<sup>553</sup> Michael Hutt's analysis of the process of writing the new national anthem in 2006-7 (2012) addresses the post-conflict re-representation of the nation, but no research has been published to date on national-level memorialisation initiatives following the conflict.<sup>554</sup>

## **Post-conflict Nepal**

This chapter begins with a brief re-cap of the chronology of post-conflict Nepal, in order to situate the discussion that follows and help with analysis of the memorial's present perception. The 'People's War' saw the loss of some 18,000 lives and has left more than 1,400 people unaccounted for in the period 1998 to 2006 (Aditiya Adhikari, 2015, p. 243; Centre, 2010; *Missing Persons in Nepal: The Right to Know - Updated List 2012*, 2012). The 2005 State of Emergency instituted by King Gyanendra pushed the political parties and the CPN-M together and the *Jan Andolan* of March-April 2006 led to the cessation of hostilities between the CPN-M and the Nepali state. Gyanendra reinstated parliament, and direct talks followed between the Prime Minister G.P. Koirala and the Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The official end of the conflict came in November 2006, when the CPN-Maoist and the Nepal Government signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), bringing the Maoists into mainstream politics. The King's executive powers were formally transferred to the Prime Minister, cabinet or parliament in the interim constitution in January 2007.

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<sup>553</sup> Robins gives a detailed account of local memorialisation initiatives supported by the ICRC (Robins, 2014). The work of journalist Kunda Dixit attempts to address the conflict from the victim's perspective (K. Dixit, 2007).

<sup>554</sup> Whilst the national anthem could be argued to be a memory project, this frame of analysis was not used for the only detailed analysis I am aware of the process of its creation, see Hutt (2012).

In April 2007, the Maoists joined the interim government,<sup>555</sup> and then promptly left again as they negotiated the terms of the transition with the mainstream political parties.<sup>556</sup> The CPN-M re-joined the interim government in December 2007. During 2007 CPN-M fighters assembled in cantonments; a UN mission arrived in Nepal to monitor the arms and armies of both parties, and to assist in preparation for elections to the Constituent Assembly (CA) (Martin, 2012), the body expected to serve for a two-year term as both the parliament of Nepal and the creator of its new constitution. All elections were postponed during this period as a result of the protests and riots in the south from those fighting for regional autonomy that came to be known as the *madhesh andolan* (2006-2008).<sup>557</sup>

Elections to the CA were held in April 2008, and brought to power a CPN-M led coalition with Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal as Prime Minister. At its first meeting on 28 May 2008, the CA declared Nepal a federal republic and formally abolished the monarchy. The first President, Dr Ram Baran Yadav, a Madhesi politician from the Nepali Congress, was elected in July 2008. It was at this time, in late 2008 that the design competition for the Ganatantra Smarak was launched.

By the time the final foundation stone was laid in the grounds of the Narayanhiti Palace in 2012, the situation was far from stable; there had already been four Prime Ministers in four years.<sup>558</sup> Pushpa Kamal Dahal resigned in Spring 2009 after a controversy over the leadership of the army, and a series of governments followed, headed first by the Unified Marxist Leninist Party (UML) and then again by the CPN-M. Following two

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<sup>555</sup> Under the new Legislature, Parliament contained all 209 of the existing parliamentarians from the Seven Parties and added 73 Maoist parliamentarians and 48 miscellaneous parliamentarians

<sup>556</sup> The Maoists demanded the abolition of the monarchy. Amendments were made to the Interim Constitution at the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly on 28 May 2008 that enshrined a commitment to federalism.

<sup>557</sup> For the background, see (Jha, 2014).

<sup>558</sup> CPN-M's Pushpa Kamal Dahal (May 2008 to May 2009), UML's Madhav Kumar Nepal (May 2009–February 2011), UML's Jhalanath Khanal (February–August 2011), CPN-M's Dr. Baburam Bhattarai (August 2011-May 2012).



extensions to its initial two-year term which greatly eroded its credibility, the CA was eventually dissolved in May 2012, with no agreement on the constitutional framework for the new republic, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Khil Raj Regmi took over as Prime Minister. A second set of elections were held in November 2013, the Nepali Congress (NC) emerged as the largest party and the NC President Sushil Koirala was made prime minister in February 2014 in partnership with the UML. It wasn't until September 2015 that the government promulgated a new constitution, fast-tracked in the aftermath of the earthquakes that hit Nepal in April and May, killing over 9,000 people. By December 2016, when the Smarak was due to be completed, Nepal had a further two changes of power. KP Sharma Oli (UML) led a coalition government from October 2015 until July 2016, when Pushpa Kamal Dahal (CPN-M) took over, again leading a coalition. The vulnerability of the project that resulted from the shifting patterns of political control is a thread that I will follow throughout this chapter.

## **The Design Competition**

The proposal for the Ganatantra Smarak was announced by Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai, then Finance Minister in the budget for the fiscal year BS 2065-2066 (2008-2009) under the heading “Institutional Development of Federal Democratic Republic and State Restructuring” and second only to the commitment that a new constitution would be written within two years. In his speech, he declared:

A Statue of Republic with distinct design will be erected within the vicinity of Narayanhiti premises to mark and long memorize the day that ended feudal monarchy through people's extraordinary courage and sacrifice-led struggle. I have allocated Rs. 50 million for this Statue which will be made using Nepali technician and Nepali design. Likewise, the Narayanhiti premises will be developed as a modern museum. I have anticipated that the Statue of Republic and the museum will turn the Narayanhiti vicinity to an attractive touristic site. (section 22, page 11)<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>559</sup> The full text of the English translation can be found here: [http://www.mof.gov.np/uploads/document/file/Final%20Translation%20Bud%202008-09%20\(1\)\\_20141228082419.pdf](http://www.mof.gov.np/uploads/document/file/Final%20Translation%20Bud%202008-09%20(1)_20141228082419.pdf) The full text of the Nepali document can be found here:

The CPN-M election manifesto from the CA elections set out their objective of “creating a new history” bringing “[t]he dark era of feudalism and monarchism” to an end (von Einsiedel, Malone, & Pradhan, 2012a, p. 371). At the beginning of the speech, Bhattarai first refers to the monument as *Ganatantra Pratimurti* (Republic Statue), then in the final sentence when setting out the concept, he uses the phrase *Ganatantra Smarak* (Republic Memorial). The language used in Bhattarai’s speech conceived of the *Ganatantra Smarak* as a way to re-purpose political history and institutionalise the CPN-M contribution to this pivotal moment, a shift in the centre of balance of the nation from the monarchy to the people.<sup>560</sup>

Bhattarai studied for his undergraduate degree in architecture at the Chandigarh College of Architecture in India, graduating in 1977.<sup>561</sup> He was fully cognisant of the relationship between architecture and political power and his speech makes explicit the symbolic significance of constructing the *Ganatantra Smarak* within the premises of the Narayanhiti Palace, to mark the people’s victory over the monarchy. He claims to be the primary instigator of the memorial project.<sup>562</sup>

The design competition was then advertised in national Nepali-language newspapers by the Department for Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) on behalf of the CPN-M led-government.<sup>563</sup> In his

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<http://www.mof.gov.np/np/archive-documents/budget-speech-17.html?lang> (both accessed 23 April 2016).

<sup>560</sup> Later in the document under the heading “Building New Nepal Campaign”, the *Ganatantra Smarak* is listed under item K “Erecting the Republic Statue and honouring the Martyrs programme.” It appears as the first item, followed by the Ichchhuk Cultural Academy, the Ram Briksha Yadav Memorial Center and the Suresh Wagle Memorial Cancer Center (Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital).

<sup>561</sup> For full education details, see: <http://baburam-bhattarai.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/dr-baburam-bhattarais-biography.html> (accessed 23 April 2016).

<sup>562</sup> Those involved in the process regularly referred to the *Ganatantra Smarak* as not just the Maoists’ but Bhattarai’s pet project. He reiterated this claim in response to a question by the author at a seminar given at LSE on 14 November 2016.

<sup>563</sup> This was confirmed in my first conversation with Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 19 April 2012), though there was some suggestion from Udhyay Shrestha that the competition was run twice as there was little response to the first call (Personal Communication, 14 July 2014).

budget speech Bhattarai stated that the Ganatantra Smarak would be built to a Nepali design, by Nepali technicians (section 22, page 11).<sup>564</sup> The design brief asked for submissions from Nepali architects to reflect:

- Nepal's geographical beauty, national unity, equity, progress and diversified language and culture
- Various courageous and political movements in different timeframes, people's movements and martyrs' contributions AND
- People's republic system<sup>565</sup>

I suggest the focus on 'Nepali' was not intended to indicate the development of a new architectural language for a federal republic. Rather, the use of the term 'Nepali' followed a twentieth-century pattern that was used to confer authenticity and therefore authority to architectural designs (See Chapter Three).

Those who wished to enter the competition had first to register their interest with the Department for Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC). As part of the process they were invited to take a tour of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, thereby taking part in a performance of the official narrative that relegated the monarchy (and its symbols of office) to the past.<sup>566</sup> Five finalists were selected from fourteen entries and each was invited to present to a jury led by the Society of Nepalese Architects (SONA) behind closed doors.<sup>567</sup> The finalists were A-Not Architecture and Architects, Akriti Rimal and Anuj Shrestha, Bijay Singh and Anil Maharjan, Abhishek Bajracharya and Shekhar Dongol of John Sanday and Associates, and Sarosh Pradhan and Associates.<sup>568</sup> Three of these teams

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<sup>564</sup> Link given above in footnote 14.

<sup>565</sup> I have been unable to locate a copy of the original brief in Nepali, and this extract comes from a summary of the competition published in SPACES Magazine in 2009. I have confirmed with three architects who entered the competition that these words are an extract from that document. ("Ganatantra Smarak," 2009)

<sup>566</sup> None of the design teams spoken with could remember the exact date of this visit, but they recall that the museum was open, placing it after 26 February 2009.

<sup>567</sup> Whilst no details are given, this is confirmed on the SONA website, see: <http://sona.org.np/archive/> Sudarshan Raj Tiwari recalls that the jury was not very interactive. Personal Communication, 24 July 2013.

<sup>568</sup> I have not seen all fourteen entries, only those shortlisted, see: ("Ganatantra Smarak Interaction," 2009).

had graduated from Nepali universities within the preceding three years and all were based within the Kathmandu Valley.<sup>569</sup> The winning design by Shekhar Dongol and Abhishek Bajracharya of John Sanday Associates (Figure 45) was publicly announced at the Concept Design Competition Award Ceremony held at the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2009.<sup>570</sup> Whilst the firm is owned by a British architect, both entrants were Nepali and had been working for the firm for one year.<sup>571</sup> They were awarded a cash prize of Nrs 200,000. The runners up were each awarded consolation prizes and Nrs 50,000 (“Ganatantra Smarak - Concept Design Competition Award Ceremony,” 2009). At this point, the winners of the competition handed over their working drawings and estimations to the DUDBC.

All the design teams stated their intention to mark the moment of transition and the figurative design devices proposed by most included the exaggerated height of proposed structures to emphasize victory over monarchy and challenge the palace; the use of light to signify hope, and the use of form to reveal the disruption of previous hierarchies of power and control (“Ganatantra Smarak,” 2009). For example, the design entry by Rimal and Shrestha of A-Not Architecture described their decision to use circular space to “breakdown any forces that oppress” (“Ganatantra Smarak,” 2009). Notably, all of the shortlisted designs included memorial elements to the victims of the ‘People’s War’ in particular (as opposed to martyrs in general), for example through the inclusion of a wall of names. The winning design concept was built around the language of martyrdom, to be executed in concrete and steel, emphasising the Ganatantra Smarak’s role as a memorial.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> The exceptions are A-Not Architecture, and Sarosh Pradhan and Associates, both established practices in Kathmandu.

<sup>570</sup> The event was presided over by Dr. Sunil Babu Shrestha, Member, National Planning Commission; Ar. Purna Kadariya, Secretary, Ministry of Physical Planning and Works; Er. Uma Kant Jha, secretary, Ministry of Physical Planning and Works; Ar. Indra Bahadur Shrestha, DG, DUDBC; and Ar. Bishnu Panthee, VP, SONA.

<sup>571</sup> They studied together at the Pulchowk Campus, Institute of Engineering between 2005 and 2008.

<sup>572</sup> Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 19 April 2012.

## The winning design

As specified by the design brief, the design submitted to the competition by Bajracharya and Dongol was intended to be approached through the southern gate to the Narayanhiti Palace compound, from the top end of Durbar Marg (Figure 46).<sup>573</sup> Once within the Narayanhiti site, visitors would be free to choose how to explore the monument, but visitors were intended to pass through the wall of the palace compound directly ahead of the Smarak, which would appear “as a rift in the earth, a long gray {sic} stone wall, emerging from and receding into the earth” in front of the palace.<sup>574</sup> Two ramps, one rising from the south side and one from the north, were to guide visitors around the perimeter of a large, square courtyard, raising them to the level of the *memorial plaza*. An elliptical space was then marked out on the plaza by four stambha [columns] at each of the cardinal points connected together at their highest point by an elliptical steel band inscribed with the words of the national anthem.<sup>575</sup> Each of the stambha was also connected to the one opposite by a steel pipe and the intersection of the two pipes was marked by a circular steel band inscribed with the words “you will never be forgotten” (in English). Lights would shine from the outer elliptical band, refracting off the circular band at the centre to illuminate a map of the country set into the granite floor below (Figure 47). Each of the stambha was intended to represent a group of people, “stambha 1 the ones who were lost, stambha 2 the ones who lost their lives, stambha 3 the ones who were abducted, stambha 4 the ones who were handicapped {sic}”<sup>576</sup> and was to be covered in small empty niches to represent the absence of

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<sup>573</sup> Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 19 April 2012.

<sup>574</sup> Architect’s presentation given to competition jury, April 2009. Unpublished document. Kindly shared with the author by Abhishek Bajracharya.

<sup>575</sup> The national anthem will also no longer be inscribed on the elliptical steel band that links each *stambha* [column] to this model of the country. Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 25 July 2016.

<sup>576</sup> Architect’s presentation given to competition jury, April 2009. Unpublished document.

individuals. The whole design was intended to be circumambulated and the sacrifice of the people who have suffered, died or disappeared to be interpreted as enabling the country to move forward “in a positive and bright direction”, literally holding the light that shines down on the map.<sup>577</sup> Directly underneath the raised memorial platform sat an elliptical 300 seat conference hall to include a gallery space “with photographs, important events and time being carved on the walls” (Figure 48).<sup>578</sup>

### **Locating the Smarak**

The site for the Ganatantra Smarak was changed four times between 2009 and 2012. After the original location in front of the Narayanhiti Palace, on 29 May 2009 the first foundation stone was laid within the public space of Ratna Park in the centre of Kathmandu as part of the first annual Republic Day celebrations (“PM lays foundation of Republic monument,” 2009). In late 2009 the site was again changed to Tinkune, on a triangular plot of land located outside the city centre towards the city’s airport (“Tinkune to be new site, officials mull redesigning,” 2010) and on 27 March 2012, the final foundation stone was laid in the north east corner of the Narayanhiti Palace compound (“PM lays foundation stone of Ganatantra Smarak,” 2012).

The pragmatic narrative suggested by representatives of the DUDBC managing the process, is that the Society of Nepalese Architects (SONA) who chaired the judging panel for the competition raised concerns about the archaeological importance of the Narayanhiti site,<sup>579</sup> the congested nature

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<sup>577</sup> Architect’s presentation given to competition jury, April 2009. Unpublished document. Abhishek Bajracharya cited the team’s architectural precedents as the work of Eisenman in Berlin, Correa in India and the Gandhi Memorials in Ahmedabad and Delhi. Personal Communication, 19 April 2012.

<sup>578</sup> In addition to setting the parameters for the symbolic content of the design, the design brief included a specific set of accommodation requirements, including a 300-seat conference hall, and a not insignificant amount of parking. Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 19 April 2012 and 27 July 2014.

<sup>579</sup> Sudarshan Raj Tiwari (Personal Communication, 24 July 2013) and Udhay Shrestha (14 July 2013) who both attended the SPACES seminar confirmed that the site in front of the Narayanhiti Palace was a major point of contention and referred to the site’s use since the Licchavi period in the 11-12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (Tiwari, 2002).

of the city centre, and the negative impact of removing public space for different activities in the name of the people. The latter concern was also cited with reference to Ratna Park and there is some suggestion of public protest (“From Ratnapark to Kirtipur, Republic Tower goes places,” 2012). An ownership dispute made the Tinkune site untenable and the government was more easily able to requisition 35 ropanis (4.5 acres) of land in the north east corner of the Narayanhiti Palace grounds, hence the Ganatantra Smarak’s return to ex-Royal land.<sup>580</sup> Articles in the Nepali press, however, reveal this narrative as anything but straightforward.

This article in the Kathmandu Post was written in the aftermath of the May 2009 resignation of Pushpa Kamal Dahal and collapse of the CPN-Maoist-led coalition:

Why does Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal want to change the venue of its [the Smarak’s] establishment at this point of time when he needs to focus on several other pressing national issues, including the Cabinet expansion? This is just not understandable. He keeps saying he wants to do something concrete so that people will remember him even after his tenure. But let me tell you Mr. Prime Minister, people are looking for some real change that would make their everyday lives easier. They want to feel a sense of relief. Do you think establishing the monument at Ratna Park would make them happy? More important for them is for the peace and constitution-writing processes to move ahead smoothly. It doesn't matter wherever the monument stands. What matters is whether we are a republic state in the real sense or not. (“Monumental molehill,” 2009)

The author of this piece explicitly links the change in proposed location of the Ganatantra Smarak with the change in political leadership.<sup>581</sup> They reference a CPN-M accusation levelled at the new UML Prime Minister, Madhav Kumar Nepal, that the Smarak site was shifted from the palace in order to enable the restoration of the monarchy (“Govt bidding to restore monarchy, claims Maoist Chief,” 2009). The article’s call to the government to “Come on, wake up, address something real for a change” highlights the

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<sup>580</sup> The request made to Ministry of Defence for 85 ropanis of land in 17/12/2012 (BS 2069/09/02) and 35 ropanis were granted on 21 March 2013 (BS 2069/12/08). *Narayanhiti Darbar Sangrahalaya Guruyana Tyari Samitiko Pratibodana 2071* (Report of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum Master Plan Preparation Committee 2014). Unpublished Document.

<sup>581</sup> Confirmed by Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 17 July 2014.

discrepancy between the political elite's focus on state building at a time when the people were more concerned with peace and stability (Hachhethu et al., 2008).

Each repositioning of the monument was accompanied by government requests for design changes, ostensibly to adapt the Smarak to its new location. Associated as they were with changes in political leadership, these requests reveal competing views over the performative intention of the Smarak.<sup>582</sup> The design brief included in its schedule of accommodation a 300-seat auditorium, a place in which memory would be actively and audibly forged.<sup>583</sup> Under the premiership of Madhav Kumar Nepal (UML) (May 2009-June 2010) there was a request to edit out the conference hall, revealing that the plan for large-scale memorial events, for example on Republic Day, was subject to discussion.<sup>584</sup> The re-inclusion of the auditorium in the contract for construction in early 2012, when Baburam Bhattarai was Prime Minister, firmly associates this proposal to actively re-forge national memory with CPN-M ambition.

It is not a coincidence that it was after Baburam Bhattarai became Prime Minister in August 2011, that the final foundation stone was laid in the North East corner of the Narayanhiti Palace compound on Tuesday March 27<sup>th</sup> 2012 (two months before the term of the CA was due to end).<sup>585</sup> The Smarak was to be approached through the eastern gate to the compound from the road running north to Gairidhara from Nagpokhari, either on foot or by car (for VIPs) (Figure 49).<sup>586</sup> Bhattarai is quoted as having stated that he

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<sup>582</sup> Bajracharya reported proposing design changes for the site at Tinkune in a presentation to secretary of the Prime Minister. His team presented updated drawings by April 2011. Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 19 April 2012.

<sup>583</sup> Abhishek Bajracharya and Macha Kaji Maharjan. Recorded Interview, 28 July 2015.

<sup>584</sup> Confirmed by Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 27 July 2013.

<sup>585</sup> Bhattarai is reported to have chased the DUDBC for a location in January 2012, when he was conscious that there were just 5 months left of his tenure following the final extension of the CA for six months in November 2011. Abhishek Bajracharya and Macha Kaji Maharjan. Recorded Interview, 28 July 2015. See also: ("Republic Tower finds no place, hunt goes on," 2012).

<sup>586</sup> The east entrance to the Narayanhiti compound was installed by Gyanendra. Hindu religious practice dictates that if a member of a family dies, the entrance through which their body was removed from the home should be blocked up. It is said that the bodies of



was honoured to lay the foundation stone of the Republic Memorial in a place where the authoritarian rule of the monarchs had come to an end, paving the way for democracy (“PM lays foundation stone of Ganatantra Smarak,” 2012). The Ganatantra Smarak was positioned in the grounds of the Narayanhiti Palace order to maximize opportunities for symbolic meaning; its juxtaposition with the Palace Museum drew attention to the transition between the two regimes (Figure 51).

The team at John Sanday Architects turned down a request to re-design the landscaping around the Smarak, and in September 2012 a tender was issued to design the landscape around the memorial in its final location.<sup>587</sup> The winning design submission by Vastushilpa Architects includes water features (ponds and fountains) in axial alignment with the Smarak at the centre, pavilions and a gazebo to provide shade and seating areas, a cafeteria (and associated restrooms) and a large external amphitheatre (Figure 50). Vastushilpa Architects’ outline design document stresses their intention to maintain the original design concept of the Smarak, but projection drawings reveal elements more reminiscent of a pleasure park, for example the use of neoclassical sculptures at the centre of several water features and the grouping of seating areas around clusters of trees.<sup>588</sup> The large-scale open gardens with their inclusion of communal spaces contrast with the original landscaping by Abhishek Bajracharya and Shekhar Dongol, which included small, abstract memorial gardens designed to offer a place “for personal reflection and private reckoning.”<sup>589</sup> Bajracharya felt that the design changes transformed the Smarak into part of a public park.<sup>590</sup> In

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Birendra and other members of the royal family were removed from the site from the West entrance, and whilst it was not practical to block this gateway, it might suggest the need for an alternative private entrance to the site. Sudarshan Raj Tiwari, Personal Communication, 24 July 2013.

<sup>587</sup> Abhishek recalled how his team from John Sanday Architects were not invited to the laying of the foundation stone, then were called the next day by the Prime Minister’s office for design changes to adapt the design for the new site. Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication. 17<sup>th</sup> July 2014.

<sup>588</sup> Copy kindly shared with me by Abhishek Bajracharya, 27 July 2013.

<sup>589</sup> Architect’s presentation given to competition jury, April 2009. Unpublished document.

<sup>590</sup> His phrase was that an apple had been turned into a watermelon. Personal Communication, 27 July 2013.

September 2012, the Constituent Assembly had been dissolved, no new constitution had been produced and the country had no Prime Minister. The acceptance of this landscape design was a process managed by the civil servants in the DUDBC.<sup>591</sup>

A second basement level was proposed by Vastushilpa Architects to raise up the Smarak in reference to the high plinths of Newar temple architecture, and was initially to be used as a car park. Sometime in 2014 the decision was made to turn this into a gallery hall, and in 2015 decisions about the contents of this space were being directed by the office of the Prime Minister.<sup>592</sup> As a result of this additional level, Bajracharya and Dongol have reduced the height of the memorial plaza and this is now approached by steps that run across the length of the eastern edge of the platform. The ramps, originally designed to run up to the level of the plaza were used as a device to link the ground level to the auditorium below. A set of internal stairs leads down to the basement gallery hall.<sup>593</sup>

Construction began in December 2012 and was predicted to take three years, with the Smarak to be launched on Republic Day, 28th May 2016.<sup>594</sup> Construction has continued to date though progress was slowed by the earthquakes that shook the country in 2015 and the subsequent blockade of goods and services over the border with India by the United Democratic Madeshi Front (Republica 17 July 2016).

Young writes about the nexus between a monument and its location: “a monument necessarily transforms an otherwise benign site into part of its content, even as it is absorbed into the site and made part of a larger

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<sup>591</sup> Also costs had reportedly rocketed from Nrs 340 million to Nrs 400 million. Macha Kaji Maharjan. Recorded Interview, 28 July 2015.

<sup>592</sup> Abhishek Bajracharya and Macha Kaji Maharjan. Recorded Interview, 28 July 2015.

<sup>593</sup> I have visited the construction site of the Ganatantra Smarak three times, July 2014, 2015 and 2016.

<sup>594</sup> Roshan Shrestha, executive director of the constructing company BKOI and SKY Bangalamukhi Joint Venture signed an agreement with the DUDBC on 7 Dec 2012. Mach Kaji Maharjan. Personal Communication, 13 July 2013.

locale.” (Young, 1993, p. 7). To build this memorial on what was formerly royal land was an expression of institutionalized power, a representation of history that in its location set in stone the way things were (feudal monarchy) and are (people’s republic). It was a literal inscription of the transition from monarchy to republic into the landscape of the city. Plans exist for the *Ganatantra Smarak* to be managed by the staff of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum. The site is not intended to be freely accessed, visitors will buy one ticket to enter both sites and if the Nepal Army agree to grant access between the two sites, visitors will be routed from the Palace Museum to the *Smarak* (reversing the point of entry to the *Smarak* site).<sup>595</sup> This decision to monetise and control access to the site is indicative of the political need to place recent events into some cognitive order that reinforces community, creating a spatial narrative that tells the story of the transition from monarchy to republic.

In October 2009, under the premiership of Madhav Kumar Nepal (UML) a second competition was launched, this time for a *Ganatantra Stambha* [Republic Tower] and this caused considerable confusion in the public reporting of both projects. After a similar bewildering array of proposed sites, including the land allocated for the UN Park in Gushi Gal, Kupandol (“Republic Tower to be erected at UN Park,” 2010). In April 2012 the Kathmandu Post reported that a foundation stone had been laid that week in Gaangkhel, Kirtipur, west of the Tribhuvan University campus (“From Ratnapark to Kirtipur, Republic Tower goes places,” 2012). The design competition for the *Stambha* was won by A-Not Architecture and Architects. Conceived as a *chautara* [rest stop], with a tree at the centre giving shade to all passersby, the tower was to be 94 metres tall and 60 metres wide. This would have made it taller than the *Dharahara*, the nine-story structure built in 1821 by Bhimsen Thapa, which before it collapsed in the earthquake on 25 April 2015 killing over 100 people, was the tallest structure in the

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<sup>595</sup> At the time of my last field visit in 2016, this depended on reaching an agreement with the Nepal Army who currently base 4 regiments in the remaining space on the Narayanhiti site: Valley Pritana, Kali Bahadur, Purano Gorakh, Special Security Force. Macha Kaji Maharjan. Personal Communication, 25 July 2016.

Kathmandu Valley. Two levels were proposed, the first to house a gallery and the second designed as a viewing tower. The design includes features that overlap in their intended meaning with the design of the Smarak. It includes a Republic Corner that would be imprinted with a map and used to pay tribute to all martyrs on the occasion of Republic Day; a wall of names and a wall of stars (representing those unknown) as well as the tower itself, described as a “memorial tower” held up by three piers, each representing a geographical region of Nepal. It may have been initially intended by the UML Prime Minister, as a way to supercede the Smarak and assert his party’s claim over the history of democratic struggle.<sup>596</sup>

### **The translation of the new national anthem into an architectural idea**

Sudarshan Raj Tiwari, then Professor of Architecture at Tribhuvan University, described the way the task of designing the Ganatantra Smarak was conceptualised by the CPN-M led government as “translating the new national anthem into an architectural idea.”<sup>597</sup> The new national anthem replaced a melody composed as a salutation to the king and was selected by a national taskforce from an open competition in the previous year (2006) during what Hutt describes as “a brief window of opportunity for popular consensus” (Hutt, 2012, p. 320). The co-ordinates of unity in diversity, the country’s natural resources, the record of debt to those who established the nation-state through their actions (and deaths) and the people-centred, forward-looking republic set out above for the Ganatantra Smarak were set by the lyrics of the new national anthem:

*Sayaum thunga phulka hami,  
eutai mala nepali*

We are hundreds of flowers, [but] one

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<sup>596</sup> In 2015, the Ganatantra Stambha project was being managed by the same team in the DUDBC as the Ganatantra Smarak and a model was on display at the Kirtipur campus of Tribhuvan University, but construction had not yet begun. Abhishek Bajracharya and Macha Kaji Maharjan. Recorded Interview, 28 July 2015.

<sup>597</sup> Sudarshan Raj Tiwari. Personal Communication, 24 July 2013

Nepali garland

*Sarvabhaum bhai phailieka,  
mechi-mahakali*

Sovereign and spread out, [from] Mechi  
[to] Mahakali

*Prakritika koti-koti sampadako  
Anchala*

A zone of nature's myriad resources

*Birharuka ragatle, svatantra ra  
Atala*

Independent and unalterable, by the blood  
of heroes

*Gyanabhumi, shantibhumi  
tarai, pahad, himala*

Land of knowledge, land of peace, Tarai,  
Pahad, Himal

*akhanda yo pyaro hamro  
ma-tribhumi nepala*

Undivided this our dear motherland  
Nepal

*Bahul jati, bhasha, dharna,  
sanskriti chan bishala*

The multiple ethnicities, languages, religions  
and cultures are vast

*Aragami rastra hamro, jaya  
jaya nepala*

Ours is a progressive nation, Jaya Jaya  
Nepal<sup>598</sup>

The consensus that saw this characterisation of the nation agreed in 2006 began to fade soon after the conclusion of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in November 2006 and disappeared when the publication of Interim Constitution in January 2007 sparked the madhesh *andolan* (Hutt, 2012, p. 320). The design brief for the Ganatantra Smarak issued in autumn

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<sup>598</sup> Published translation by Michael Hutt (2012).

2008 adopted the encapsulation of the nation agreed through the national anthem two years earlier. It was conceived as a monument to a political moment that garnered consensus during an increasingly unstable period, “the day that ended feudal monarchy through people’s extraordinary courage and sacrifice-led struggle.”<sup>599</sup> The 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement included a commitment to the restructuring of the country “in an inclusive, democratic and progressive way by ending its present centralized and unitary structure.” (CPA 3.5)<sup>600</sup> In 2008, when the terms of reference for the Smarak competition were drawn up, this process had barely begun.<sup>601</sup> Couched in identity terms, the specifications drawn from the design brief appear to show an attempt to avoid the issue of recognition of specific identities, but drew instead upon the common ground that existed between both the traditional political parties, the CPN-M and the people of Nepal; the concept of an inclusive new republican Nepal (Hachhethu et al., 2008, p. 2). The use of the co-ordinates set by the national anthem to frame the design brief enabled the government to present a unified national narrative.<sup>602</sup>

Following the publication of the competition for the national anthem, a challenge from the artistic community led the government to rethink its chosen selection process, which was made more representative and transparent (Hutt, 2012, pp. 311–312). No such debate is visible in letters

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<sup>599</sup> Mocko’s account of the first sitting of the CA confirms that there was unanimity over the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic, but not much beyond (2012, p. 211).

<sup>600</sup> The full text of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement can be found here: [http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace\\_agreements/nepal\\_cpa\\_20061121\\_en.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/nepal_cpa_20061121_en.pdf) (accessed 23 August 2018).

<sup>601</sup> The CPA also included specific commitments to the establishment of both a National Peace and Rehabilitation Commission and a High-Level Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as a commitment to release the names of all those disappeared and killed on both sides. These processes did not begin until 2016 and even then, was without the support of the United Nations (M. Sharma, 2012, 2017).

<sup>602</sup> For example, rather than present a map of the country at the centre of the Smarak’s memorial plaza, at the start of 2016 (when debate around the demarcation of the federal states was raging) it was decided instead to build a topographical model of the country with the three geographical regions of *Terai*, *Pahad* and *Himal* marked using copper, bronze and gold paint respectively. Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 25 July 2016.

pages of national papers in the case of the Ganatantra Smarak.<sup>603</sup> This is not to say, however, that the competition and selection process were without controversy. The editors of SPACES Magazine (an independent publication on architecture and design) organised a public seminar with the DUDBC later in April 2009 to give the local academic and design community an opportunity to discuss the competition, the choice of the Narayanhiti site and each shortlisted design with the competition finalists and government officials (“Ganatantra Smarak Interaction,” 2009). Each of the five finalists repeated their competition presentation in front of an audience at the DUDBC.<sup>604</sup> Bharat Sharma (ex-Deputy Director General of the DUDBC) wrote that it was “like inviting the doctor after death to brief the status” (B. Sharma, 2009) and the published summary of the event in SPACES remarked on the absence of any representation from the jury. Bharat Sharma wrote that the terms of reference, “looked very much like a dictated notion by political high muscle which was blindly followed by the department ... It was an extremely wrong start.” (B. Sharma, 2009). Although the attendees were representative of only a limited cross-section of society, the critique offered at this event reveals the precariousness of the government’s projected image of national unity and of its ability to represent the views of Nepal’s diverse population. Delegates at the seminar called upon the government to re-run the competition to invite submissions from a wider cross-section of society.<sup>605</sup>

Professor Sudarshan Raj Tiwari’s characterization of the task of designing the Ganatantra Smarak as a physical manifestation of the national anthem was meant as a criticism and applied not only to the government’s conceptualization of the task, but also to the design response. He stated that “the elements that evoke nationalism and unity seem to be missing in

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<sup>603</sup> I used the archives at Martin Chautari to check *Kantipur*, *Republica* and The Kathmandu Post for this period.

<sup>604</sup> No representatives from the Society of Nepalese Architects (SONA) were present.

<sup>605</sup> Udhay Shrestha (one of the organisers of the seminar) suggested to me that government officials were of the opinion that the project should not go ahead, but that it had such high-level political backing their hands were tied. Personal communication, 14 July 2013.

the designs.”<sup>606</sup> All the finalists were criticized at the seminar for not taking up the challenge of developing an architectural language for a new Nepal.<sup>607</sup> Architect Devendra Nath Gongal criticized all of the design teams for adopting an “orthodox” approach and suggested a more effective source of inspiration for the design would have emerged from direct communication with the mass public (Gongal, 2009). He is reported to have said about the winning design at the seminar that “The design lacks the emotion that calls for unity to build a new Nepal.” and further added, “The design if implemented could kill the spirit of the Palace, ganatantra itself and of the country as well.” (“Ganatantra Smarak Interaction,” 2009) In early 2010, Udhay Shrestha (then editor of SPACES) reflected in an editorial that

the Smarak...has objectives...worthy of commendation. But...stops short of anything further than that. [It] has failed miserably...its responsibility towards the country’s citizens in general, as its objective has been marred by deep personal and political overtones, cutting short drastically the vision with which the monument should have been addressed. (2010)

Later in 2010, Nepali author and academic Shiva Rijal suggested in an opinion piece in the English language daily Republica that this project was “the rarest opportunity in the architectural history of the country” and in order to mitigate what he saw as a lack of “Nepaliness” in its design, the Ganatantra Smarak could be constructed voluntarily by young people, “since youths from different parts of the country find some good causes and meanings to come together and feel the glory of their nation and history together – the very thing that the martyrs wanted to see and died for.” (2010). Whilst Rijal pressed for a rethink of the selected design in order to ensure its authenticity, he accepted the symbolism of the state emerging from the “dreams and visions of the martyrs.”

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<sup>606</sup> Sudarshan Raj Tiwari. Personal Communication, 24 July 2013.

<sup>607</sup> This was a feeling expressed to me by Sarosh Pradhan (Recorded Interview, 15 July 2013) and Udhay Shrestha (Personal Communication 14 July 2013) independently – both stated that they felt entrants had taken it on as of a commercial project, not appreciating its significance.



The use of the phrase *Birharuka ragatle* [by the blood of heroes] in the new national anthem deliberately placed the violence of the recent conflict into part of a historical narrative of a struggle for democracy. Historian Pratyoush Onta has written how the Shah monarchy (particularly throughout the Panchayat era between 1962 -1990), promoted a *Bir* [brave] history of Nepal that eulogized the achievements of the Shah kings and promoted the idea of an independent nation (1996b). In this historical narrative, the hero was someone who died for king and country. In the winning memorial design, this hero was adopted by the young architects as a direct reference to the recent conflict. They intended to represent the sacrifice and suffer of those on both sides of the 'People's War' and stated that key intentions for the design were for it "to memorialise the anonymous heroes of the country" and "to provide a place for family members and friends to reflect on the loss of their loved ones."<sup>608</sup>

## **Materialising a new democratic history**

### *The narratives of martyrdom*

Abhishek Bajracharya felt that his and Shekhar Dongol's design was selected by the jury because it personalised the victims of the recent conflict through the inclusion of the four stambha. In representing the victims using empty niches carved into the stambha they would recall the dead, injured and disappeared as human beings.<sup>609</sup> While the architects intended to offer a gesture towards the victims of the recent conflict, I argue that the design was selected as an attempt to construct a political memory (A. Assmann, 2010) that would institutionalise a narrative of suffering and sacrifice, and present a triumphant history of people over the monarchy, highlighting the impact of the CPN-M party.

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<sup>608</sup> These quotations are taken from a copy of their unpublished presentation to the jury in April 2009. I am grateful to Abhishek Bajracharya for sharing this with me.

<sup>609</sup> An original proposal to include a wall of names was quickly dropped. By 2015, all plans to include the names of victims on the site had stalled. Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 28 July 2015.

For the CPN-M party, the 'People's War' was fed by sacrifice (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2006). It encouraged a culture of martyrdom and used memorialisation as a political tool throughout the conflict.<sup>610</sup> The official memorialization of the Ganatantra Smarak can be interpreted as an extension of this practice, made possible by the status of the CPN-M leaders after the conflict. Lecomte-Tilouine describes how the Maoist movement leveraged Nepali traditions of the warrior's sacrifice by reference to Hindu traditions of martyrs' blood birthing new warriors (2006), and valorised the families of martyrs by subjugating them to the cause. De Sales' analysis of revolutionary songs reveals that the noble death of a martyr was portrayed as offering liberation from social inequality and a construct that created unity amongst those who remembered them (2003). In 2003 the Maoist publication *Janaawaj* elaborated: "The people who commemorate the martyrs have developed a new culture in which martyrs' doors and pillars are created, martyrs' photos are exhibited and villages, hamlets, companies, battalions and brigades are named with martyrs' names" (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2006, p. 240). Analysis by Satya Shrestha-Schipper of the Maoist gates in Jumla and Mugu between 2007-2009 reveals that this form of memorialisation is divorced from the families of those being celebrated (2012). Most were either built by Maoists or by villagers on Maoist orders and were located in areas where the state had lost control, and thereby demonstrated presence and authority. They were often decorated with communist symbols and slogans, portraits of leaders and the names of fallen comrades, reinforcing narratives of resistance.

Memorials construct narratives that will determine what kind of history will be written and spoken about victims, and the literal symbolism of the Smarak design defines how the dead should be remembered by explicitly (and physically) connecting the sacrifice of the people and the birth of the

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<sup>610</sup> Through literature, ceremonies, memorial parks, songs and poems (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2006, p. 241).

'New Nepal'.<sup>611</sup> An official leaflet produced by the DUDBC for the occasion of the laying of the Smarak's foundation stone in 2012 includes the text summarising the design concept from the architects' presentation.<sup>612</sup> By recalling the martyrological refrain promulgated by the CPN-Maoists, i.e. citizens who died so that the 'new' Nepal could live, the Ganatantra Smarak design embodied particular historical interpretations of the 'People's War' sanctified by the CPN-M led government (Young, 1993, p. 2).

By commissioning the Smarak, the CPN-M led government gained itself the right to possess the memory of the dead and missing and to define who and how they would be remembered. It attempted to instrumentalise victims' memory for political purposes in two key ways. Firstly, the narrative of sacrifice and suffering substantiated political identity across ideological lines and was intended to be unifying. Martyrdom does not require a definition of who was a martyr, just that they had sacrificed their lives for the nation – after all, the 2006 *jan andolan* (people's movement) was a victory against the monarchy shared by both sides.<sup>613</sup> Because martyrs "act for the liberation of the people and the advent of a better world" (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2006, p. 240), they support the collective and emphasize the strength and role of the people (as opposed to the monarchy). Secondly, the martyrs of the 'People's War' were united with martyrs from previous historical struggles, staking the CPN-M party's right to claim their place in history.

During the 'People's War' in Nepal there were clear differences between different groups of Nepali society in the way that the conflict was perceived. This gap was reproduced in the narratives of historians, politicians and journalists (Hutt, 2006; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2006).<sup>614</sup> Accounts of how victims

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<sup>611</sup> See: ("PM lays foundation stone of Ganatantra Smarak," 2012) for Baburam Bahattarai's speech on laying foundation stone in 2012.

<sup>612</sup> I am grateful to Macha Kaji Maharjan from the DUDBC for providing me with a copy of this leaflet in 2014. I am uncertain whether another version exists in Nepali.

<sup>613</sup> Simon Robins highlights the Maoist practice of identifying those who are missing 'martyrs', a practice that denies them justice (Robins, 2013, p. 190).

<sup>614</sup> For example, the traditional political parties developed a narrative of "Maoist evil" during the conflict as revealed by Hutt's analysis of the Nepali print media in the latter half of 2001. Hutt located a particular use of language driven by official rhetoric: "military actions

have attempted to advance their own narratives at a local level make it clear that the interpretation of the conflict is still contested (Billingsley, 2016; Robins, 2014; M. Sharma, 2017). For example, a positive narrative about someone killed by the Maoists can be perceived to discredit the narrative of someone killed by the state. However, the dominant official language of government is one of all victims being equal, reflecting the political balance that exists between the parties to the conflict. As the Maoists were successful in mobilizing the *janajati* (peoples considered indigenous and often from marginalized communities), they became more vulnerable to becoming casualties. For example in the Terai, the Tharu were victimized by the forces of the state to the extent that in the Bardiya district, they constitute 80% of those missing despite barely being a majority (*Missing Persons in Nepal: The Right to Know - Updated List 2012*, 2012). According to Judith Butler (2009, pp. 1–32), by making all victims ‘grievable’, their lives are seen to matter: The political decision to make all deaths ‘grievable’ in the design of the Ganatantra Smarak enabled the government to present an image of inclusivity without actually offering anything to support those who survived the conflict. There are no standards of accountability for memorials and the use of the niches to represent people without having to produce a list of names meant no research in order to identify those missing, injured or killed had to take place and is reflective of the failure of the transitional justice mechanisms in Nepal to date.<sup>615</sup> Work by Naidu on memorialization in post-conflict Africa demonstrates that discussions about the meaning, style and shape of a memorialisation activity and who is represented in the final product reveal the importance given to different sectors of society in the transitional justice process (Naidu, 2014, p. 41).<sup>616</sup> The continuity between those running the post-monarchical Nepali state and those responsible for leading each side of the ‘People’s War’ meant that the

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by the army brought about the deaths (*mrityu*) of Maoists, whereas Maoist killings of security officials were nearly always murders (*hatya*)” (Hutt, 2006, p. 386).

<sup>615</sup> The document outlining plans for the galleries within the Ganatantra Smarak kindly provided to me by Macha Kaji Maharjan was rather tellingly missing its only annex: a list of names. See title in footnote 70.

<sup>616</sup> Naidu draws on fieldwork and research conducted in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Kenya.

formal legitimate authority capable of endorsing and institutionalising transitional justice mechanisms was held by those who had the most to gain from silencing the recent past. Elizabeth Jelin, writing about exclusion in public memorials in Peru, states

memories and silences regarding the “recent” past are woven into long-term historical structures of inequalities and injustices and into ingrained cultural practices... (Jelin, 2007, p. 189)

The Ganatantra Smarak was not to address the value of those who died in the conflict, but to turn the page after the rupture of violence and claim authority over historical struggles for democracy.

The anonymous people to be remembered at the Ganatantra Smarak are being harnessed to support a new historical narrative – one that willfully redefines the heroes of the Nepali nation as people who have sacrificed their lives to build the Nepali republic. An official document outlining the proposed structure of the Ganatantra Smarak gallery hall reveals the construction of a new historical narrative in which the people are the architects of the nation and the CPN-M as the instigators of the ‘revolution’, the heirs of all previous struggles for democracy.<sup>617</sup> The story is punctuated not with the lives of successive monarchs (Onta, 1996b), but with events and political movements that mark the people challenging the authority of the monarchs (and where people have lost their lives), presenting a long history of democratic struggle. Ankersmit writes that:

the intense historicization and narrativization taking place at the occasion of a sublime historical event may completely dissolve the historical identity of a previous period and replace it by a new one. (2001, p. 320)

The historical narrative proposed for the gallery is preceded by the title ‘*Shahid*’ [martyrs] and begins with the advent of democracy in 1950 when

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<sup>617</sup> A copy of this unpublished document, titled “*Ganatantra Stambha ra Smarakmaa pradshin garine saamagriharuko suci tyaar kaayeko aantimaa prati bedana*” was kindly provided to me by Macha Kaji Maharjan in 2015.

the Rana prime ministers were removed from power.<sup>618</sup> Significantly, the 'People's War' is included as the latest in a series of events that includes: the short period of multi-party democracy in 1959 before King Mahendra seized direct control and placed the monarch at the centre of the Panchayat political system; the first *jan andolan* in 1990 that saw the end of the Panchayat system, and the formation of the first Constituent Assembly in 2008. The conflict is presented as an essential and natural step towards the achievement of democracy that is equal to all the others.<sup>619</sup> All those who died as a result of these actions are transformed into martyrs. That this is an example of Ankersmit's "sublime historical event" is made manifest by this attempt to effect a transformation "from the figure of the hero [*bir*], traditionally associated with the military realm, to that of a new figure, the martyr [*shahid*]" (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2006, p. 241) and lay claim to a history of activism.

#### *Location of the Smarak behind palace walls*

Memorials are physical sites where people are intended to meet, speak and commemorate. Forty writes that memorials are "effective less because they communicate meaning (though this is also important) than because, through performance, meanings are formulated in a social rather than a cognitive space." (Forty & Kuchler, 2001, p. 23) It remains to be seen how the public will respond to the site, and this chapter has presented the concept in the context of what James Young has referred to as the form of a public memorial (1989) and therefore deals with performative intentions rather than the function of the design.<sup>620</sup>

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<sup>618</sup> Commissioned in the late 1960s by Mahendra as the Democracy Gate, the Shahid Gate enshrined busts of the four men who were executed by the Ranas in 1941 after a failed attempt to overthrow the ruling regime: Dharma Bhakta Mathema, Shukra Raj Shastri, Ganga Lal Shrestha and Dasharath Chand ("Interview with Shanker Nath Rimal," 2002). The structure positioned their busts underneath a bust of King Tribhuvan, and thereby co-opted their deaths in the service of the monarchy and the nation.

<sup>619</sup> This narrative was written before the promulgation of Nepal's latest constitution in 2015, and rather than highlight the uncertainty of recent years, the narrative stops at the abolition of the monarchy

<sup>620</sup> I draw from my own visits to the construction site of the Ganatantra Smarak, in July 2014, 2015 and 2016.

The Ganatantra Smarak was commissioned by the CPN-M led government in the name of the people of Nepal, but it has not been widely discussed in the Nepali print media, or on social media channels. Press coverage of the project does exist and its timing appears to correlate directly to press releases from the DUDBC, e.g. to announce the winner of the competition, the laying of more than one foundation stone and to offer progress reports as the schedule slipped behind. In my experience, most Nepalis don't really know that the Smarak project exists, and of those that live in Kathmandu, few are aware what the Smarak stands for, and of those who are aware of its existence, many remain indifferent.

Whilst the second *jan andolan* in 2006 culminated in Kathmandu, the 'People's War' was fought in rural areas, and Kathmandu was largely untouched by the conflict. The extent of the Maoist insurgency was made possible precisely by a disconnect between the ruling elite of the "Kathmandu-centric" government and the rest of the country (Hutt, 2004b, p. 17).<sup>621</sup> The location of the Ganatantra Smarak in the grounds of the ex-royal palace in the centre of Kathmandu addressed the needs of the victims of the conflict only in so far as they overlapped with the needs of the authorities, i.e. that opinion had swung in favour of a republic (and against the institution of monarchy) (Hachhethu et al., 2008, p. 6). The urban landscape of Kathmandu is imbued with a political history of activism and past experiences of activism are invoked at Ratna Park where a Democracy Wall was constructed in commemoration of the 1990 *andolan*, destroyed during by Gyanendra's government in 2005, replaced by a pedestrian bridge, and then re-built after the 2006 *andolan* (Snellinger, 2010, p. 123).<sup>622</sup> The Narayanhiti Palace compound remained surrounded by its high walls, and continues to be associated with the authority of the state. Writing about

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<sup>621</sup> With 30 thousand fighters in April 2006, the Maoists had effective control of 80% of the territory of the state (through the use of parallel administrations) and an estimated 20,000 people under arms (Hutt, 2004b, p. 17).

<sup>622</sup> Snellinger records the history of this democracy wall, linking its location to the office of the All Nepal National Free Student Union (Unified) (ANNFSU) – a logistical hub during the 1990 *jan andolan* and again from 2004. See also (Snellinger, 2018).

memorialisation of the People's War, Simon Robins argues that for the victims of the conflict, this is ultimately about recognition:

Memory after violence ... concerns the representation of the events that led to disappearance and death and construction of narratives that will determine both how those most affected will live, and what history will be written about those who died. (Robins, 2013, p. 186)

He goes on to state that their construction of collective memory does not rely on state-led national narratives, but from social understandings that emerge from local, daily interactions. The Smarak has the potential (albeit unintended), once open to the public, to open up a space for public debate and discussion and to act as a catalyst for dialogue between previously divided groups that is not being offered through the limited transitional justice mechanisms in place. Equally, as entry will be controlled, it also has the potential to be completely ignored.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed a government-led attempt to disengage Nepal's monarchical past from the nation's identity: the objectified previous representation (the Narayanhiti Palace Museum) is woven into a historical narrative that places the CPN-M at the culmination of a story of the people's struggle for democracy. Through an analysis of the design competition and proposed form and content of the Ganatantra Smarak (Young, 1989), I argue that the physical juxtaposition of the Smarak against the Narayanhiti Palace Museum was framing the transition from monarchy to republic. As a site around which the re-narration of the nation was to be contextualised (Bhabha, 1994), the Narayanhiti Palace was chosen because it symbolized the monarchy. The Ganatantra Smarak and the Narayanhiti Palace Museum were intended together to enable visitors to clearly recognize the monarchical past as a world left behind, that could be discarded for the republican, mass future – a national identity borne of the people and led by



the CPN-M or, as Ankersmit would describe it, a simultaneous dissolution of and transcendence from the monarchical period (2001).<sup>623</sup>

After the 'People's War', people whose identities had long been suppressed began to specify their differences as part of the debates about multistate federalism and the new federal structure. This rise in identity politics clashed with the state's view of itself as the legitimate authority offering equal rights for all citizens. The monarchy in Nepal was invested with a particular form of power—one that was unaccountable and above the law—and I argue that this was maintained by the governments after the conflict. Although Nepal had a vibrant civil society and a free press, it was in the ruling parties' interest to actively avoid any struggle over the meaning of what had happened. This ingrained practice of governance helps to explain the use of the co-ordinates set by the national anthem adopted in 2007 in the conception of this public site of memory. Through the presentation of people's sacrifice for the nation, and plans to present the 'People's War' as the ultimate struggle against democracy, Nepal's politicians simultaneously re-narrated the past, and attempted to avoid questions such as whether a violent conflict had actually been necessary. In the absence of a republican constitution, Bajracharya and Dongol's design enabled the commissioning CPN-M led government to present a singular national identity that focused on the transfer of power from the monarchy to the people, presenting a picture of inclusion.

The constant re-positioning and adjustment of the Ganatantra Smarak design represents the precarious balance of the alliance between the different political parties, including the Maoists. They reveal multiple, divergent and often competing interests and different stakes in how

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<sup>623</sup> When asked by the author at a seminar at LSE on 14 November 2016 whether the expense of the Ganatantra Smarak can continue to be justified in 2016, Baburam Bhattarai made a direct comparison with proposals to reconstruct the *Dharahara* following the 2015 earthquakes. In contrast to the construction of the Ganatantra Smarak, proposals to rebuild the *Dharahara* garnered a significant amount of public attention. The reconstruction of the *Dharahara* plays to a reinforcement of the culture of the traditional elite (Hutt, 2017a) and therefore it is no surprise that Bhattarai confirmed that in his opinion the construction of the Ganatantra Smarak would be a better use of scarce funds.

histories are represented (Knauer & Walkowitz, 2004). Whilst the project was set into motion by a CPN-M led government (both at the time of the competition and the final confirmation of the selected site), the transition period has seen coalition governments led by each of the major political parties and a period during which the chief justice performed most of the functions of a Prime Minister. The existence of two projects (the Stambha and the Smarak), reveals the politically driven nature of the memorial-making process and the advantages to all parties to cling on to the moment of transition. The fact that the Smarak project continued, and plans for the historical gallery were drawn up after 2012, indicate agreement between Nepal's politicians of all parties that the best way to put the recent past behind is to inscribe it as part of a longer historical narrative of struggle.

The creation of a memorial necessitates decisions about whose stories are told and therefore whose are forgotten, or actively silenced. Whilst Abhishek Bajracharya and Shekhar Dongol intended their design to act as a site of remembrance, its narratives of martyrdom enabled it to serve the interests of the political elite and support a collective act of forgetting. On my most recent visit to the construction site in July 2016, Bajracharya described a design intervention he had proposed, which he called “the Wall of Freedom”. This would see the west wall of the memorial become a graffiti wall for people to add and erase thoughts, and therefore a place for new stories to come and go.<sup>624</sup> This acknowledges the contemporary role of monuments described by James Young (2016), yet it would challenge the official desire to offer a fixed mode of viewing and in enabling anyone to share their story, risks creating a space that might be contested. The ultimate goal of transitional justice is to reconcile societies divided by conflict, and whilst the Ganatantra Smarak was not conceived by the Nepal government as a transitional justice mechanism,<sup>625</sup> the fact that those in the

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<sup>624</sup> He referred in particular to street art projects around the city where students from local art colleges are paid by NGOs to create street art. Abhishek Bajracharya. Personal Communication, 28 July 2016.

<sup>625</sup> During the ten years following the 2006 ceasefire, Nepal's government opposed domestic judicial process and truth-telling mechanisms (Robins, 2013) and made slow

political elite included people who were responsible for conflict-era atrocities make it a powerful political tool. A judicial process remains at the centre of demands of national and international human rights activists,<sup>626</sup> but families also wish to confirm and have valorized the fate of their loved ones.<sup>627</sup> We have yet to see how the memorial will be used, and how it will be re-used and re-cast by communities and victims, officially or unofficially – it is then that we will be able to assess how it lives in the minds of different communities over time.

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progress towards identifying and prosecuting those responsible for human rights violations and crimes under international law committed during the conflict.

<sup>626</sup> For example, in June 2018, Nepal's Supreme Court held a hearing on the Kavre District Court's verdict against three army personnel convicted for killing a 15-year-old girl (Maina Sunar) in 2004 while at Birendra Peace Operations Training Centre in Panchkhal because the Nepal Army challenged the District Court ruling (Rai, 2018) Ganga Maya Adhikari, staged a well-publicised hunger strike in demand for justice for the murder of her son Krishna Prasad Adhikari, also murdered during the insurgency period ("Ganga Maya Adhikari ends indefinite hunger strike," 2018).

<sup>627</sup> For example, demands for the return of their relatives or of human remains because the bodies of the dead permit mourning and the satisfaction of social and spiritual obligations (and creation of social meaning) through traditional death rituals such as cremation.

## Chapter Nine | Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the construction of memory at the Narayanhiti Palace, Nepal's ex-royal palace and how the practices that produced collective memory have changed over time. Focusing on the recent transition of the palace to a museum, from *darbar* to *sangrahalaya*, this thesis has identified the Palace Museum's role in the construction of a Nepali national identity in Nepal's post-monarchical period, a national identity that at the time of the political transition from monarchy to republic was dependent on the formation of a collective memory that positioned Nepal's Shah monarchy firmly in the past. It presents an account of the impact of the political transition on the form, nature and voices of public histories told.

The Narayanhiti Palace has its foundations intertwined with the construction of Nepali national identity that until 2008, has been dependent on the model of Hindu kingship practiced by the institution of the Shah monarchy. Chapter Two begins with the way that the warlike and mobile Shah kings anchored their kingship in space (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009) in order to legitimise their position as they conquered first the hilltop kingdom of Gorkha in 1559, and then following a series of conquests under the reign of King Prithvinarayan Shah, in 1769 occupied the Malla kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley, establishing the Shah monarchy at the centre of a newly consolidated kingdom. Prithvinarayan established political legitimacy as the enforcer of the Hindu socio-cosmic order, and all subsequent regimes used Hinduism to legitimate their rule. In 1951, the Narayanhiti Palace came to be the administrative centre of the Shah monarchy: one of three palaces, that until the abolition of the monarchy in 2008, each had distinct roles to play in both rooting and upholding the Shah dynasty – both as the central representation of its territory (*muluk*) and through the ritualistic maintenance of its realm (*desa*). The Palace's modern origins are traced to the spatial politics of the semi-colonial Rana regime in the nineteenth century: Built on land outside the boundary of the Newar city, the palace became the seat of

royal power in the 1880s, when the Shah king nominally ruled through the Rana Prime Ministers and were kept as “palace-bound figureheads” (Hutt, 2014, p. 421). The Palace was institutionalised within the formation of a national memory centred on the Shah monarchy in the 1960s, after the Shah monarchy had resumed control from the Ranas. King Mahendra authorised the demolition of Rana neoclassical palace buildings in order to make way for a new modern palace that was to symbolise the symbiotic relationship between the Shah monarchy and the nation. The investigation of the processes of the palace’s design and construction in Chapter Three, sets out how the palace was used by Mahendra to seek legitimacy through the will of the people of Nepal as he instituted the Panchayat system, at the same time as excluding all but the elite from the inner workings of the government.

The Narayanhiti Palace has survived in many different forms (Chapters Three and Four): operating as the artifice for the construction of national identity, the seat of power, the target of resistance and after 2001 the locus for popular imaginings that questioned the “essential mystery of royal authority” (Lakier, 2009, p. 227). The Narayanhiti Palace served as a site of power, it acts as an architectural compass at the centre of the city, a walled compound at the head of a major axis, against which the height of adjacent buildings were determined. As the Panchayat system came to an end in 1990, the strategies that made it clear that the Narayanhiti Palace belonged to the monarchy as the head of state, not the people, saw it become fixed as a site of democratic resistance against the autocratic rule of the Shah monarchy. In an attempt to create a shared memory of a democratic monarch, King Birendra opened up the palace to visitors, allowing them to walk through spaces made coherent in the image of the Shah monarchy and interpret for themselves the king’s divine right to rule. As the site of the royal massacre, when Birendra and most of his family members were killed on the night of 1 June 2001, the Narayanhiti Palace also served as the space in which the master image of the Shah monarchy cracked apart. The provision of an official account of the massacre that was full of contradictions and dubious information exposed the enclosed space of the

palace for what it was, an inaccessible private space at the centre of power, what Lecomte-Tilouine calls the 'black box' (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2017, p. 16). After the massacre, the psychical space of the palace was used as a locus for artistic and literary imaginings that responded to the rumours circulating, as a means of criticising contemporary attempts to maintain the Shah monarchy. Attempts that included: military crackdowns, public censorship and autocratic rule, all within a democratic state. In 2006, after ten years of civil war (1996-2006), the political parties and the Maoists established a united agenda in which to regain power in the name of the people, which culminated in the 2006 *jan andolan* [people's movement] and saw the overthrow of King Gyanendra. In 2008, it was the desire to mark the reversal of power relations that drove Nepal's politicians to declare the Narayanhiti Palace a museum [sangrahalaya].

In 2009, shortly after the Narayanhiti Palace was opened as a museum, Nepali architect Sarosh Pradhan visited the site as a part of the *Ganatantra Smarak* (Republic Memorial) design competition process (Chapter Eight). After his visit, Pradhan wrote a short reflective piece:

As I walked around the Palace – I felt the emptiness of Space.  
There was history made and remade and there was history destroyed.  
There was a sense of loss as well as this feeling .... Am I really walking the steps of the Palace?

This would perhaps be the feeling for many who would tread these steps.  
Democracy, Republic, Federation ... Sovereign  
A monument to mark all these?

A blank empty space – stared back at me...

The royal massacre ...the rise of the revolution, the fall of the Monarchy.  
Democracy, Republic, Federation ...New Nepal.<sup>628</sup>

Pradhan used his reflections of his visit to the Narayanhiti Palace Museum to inform the development of his design concept for the *Ganatantra Smarak*.<sup>629</sup> His was the only design in the final shortlist to reflect the

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<sup>628</sup> Sarosh Pradhan (2009). *Ganatantra Smarak Competition Entry*. Unpublished document, p.2. Shared by Sarosh Pradhan.

<sup>629</sup> Sarosh Pradhan. Recorded Interview, 15 July 2013.

ambiguity of the contemporary situation (Figure 52).<sup>630</sup> One of the more experienced entrants, Pradhan's design aimed to prompt a series of questions about the future and evoke multiple memories of the past.<sup>631</sup> His design drew attention to the reciprocal exchange between a memorial and its site, as a gentle landscape which foreshortened the distance between the Palace Museum and the Ganatantra Smarak. It was intended to be experienced as a reflective inner journey in which people would explore their sense of being Nepali, "it is important to absorb what is around you, so many things [we] don't understand, but time to reflect [on them ...can develop [our] understanding of [an]others' purpose."<sup>632</sup> At its heart he positioned the national flag, as a universal representation of the people of Nepal. I share this here (rather than the previous chapter), because in choosing to present a design that offered a space for reflection, and an exploration the relationship between the past, present and future at the Narayanhiti Palace, Pradhan acknowledged the position the site had found in the collective memory of Nepalis, memory that associated the palace with royal authority and that can be retrieved at any time and under any condition. Pradhan's proposed design was not successful, perhaps precisely because it was too open to diverse interpretations.

Museums confuse and mix up time, and like Pradhan, all visitors to the Palace Museum link the present to the past. There is a contrast between official attempts to present a fixed, idyllic view of Nepal's monarchical past, and the fact that each individual's performance of the Palace Museum is affected by the historical experiences of other times that have been transmitted across generations (Chapter Six). This interweaving of experiences across time and space, "memory-crossing" (Kusno, 2010, p. 277) is crucial for understanding both the importance of the Narayanhiti

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<sup>630</sup> Pradhan designed a memorial in the American Embassy, Kathmandu (Competition won in April 2008) and the World Hindu Foundation monument for peace in Pipra, Birgunj in 2006.

<sup>631</sup> Pradhan protested against the government's intentions by following this with an entry to the competition for the subsequent Ganatantra Stambha in 2009 with a blank piece of paper. Sarosh Pradhan. Recorded Interview, 15 July 2013.

<sup>632</sup> Sarosh Pradhan. Recorded Interview, 15 July 2013.

Palace Museum to the creation of a collective memory in support of the construction of a new Nepali identity, and also the ways in which individual remembering, in its unpredictability can threaten such reconstruction. The effort of this study, has been to make the “memory-crossing” visible; to reveal the site’s power and question the formation of memory (both individual and collective).

Narayanhiti is no longer a palace [darbar]; it is a museum [sangrahalaya]. The monarchy operated as a powerful social institution that sought to maintain its position through a variety of social practices that included, the receipt of a stipend out of the national budget, to fund the royal family’s residence in the Narayanhiti Palace.<sup>633</sup> Given this, it is not surprising that visitors’ accounts evidence that the fact the Narayanhiti Palace is no longer a palace is obvious to most (Chapter Six). However, the fact that it remains a social institution is missed by many. Visitors pay a fee to be admitted, they hand in their belongings, are presented with a number of rules of behaviour printed on their ticket and are guided along a predetermined route through the Palace Museum. On entering the southern gate of the palace compound, visitors do not only enter the private space of Nepal’s monarchy, but also of the modern post-monarchical Nepali state that preserves and exhibits the royal past. The practices, norms and rituals built into the experience of visiting a museum, as a place ‘of the past’ in Nepal are commonly understood, even if they are experienced differently. Visitors understood that this was the *ex-royal palace* of the Shah kings of Nepal, that this was the palace in which the massacre took place, and the place from which Gyanendra relinquished his kingship in June 2008. Yet visitors were pre-occupied with linking themselves to the past, riveted by the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of former kings, and mostly overlooked

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<sup>633</sup> That the Palace was understood as a royal privilege was evident in mounting public criticism during Gyanendra’s reign, that culminated during the preparation for the 2006-2007 budget. Thomas Bell records students at the Padma Kanya Ladies’ Campus in 2003: “Give back Singha Darbar [the government] or lose Narayanhiti [the palace]” (2014, p. 86) A public controversy grew during the period from 2001 to 2008 over the fact that Gyanendra and other members of the royal family had not paid their electricity bill, but had not had their supply cut off (Scrutton, 2008), a trope that again reared its head in in 2016 in relation to Gyanendra’s occupation of the Nagarjun Palace.



their own involvement in the reinvention of the palace as a site of memory (Nora, 1989).

The second part of this thesis is concerned with the formation and maintenance of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum reveals about the construction of collective memories about Nepal's royal past. By museumising the palace, Nepal's politicians intended to contain the royal past, to section it off from everyday life,<sup>634</sup> and present it back to the people by granting visitors access to the rooms on display. Svetlana Boym writes about the ways in which people turn to the past for a variety of reasons, including claims for immortality, creation of social cohesion as well as in response to feelings of longing and loss (42-44). Boym's dimension of restorative/ reflective nostalgia draws out the tension in marking absence and loss in sites of memory (Nora, 1989) and acts as an important counterpoint for understanding the relationship between memory work and the construction of national identity. Her definition of restorative nostalgia states the aims of those who invoke it as: to assert victory over time; to offer an exemplar for present; and to stake a claim for the immortality of the present. In this transformation from *darbar* to *sangrahalaya*, what the government intended to preserve was not the Narayanhiti Palace, or its contents, but its symbolic significance as a sign of political authority and legitimacy.

Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and time. (Boym, 2001, p. 41)

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<sup>634</sup> The Palace Museum's role as a place to consign the monarchy in the past was evidenced with a government decision in January 2012, when Baburam Bhattarai was Prime Minister, to remove the statue of the King Tribhuvan from the Shahid [martyrs] Gate and place it within the Narayanhiti Palace Museum (see footnote 618). The removal of Tribhuvan's bust was to remove the Shah monarchy's association with past struggles for democracy and firmly consign the monarchy to the past. In fact, the Supreme Court upheld a challenge to this move, and the bust remains in place at the Gate ("Statue Decision Challenged," 2012).

After ten years of civil war, the display of a historical narrative that located the Shah monarchy (under Gyanendra) at the root of the conflict, and the Shah monarchy (under Birendra) as a ceremonial institution of the past, as distinct from the present was intended to restore the unifying force of the collective through the creation of a shared memory. This 'restoration' (Boym, 2001, p. 41) hinged on the illusion that consensus has been reached over the nature of the transition (i.e. triumph of democracy over autocracy), and that the trauma of the conflict was in the past. Chapters Five and Six in particular, seek to understand the motivation behind the creation of the official historical narrative and the underlying longings of those whose consent it is has sought. In this way (rather than critiquing its content), I hope I have resisted the temptation to characterize Nepal's national memory or the nation's relationship to its past.

As soon as it was opened, the Narayanhiti Palace Museum was promoted to a mass audience, who may have different interpretations of the rooms on display, but who, as visitors en-masse, had similar expectations to be informed, entertained, and even validated. Halbwachs writes about the ways in which shared experiences form the basis of common relations (1992) and the fact that all visitors to the museum experience this way of remembering (and forgetting) together is what marks the importance of the role played by the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, a public site, in the reproduction of Nepal's new national identity.<sup>635</sup> The moral authority of museum as a public institution in Nepal that was harnessed by the government in its decision to render the palace harmless, and present it as a site that belongs to the people of Nepal (Chapter Five). The institution of the museum was used by Nepal's interim government to mask the symbolic and material work involved in constructing a shared past, as indicated by the museum's situation at the level of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, a level above the Department of Archaeology, which is

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<sup>635</sup> Whether people visit or not, the walls around the palace compound (Figure 52) have continued to suggest a separation between the institution of the Palace Museum and daily life. Kusno writes that the "built environment, like monuments constructed for commemoration, enacts the dynamics of memory and forgetting, but operates often without demanding a spectral gaze to take effect." (2010)

responsible for either managing, or advising all other state-run museums in Nepal. Aware of the historical use of the institution of museum by the Shah monarchy to construct and disseminate a collective national narrative, Nepal's politicians also sought to challenge the monarchy's authority as the source of all cultural institutions, and laid claim to the right to re-write the past. The transformation of the Narayanhiti Palace from *darbar* to *sangrahalaya* was rooted in the moment of the political transition (Subedi, 2009a), a transformation that marked the palace as the site where the Shah monarchy ended, dissociated from its history as the seat of power.

Those involved in the formation of the Palace Museum negotiated the paradox of a symbol of royal power in post-monarchical Nepal, placing the Shah monarchy in the past, whilst maintaining a sense of connection with the culture from which the nation's identity has for so long been derived (Chapters Five and Six). The history presented at the Palace Museum is dependent on the site being *really real*, in order to present the reconstructed monarchical past as being *as it really was*, in particular, to provide access to the site of the royal massacre. I argue that the national identity narratives being channeled through the creation of a shared memory at the Palace Museum originate in narratives of disbelief created in response to the political situation that followed the royal massacre. Discussing the role of the press in creating a community of disbelief in 2001, Lakier writes:

The murders at Narayanhiti allowed the resurrection of hegemonic state discourses of the king and Nepali nationalism; they also made newly relevant the essential mystery of royal authority. Nonetheless, this mystery no longer served to conserve and protect the social order, but to indict it as a betrayal of the nation and of the ideology of publicity and transparency which was supposed to structure and unite the nation. The practices of conspiracy, royal mystery, and hence also the obscurely perduring sacred authority of the king were thus conscripted into the service of the modern social project of the nation. (Lakier, 2009, p. 227)

The official history on display at the Palace Museum is refracted through the lens of new national identity narratives: the palace was offered to the public as a showcase of openness and transparency and it presented a history of the monarchy that presented Birendra, the dead monarch, as an apolitical

figure who had served and represented the people. This history reveals more about the post-monarchical political need for unity than about the nature and legacy of the institution of the Shah monarchy.

As a political project to restore unity through the reimagining of the boundaries of the collectively remembered royal past, the Palace Museum is dependent on a set of material practices that take place behind the scenes. Chapters Five and Seven together present the work of collective memory as a cultural product: located behind the palace walls, the research presented in these chapters exposes the material realities of constructing shared histories, and collective memories. The precarious employment position of the ex-palace staff, the lack of revenue budget in comparison to the significant income generated, and the costs of maintaining the Palace Museum's infrastructure might be hidden from view, but it is essential to understand them as critical elements of cultural production and consumption. Whilst I started my fieldwork with a focus on questions about the construction of collective memory, much of my time at the Palace Museum was pre-occupied with the Museum as a site of employment (Handler & Gable, 1997; Macdonald, 2002).

When I began my research, the new history of Nepal's old monarchy seemed triumphant, after all the Narayanhiti Palace had been transformed into a museum and was visited by thousands of Nepali visitors every month and articles in the national print media affirmed that the act of visiting together had become a shared memory. Yet, like Handler and Gable at Colonial Williamsburg (1997), the more I spent time with the ex-palace staff operating the Palace Museum, the more I noticed that they did not embrace the official narrative, and the upholding of the presentation of this new history to museum visitors was not what drove their daily practice. Chapter Seven's presentation of the actions of ex-palace staff I came across, challenges any assumptions that the official narrative is either collective or representative. This group have acted, both individually and collectively, on an unofficial interpretation project that they have encouraged to accommodate a greater range of memories and actors when remembering

Nepal's royal past. This unofficial project emerged and gained momentum over time, both because the ex-palace staff did not understand the official history as representative of the royal past of which they had been a part; the result of which has seen them placed in a marginalized position as employees of the new Nepali state. Sidelined within the bureaucracy of Nepal's Civil Service, their jobs tarried by the continuing processes of its transformation, the ex-palace staff attempted to ensure that their voices were heard. I argue that their actions have acted as a threat to the continued preservation of the official historical narrative at the Palace Museum and suggest that these actions, by ex-palace staff have, over time, had a cumulative effect on visitor's interaction with, and responses to the displays, actions that encourage *reflective nostalgia* (Boym, 2001). In this way the ex-palace staff act as living specters that haunt the governments' project to construct a collective memory of Nepal's royal past.<sup>636</sup>

The new Nepal was to be represented by the Ganatantra Smarak, in order to substitute one national narrative for another (Chapter Eight). In the absence of any uniform or unified version of Nepal's recent past or new national formation, the co-ordinates of Nepali national identity set by the lyrics of the new national anthem adopted in 2007 were adopted as the basis of the Ganatantra Smarak design. The construction of the Smarak within the Narayanhiti compound, the design's focus on the martyrdom of all victims of the conflict, and the narration of the 'People's War' as the natural culmination of a long history of popular struggle for democracy, indicate that the desire to summarize identity and memory at the Narayanhiti site has less to do with confronting difficult histories than it does with legitimizing the new government (and individual political parties) and restoring faith in the unity of the collective through a focus on the transfer of power from the monarchy to the people.<sup>637</sup> These official narratives, designed to support the

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<sup>636</sup> Whilst not referring to ex-palace staff, in 2009, Subedi wrote "But the spectre of the past can continue to work under a different guise if openness does not guide the decisions of the stakeholders, who are the major political parties in most cases." (2009a, p. 5)

<sup>637</sup> Sarosh Pradhan submitted a blank piece of paper as his entry for the *Stambha* design competition, in order to register his frustration with what he saw as yet another ill-conceived political project that lacked the necessary clarity and engagement to ensure it would make

construction of collective memories, have a coercive force to them, and the scene has been set for visitors to the site to remember (and forget) in the same way. If plans for a dual-ticket are put into place, this will ensure that all visitors are routed from the Palace Museum to the Ganatantra Smarak, to make the connection between the demise of Nepal's monarchical past and the construction of the new republic of Nepal.

This thesis offers a contribution towards our understanding of the formation of a new national identity during Nepal's post-monarchical period, a period marked by constitutional uncertainty. It has charted ways in which the authoritative site of the Narayanhiti Palace in the capital, Kathmandu, has been treated simultaneously as, an element of and obstacle to national unity, since 2008. The museumisation of the palace, the situation of the Ganatantra Smarak within palace grounds, and its basis drawn from the new national anthem, together reflect on the nature and limits of the coordinates of Nepal's new national ideology during this period. The impulse to construct coherent historical narratives came in 2008 at the moment of political transition, when Nepal's interim government was in pursuit of the construction of a collective memory that helped to make sense of the current social order and political ideologies. The official way of grappling with Nepal's royal past at the site of the Narayanhiti Palace was through a national identity framework that used the site to stage a spatialized history of the triumph of the republic of the people over the monarchy. This history presents the enormous loss of life from Nepal's recent violent past as a shared sacrifice, necessary for the construction of an inclusive future. When the Ganatantra Smarak opens to the public, the pain and violence of the 'People's War' will be sandwiched between an idyllic monarchical past and inclusive post-monarchical present, regrettable, but paving the way for the current, improved state of affairs. Both the Palace Museum and the Ganatantra Smarak bring different formal qualities to bear to public remembering at the Narayanhiti site: The Palace Museum is an ambivalent

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a difference to the Nepali people or help to re-define Nepali national identity. Recorded Interview, 15 July 2013.

site (Subedi, 2009a), at once the site of power (past and present), a palace of memory, and a palace for the people; it is both present, and disempowered. The Smarak on the other hand embodies an exclusionary representation of a new Nepali identity that is intended to be redeeming, for Nepalis to locate their present selves within.

As I have conducted my fieldwork over a period of four years (2012-2016), I have had the opportunity to experience the negotiation of the site of the Narayanhiti Palace over time, and my final reflections relate to the world around the museum and its potential to change how the site is seen and understood. The official historical narrative described above that attempted to fix a particular way of remembering (and forgetting) Nepal's royal past, is of course transitory. The experience, for example, of a Maoist cadre visiting the museum, whilst still bearing arms in 2009 cannot be compared to the visit of a group of school children in 2016, particularly children born after the Shah monarchy was abolished. The research presented in this thesis shows that the symbolic status of the Palace Museum, imbued at the moment of the political transition, has been slowly disintegrating. I argue that over time, as political uncertainty and instability has continued, the element of doubt that was harnessed by Nepal's politicians to create a collective memory in support of national unity, has started to spill over to question the image of permanence presented at the Palace Museum and as a result, I suggest that the oversights, edits, silences and distortions on display are becoming increasingly more visible: The fact the crown jewels were not yet on display; that the condition of the palace building and grounds visibly deteriorated; that no further spaces or facilities were opened; that ex-palace staff continued to run the Palace Museum; and that officials associated with the Department of Archaeology would not recognize the Narayanhiti Palace Museum as a museum whilst it remained outside the purview of the Department of Archaeology, are all factors that contributed towards the gradual disintegration of the official narrative. It is telling that in 2014, in an attempt to shore it up, the government agreed to fund the reconstruction of part of the building of Tribhuvan Sadan, where the massacre took place.

At the time of the transition, museumisation of the palace was a safe political option. It followed in the tradition of other global revolutionary movements, ensured that Nepal's royal past was remembered in the awareness of having been surrendered, so that it could ultimately be forgotten. Other options were discussed in the national press and they included: turning the site into government offices, like the palaces of the Ranas after the re-instatement of King Tribhuvan as the active Head of State in 1951; providing the site to Nepal's new President; demolition; selling off the land for private development, and allowing the army to take over full control. None would have been able to so effectively legitimise both the nascent national formation and political regime, and all would have involved a range of actors and served to open up the conversation about how best to deal with Nepal's royal past. To do so risked maintaining the continued public presence of the Shah monarchy in a way that could have challenged political stability. The political intention was to inscribe the Palace Museum as part of a carefully curated landscape, that would include the CPN-M-led legacy project of the Ganatantra Smarak. The Smarak has been constructed within the grounds of the Narayanhiti Palace, but political instability, repeated changes of personnel, finite resources, the 2015 earthquakes, and the influence of Nepal's Army have all contributed to the fact that the Ganatantra Smarak remains closed. The Narayanhiti Palace has not yet been finally consigned to the past in the way that was intended in 2008.

The Palace Museums' visitors come mostly from Nepal, and the government is focused on the income generated through ticket sales, income that exceeded expectations throughout the period of my research. Recent decisions indicate that the site is being prepared as a product fit for tourist (local, regional and international) consumption. For example, the re-landscaping of Bajracharya and Dongol's design for the Ganatantra Smarak by Vastushilpa Architects present it as part of a public park, an act that adds to the depoliticization of the site, potentially making the past easier to



embrace.<sup>638</sup> Kathmandu is a city with very little open and green space, and there are already plenty of visitors to the Palace Museum, who enter as a leisure activity, and for whom, the opportunity to stroll in the palace gardens is as important as the walk through the building itself. The government has funded the installation of a public restaurant at the entrance to the Palace Museum.<sup>639</sup> On the occasion of my last field visit in 2016, the Museum Director made me aware of initial proposals for the use of the old Palace Secretariat building by the west gate, currently used by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to house a new set of displays of Nepal's districts that would turn the site into a tourist attraction: a "Greater" museum, that would offer tourists a one-stop shop window to Nepal.<sup>640</sup> As the initial moment of the transition from monarchy to republic recedes further into the past, Nepal's government remains heavily dependent on foreign aid, governance structures have not fully challenged feudalism, and dominant social classes continue to perpetuate power; and in this context the meaning of the Narayanhiti site has become less clear.<sup>641</sup> Whilst the Narayanhiti Palace compound is still used to harness memories of the end of authoritative rule of the monarchy, it still has symbolic status, but its political potency is becoming increasingly diluted. To allow the site to shift into a tourist spot over time, would present Nepal's politicians with an opportunity to ensure the royal past becomes viewed as something already forgotten, a further reinvention of the Narayanhiti Palace that would conceal the awkwardness of a former site of the Shah monarchy that continues to dominate the heart of the capital city of a post-monarchical state.

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<sup>638</sup> Though the continued lack of serious governmental commitment to any transitional justice mechanisms suggests that the narrative of inclusion based on martyrdom due to be presented by the Ganatantra Smarak may not be accepted by survivors and families of survivors of the 'People's War'.

<sup>639</sup> Completed by the summer of 2014, but not yet open in July 2016.

<sup>640</sup> It was not clear to me as a result of this conversation, if this was the latest of a series of proposals by ex-palace staff, or if this proposal had government support. There were reports in the national press that the Department of Archaeology were due to move into that building, but these referred to archive and office space, not new displays.

<sup>641</sup> The building that housed Sarala Gorkhali suffered significant damage as a result of the earthquakes in April and May 2015, but after her death, what will become of Mahendra Manjil, where Ratna resides?

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