

SINGING DIALOGIC SPACE INTO BEING: COMMUNIST LANGUAGE AND DEMOCRATIC HOPES AT A RADIO NEPAL DOHORI COMPETITION

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“New Nepal.”¹ These were the words on everyone’s lips in 2006 and 2007, in the months after the ceasefire ending ten years of civil war between the state security forces and Maoist revolutionaries. In April 2006, the nineteen-day People’s Movement against then-king Gyanendra’s seizure of absolute power united democratic political parties and Maoists in a common cause. It paved the way for peace agreements and a tenuous sense of hope that Nepal could reinvent itself, rectifying past injustices of institutionalized class, caste, ethnic, gender, religious, and regional discrimination. This article aims to provide ethnographic insight into an early effort to construct commensurability among the formerly warring parties, and to open up a new discursive space in which to begin to imagine a “new Nepal.”

This early effort was the first-ever live *dohori*² song competition on state-supported Radio Nepal on Democracy Day in April 2007. This particular Democracy Day commemorated the previous year’s People’s Movement, and the competition was part of the official national celebration. A significant element of this competition was that in the post-

¹ The term “new Nepal” has a long history in Nepali social movements. Used by communists and democrats in the movement against the Ranas in the 1940s, and later in the 1950s, to refer to a Nepal free from the Rana oligarchy (cf. Pushpalal Shrestha 1995 (2053 v.s.)), it was adopted by the Panchayat regime (1960–1990) to refer to the development goals the nation was moving toward. Different underground parties used it in different oppositional ways during this period, and in the 1990 revolution it came to stand for the new political configuration of constitutional monarchy. In the period directly after the People’s War, the term was again under negotiation as parties struggled to reach a consensus on what they were striving for. The very ambiguity of the term “new Nepal” provides a rallying cry that can unite disparate parties to an extent, as long as the particulars of the common goal remain undefined.

² Hereafter, I omit diacritics and italics on this term, in order to avoid the connotations of otherness and distance from the phenomenon that this means of visual representation can imply. I do the same in the case of other musical genres, such as *lok gāt* (folk song), and political concepts, such as *gaḍatantra* (republican democracy).

ceasefire interim government, the Maoist party now controlled the communications ministry, which controlled Radio Nepal. While many members of other parties contributed to this competition, the symbolic value of the Maoists' position as head of this ministry was strong and contributed to how competitors, invited audience members, radio listeners, and other members of the public interpreted the event. The competition brought together several contradictory logics: those of Nepali Maoism and the broader field of Nepali communism in general, the form of dialogic folk song known as *dohori*, and the version of nationalism promoted by Radio Nepal up until this point. The Maoist leadership is known not only for being revolutionary but also for puritanical views regarding love and sex. *Dohori*, improvised song duels between men and women, celebrates female sexuality against dominant high-caste Hindu social norms, and is sometimes risqué, associated with an idea of rural national essence, and both embraced and rejected by nationalists of varied political affiliations. Radio Nepal, the state radio that was Nepal's sole radio station until 1997,³ had until this day broadcast very little communist music and even less, if any, live *dohori*,⁴ upholding a conservative position in many ways. Thus this competition's foregrounding of live *dohori* and the Maoist party signaled significant change in the version of the national broadcast from Radio Nepal.

This article attempts to understand how poetic tropes associated with Maoist rhetoric are being used as linguistic resources for mainstream *dohori* performers, at the same time as mainstream musical genres are being used as resources for multiple political messages. I look at how *dohori* singers in this competition use multiple political tropes in lyrics

³ The date of other radio stations' appearance in Nepal is a point of some debate; there are arguments for 1995 (Radio Nepal's own first FM station); 1996 (other radio companies lease FM airtime from Radio Nepal and operate independently from the national radio); and 1997 (Radio Sagarmatha begins broadcasting as the first independent FM station). I use the 1997 date here to emphasize the actual opening of another independent station. For more details, see Humagain (2005).

⁴ Radio Nepal broadcast communist music during the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) or CPN-UML government in 1995. While the majority of Radio Nepal staff I have interviewed claim either that there never was any live *dohori* performed on the radio or that they have never heard of any such performance, *dohori* singer Prem Raja Mahat (personal communication, 4/2009) suggests that there may have been some short live *dohori* exchanges broadcast on a program run by Pandav Sunuwar in the 1970s or 1980s, but never a competition or anything very lengthy.

within conventional musical settings, and discuss the tension between political lyrics and love song refrains. I ask how the dialogic interplay between Maoist and other communist poetic tropes, mainstream, nationalist musical and performance settings, and the various perspectives evinced by individual singers of multiple political backgrounds may form new indexical linkages, as the dialogic space formed in performance offers a model for an aspirational reality.

The Democratic Dohori Competition at Radio Nepal

In April 2007, I received an invitation to a performance event the exact likes of which had never occurred before. The invitation card read, “you are cordially invited to a Democratic Dohori Competition at Radio Nepal.” Specifically, the competition was to celebrate Loktantra Diwas, the anniversary of the 2006 People’s Movement in which the seven mainstream political parties, united with the Maoists, overthrew King Gyanendra’s autocratic regime. It would be the first dohori competition ever to be held at the national radio, performed live at the outdoor bandstand outside of the station inside the parliamentary complex of Singha Durbar, and broadcast live nationwide. The red printed text reminded me of wedding invitations. Underneath it was the signature of the Minister of Communications in the 2007 interim government, Maoist MP Krishna Bahadur Mahara. Above it was the national radio’s newly adopted slogan: “Radio Nepal: The Inclusive Voice of New Nepal.” When I showed the invitation to my friends in Kathmandu’s various music scenes, they responded with incredulity. “A dohori competition at Radio Nepal? With the Maoists in charge, things have really changed.”

Control of communications media has long been central to struggles over political power in Nepal, and the events of the past decade continue to highlight this. When King Gyanendra seized state power in 2005, his first action was to cut off most means of communication with the outside world. Radio and television stations were shut down altogether, or made to play instrumental folk music or Hindu and Buddhist religious songs, ostensibly to appeal to the visceral and emotional associations of these genres associated with official national identity, peace, and religious transcendence of the political mundane.⁵ After a few days, when royal rule was established, the media slowly came back online with a much

⁵ The national media used a similar musical strategy in 2001 after the royal massacre (Curtis n.d.), and in 1972 after the death of King Mahendra (Parajulee 2007: 62).

greater level of censorship. Members of the armed forces were stationed in internet service providers' offices to ensure that banned websites were blocked, and program presenters on popular talk radio programs had to make sure that their callers refrained from discussing political matters (Kunreuther 2006). Thus, the Maoist assumption of Communications Ministry leadership in 2006 was highly symbolic; the former armed rebels had gained control of the newspaper, television, and radio stations that had been the mouthpieces of royal rule. Control of the national radio was arguably the most significant, as it reached the greatest number of people.

A live dohori competition at Radio Nepal was almost as radical as the recent political changes. Dohori, a genre of improvised song duels between men and women, is problematically associated with many aspects of "low culture." It celebrates female sexuality against dominant social norms, and its lyrics are sometimes risqué. It is rooted in courtship practices in which male winners could win female song duel losers as brides, and in which even if there is no clear winner or loser, relationships developed through dohori songs may lead to elopements, transgressive simply by being elopements, but even more so if they happen to be intercaste or between the wrong kinds of cousins.⁶ Nevertheless, dohori is also associated with a valued rurality and rusticity seen as expressing valued aspects of "Nepaliness." Musically, it is part of the wider genre of lok git, or folk song, developed into a national folk genre with recognizable instrumentation and style at Radio Nepal since the 1950s – *mādal*, flute, *sāraṅgi*, harmonium, and guitar accompanying mostly major pentatonic melodies in the styles of western and central Nepal (Henderson 2002/2003). These sounds have been central to the dominant national discourse, sonically promoting a unity based on the rural hills as representative of authentic "Nepaliness" (Henderson 2002/2003; Stirr 2009). This version of musical nationalism is far from uncontested⁷ but

⁶ Some social groups in Nepal practice various forms of cross-cousin marriage while others do not. The 'wrong' kind of cousin would vary from group to group, some viewing all cousins as unacceptable marriage partners, and others encouraging, for instance, matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, while discouraging patrilateral cross-cousin marriage. These rules may differ from place to place among people who consider themselves to be of the same ethnicity or caste, and, many people are related, however distantly, in more than one way. Thus when transgressive marriages between cousins occur the potential exists for the couple to recast their relationship in a normative light.

⁷ Some of those who contest it include Madhesi groups objecting to hill-centrism, various groups objecting to the dominance of the Nepali language,

remains prominent and easily recognizable to its supporters and detractors alike. Within it, *dohori* is both embraced and rejected by nationalists of varied political affiliations, occupying a position that Herzfeld (2005) calls culturally intimate: near to the heart but also embarrassing and contradictory from the dominant perspective. In other words, though *dohori* is viewed as low culture, it is also seen as expressive of the same idealized version of essential “Nepaliness” that has been advocated by the state and prominent in dominant cultural production from the mid-20th century to the present.

The musical characteristics live, improvised *dohori* shares with the national folk song style place it at the heart of Nepali musical nationalism, even though its association with elopements and sexual transgression has kept it out of most official representations of the nation. From its inception, Radio Nepal broadcast many folk songs, all recorded in its own studios with its own ensembles, including short, pre-written *dohori* songs with three or four exchanges of couplets. Over the years, Radio Nepal held competitions of Hindustani classical music, thought of as high culture, and solo folk song, thought of as expressing value for the rural and rustic as central to the nation, but it did not hold *dohori* competitions.⁸ Even the pre-written, recorded *dohori* songs of the main, 30-minute commercial variety that emerged in the 1980s, remained off of Radio Nepal’s airwaves until late in the 1990s, since Radio Nepal did not broadcast anything recorded outside of its own studios. From 1997 onwards *dohori* became a staple of private FM stations’ programming, as new stations played 30-minute songs in their entirety to fill up airtime. Around this time Radio Nepal also began to broadcast recorded *dohori* songs once in a while, changing its policies to keep up with the new competition from FM stations. Live, improvised *dohori*, which can go on for hours and in which performers can potentially say anything – excessively erotic or even excessively political – was judged too risky for

and various *janajāti* groups promoting their own styles of folk music. The Maoist party has strongly contested the prominence of love-song lyrics in *lok git* and *dohori*, but they have had no objections to the music.

⁸ *Dohori* competitions were managed by the Ministry of Education and Sports from 1983–1989, as live events culminating in finals at the biannual National Games. After 1990, private organizations took charge of sponsoring *dohori* competitions, sometimes with funding from Nepal Tourism Board. These competitions are sometimes broadcast live on local television and FM stations, and sometimes recorded clips from them are broadcast as highlights after the competitions finish.

the national radio.⁹ Thus having a live dohori competition at Radio Nepal opened it up to the risks and vagaries inherent in performing improvised lyrics.

Dohori's improvisatory lyrics and association with direct expression brought Radio Nepal closer to the ethos of liveness some associate more readily with talk radio on Nepal's FM stations. In a discussion of voice on FM talk radio, Kunreuther notes that some perceive Radio Nepal's talk programs to broadcast in a "scripted monotone," contrasting with "'live' FM broadcasts [that] foreground the seeming directness of their transmission through, among other things, a poetics of spontaneity, accident, or technical mishaps" (2006: 338). This association of FM talk radio in Nepal with intimacy, liveness, and connections between speaking/singing and listening subjects has some parallels with improvised dohori's ethos of sincerity in the sharing of *manko kurā* or what is in one's heart (Jacobson 1999; Stirr 2009). And, it parallels discussions of voice and politics that call for the people to raise their voices, and the government to listen. As Kunreuther argues, formations of "voice" in intimate and political terms are mutually constitutive, with sentimental discourse about direct communication reiterating modern liberal discourse about democracy (Kunreuther 2006: 324). In other words, the ascription of a distant "scripted monotone" to Radio Nepal and a playful ethos of improvisatory liveness to FM talk radio may have more to do with political perceptions that equate state radio with distant didacticism and past anti-democratic experiences (cf. Parajulee 2007: 59), and private radio with direct, democratic citizen involvement, in symbolic representations of publics on the radio and in actual governance. Yet dohori's ethos of sincerity, which values metaphor, allegory, and

⁹ Why is there not much live dohori on FM? The main reason is probably lack of money and resources. For live dohori performance, it's necessary to hire live musicians and singers, and to have a place to broadcast from or mobile broadcasting capabilities. Local stations will thus broadcast local competitions if they can arrange for mobile broadcasting capabilities, but I have not heard of a station getting musicians together of its own accord. Also, for some Kathmandu stations like Hits FM (not the ones that relied on dohori to fill airtime), their main concern has been cultivation of middle-class audiences, seen as more interested in urban pop and hip-hop genres rather than dohori. Sagarmatha FM was the first FM station with a program dedicated to lok git that played dohori on the air, and HBC FM was the first with a dedicated dohori program. Between 2005 and 2008 it had several, run by artists like Rajkumar Rayamajhi and Shakuntala Thapa who performed in dohori restaurants in the evenings. HBC FM closed in 2008.

intentional ambiguity¹⁰ as sincere expressions of a shared set of emotions rather than precise lexical meaning, is different from the values of transparency and directness that characterize the discourses of democratization and talk radio mediation that Kunreuther discusses, and also from the values of directness and simplicity that characterize most Maoist/socialist realist artistic discourse within and outside of Nepal. Bringing dohori singers with varied political backgrounds together to improvise politically-themed songs in celebration of Loktantra Diwas at Radio Nepal thus departed from the logics of the Maoist party, the previous administrations of Radio Nepal, and the mainstream democratic political parties. It offered opportunities for new indexical linkages to form within the Nepali national imaginary, broadening the semantic field for the ideas of “voice” and “New Nepal” and thus potentially reconfiguring the existing relationships between nation, state, and subjects/citizens.

The Competition Setting

Presenting my invitation card, I entered Singha Durbar alone without an official escort for the first time, marveled at the pared-down security arrangements, and drove my scooter over to Radio Nepal. There was a big cloth tent set up over rows of chairs in front of the outdoor stage. The banner above the stage announced the radio’s new slogan: “Radio Nepal: The Inclusive Voice of New Nepal.”¹¹

The judges, who were assembled at a table in the first row of seats, represented some of the most famous senior folk singers employed by Radio Nepal, some of whose tenure at the radio station went back decades: Narayan Rayamajhi, Bam Bahadur Karki, Ram Thapa, Yukta Gurung, and Tej Bahadur K.C.¹² Bam Bahadur Karki is among the pioneers of recorded dohori, having sung on the first ever privately recorded dohori album, *Kholā Pāri Nirmāyā*, in 1985, and also on 1993’s *Pānko Pāt*, both love songs of course. Radio Nepal staff musicians – also

¹⁰ I use “intentional ambiguity” in Margaret Trawick’s (1992) sense, especially in reference to actions regarding affective ties that are meant to have multiple possible interpretations.

¹¹ The slogan in English on Radio Nepal’s website today reads “Radio Nepal: The Inclusive Voice of Modern Nepal.”

¹² A note on my use of names: if people’s names are announced during the competition and thus available on the archival recording at Radio Nepal, I refer to them with first and last names. If not, I refer to them with first names only.



The competition stage. The banner at the back reads:
“A Lok Dohori Competition Organized by Radio Nepal on the Occasion of Loktantra Diwas 2064”

an all-star group of seasoned employees¹³ – tuned up at the back of the stage, while the teams who were going to sing dohori got ready in the wings.¹⁴

The singers participating were up-and coming younger artists, including several national competition winners, almost all employed in

¹³ Bhupendra Rayamajhi, Madan Singh Nepali, Sushil Bishwokarma, Raju Agrawal, Aisingh Lama, Bharat Khadel, Ekram Shrestha, Krishna Gandharva, Tirtha Gandharva, Krishna Darji, Khadga Garbuja, Sunil Singh Nepali, Rama Mandal, Harisankar Chaudhary, Chandrakala Shah, Khadga Gandharva, Jiru Maharjan.

¹⁴ Four teams were scheduled to compete, all made up of singers known primarily for their live dohori performance. Competition dohori is scored according to a rubric that takes words, musical qualities, and stage presentation/team discipline into account, but gives primacy to the words. Each song consists of twenty couplets and refrains, ten couplets per singer, each repeated three times. Each round consists of two songs: the men of team A against the women of team B, and vice versa. The team with the greatest number of points wins. The competition is run like a tournament, with the winners of each round competing against each other.

Competition Teams (lead singers in bold)
Bhimeshwor (2nd place) Men: Sriram Adhikari , Vijay Biranu, Janak Khatri Women: Devi Gharti , Rewati Paudel, Bhagwati Birahi
Satyawati Kala Kendra (3rd place) Men: Krishna Reule , Yage Bhattarai, Krishna B.K. Women: Manju Mahat , Devika K.C., Krishna B.C.
Shanti Dohori Sanjh (4th place) Men: Badri Parajuli , Bilan Thapa, Shiva Sijali Thapa Women: Junu Shris , Nita Pun
Phulmaya and Naresh (1st place) Men: Naresh D.C. , Santosh Poudel, Badri Dahal Women: Phulmaya K.C. , Sushila Dangi, Ganga Gharti

dohori restaurants. Many had recorded albums in the mainstream media, but none had established careers as studio singers yet.¹⁵ They dressed up for their stage performance as if for any other competition: women in Gurung/Magar indigenous dress, and men in the national dress of the *daurā suruwāl* tunic and trousers, and the *ṭopī* hat. And, the gender structure of the competition remained men competing against women, though the topic of the songs was required to be politics, not romantic love. Despite its novelty at Radio Nepal, this competition looked and sounded (*musically*) much like all the others.¹⁶

The audience was made up of people from across the political spectrum. I recognized several senior Radio Nepal staff artists and other program presenters, as well as some ministers and their assistants from the Nepali Congress and the CPN (UML) parties. There were many senior

¹⁵ Each team consists of a lead man and a lead woman singer, plus one or two supporting singers, who can also whisper ideas for couplets into the lead singer's ear. Devi Gharti and Manju Mahat were the female winners of the national dohori competitions in 2005 and 2006, and others including supporting singers had received other awards and acclaim.

¹⁶ For more on dohori competitions as well as restaurant performance, see Stirr (2009: Chapters 2, 5). A quick summary of how this competition went: Bhimeshwor won the first round against Satyawati. Phulmaya and Naresh won the second round against Shanti Dohori Sanjh. Satyawati & Shanti were supposed to compete for third place, but Shanti's team left and forfeited to Satyawati. Satyawati sang a short song between its own male and female sides, and it was announced that they would be awarded 3rd prize of 10,000 rupees by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala the following day at official celebrations on the Tundikhel, the park in the center of the city. Bhimeshwor came in second to overall winners Phulmaya and Naresh in the final round.

artists in attendance, of whose political sympathies I was unaware. I also recognized a few artists affiliated with the Janasanskritik Manch, the cultural organization of the CPN (UML). I sat down next to Devi Prasad, a man I knew from dohori competitions in Syangja, a former district-level dohori star from the 1980s who had chosen politics over a music career. He was now an assistant to a minister from the Nepali Congress (NC-D).¹⁷ Acquaintances from the worlds of both music and politics came over to say hello as the competition got underway. I prepared my recorder, and Devi Prasad and his friends also took out their mobile phones and notepads, ready to record and write down the dohori singers' words. Apparently, I was not the only one interested in what the singers would say that day.



Dipika (right) and friend dance to Naresh D.C. and Junu Shris's song.

The competition went on for several hours. In between the rounds of competition dohori songs, different groups from different political parties and senior Radio Nepal staff artists performed both traditional solo lok git and songs newly written for Loktantra Diwas. During the songs, just like

¹⁷ The Nepali Congress (Democratic) was a faction that split off from the Nepali Congress in the 2002, then reunited with this party in September 2007. The current name of the unified party remains the Nepali Congress.

in other dohori competitions, some audience members took to the grassy space between the audience and the stage to dance.

The “Gandharva Ideal”

This competition occurred about a year after the People’s War ended, and it would take another year before elections to the Constituent Assembly took place. The atmosphere remained one of uncertainty regarding the direction that politics would take, but the artists were here to sing songs ostensibly in celebration of democracy. I wondered before they began: would they be critical? Or would they play it safe, and just sing slogans or platitudes? While I knew some of them had backgrounds in the Janasanskritik Manch,¹⁸ and were thus no strangers to making up political couplets, what about those who were primarily used to singing about love? Would their improvisatory repertoires stretch far enough? The choice of artist to inaugurate the competition offered some idea of what organizers might have been expecting performers and the competition as a whole to achieve.

Announcer Shanti Gurung, here especially for the competition from Radio Nepal Pokhara, called Rubin Gandharva to the front of the stage to inaugurate the competition. Rubin, a young boy of the Gandharva caste, earned his fame singing pro-democracy, anti-monarchy songs during protests in 2005–2006. He had become a media favorite for representing “the voice of the people,” in the traditional Gandharva musical idiom of improvising songs (*ghaṭanā gīt* or event songs, which, like dohori, are

¹⁸ Several artists on these teams had backgrounds in the Janasanskritik Manch, and several in the Nepali Congress party. Some former CPN (UML) members may have switched loyalties to the Maoists, as many dohori artists did by joining the party publicly in September 2008. I am not fully certain of where anyone’s political sympathies lay at this time, thus I do not attribute to anyone a party affiliation. The exception to this is Krishna Reule, who was and remains an outspoken leader within a Maoist-affiliated labor union. Members of each team did not all support the same political parties. Whatever their political leanings may have been, to my knowledge none of these artists had backgrounds as *Maoist artists*. That is, they had not been members of a Maoist *sāṃskritik pariwār* or “cultural family” performing Maoist songs and dramas before and during the People’s War. Their knowledge of Maoist and broadly communist poetic tropes, then, had to come from interactions in other settings, including a general familiarity with Nepali communist songs developed in the context of other parties, exposure to Maoist media, and interactions with those who were Maoist artists.

comprised of couplets with refrains)¹⁹ about current events, and after the coming of democracy he had been awarded a monthly government stipend for his contributions to the movement. He valued and identified with the traditional occupation of the men of his caste, being a traveling musician, or, as another very different Gandharva artist, Ram Sharan Nepali, expressed it, being a “traveling newspaper” (Weisethaunet 1997).²⁰ In an interview with Bikash Sangraula of the newspaper *República* in 2009, Rubin is quoted on his view of his traditional occupation and its relationship with politics:

“The Gandharva’s art is coming up with songs extempore according to the audience and the social and political climate,” he said, explaining his specialty. “Words have to come automatically and in the form of songs.”²¹

This idea of improvising songs reflecting contemporary sociopolitical realities appeared to be what the competition organizers hoped would characterize the dohori sung here. Rubin’s inauguration situated the entire competition within a nationalist frame drawing upon the tradition of Gandharva bards singing the stories of rulers’ exploits, updated to reflect an ideology of equality and inclusion. This time, it would be youth of multiple castes and ethnic groups singing the stories of the people’s exploits. Instead of singing for the rulers, the people would be singing for themselves. More than reflecting sociopolitical realities, they would be performing the new configuration of Nepali democracy and thus contributing to its establishment.

Concern with Current Events: A Narrative through the Dohori Songs

Though it is not always possible to evaluate dohori songs as narratives, narrative coherence (among couplets, often excluding refrains) is highly valued in competition dohori, and is something that performers strive to create to earn higher scores. Thus it’s possible to view these songs as conversations with narrative lines, and evaluate them as such. The songs taken together can also be heard as creating a loose narrative that

¹⁹ Rubin did not improvise songs in the melodies traditionally associated with *ghaṭanā gīt*; he instead used the melodies and refrains of commercially recorded dohori songs.

²⁰ While there are many Gandharvas who value the continued practice of this traditional occupation, there are many others who wish to articulate alternate identities free of caste-related histories. For nuanced portraits of more aspects of Gandharva life, see the films of Stephanie Spray (*As Long As There’s Breath*, 2009; *Monsoon Reflections*, 2007, available on www.der.org).

²¹ As Bikash Sangraula writes about Rubin Gandharva in *República* (2009).

progresses from celebration of what has been achieved to a call to arms to fight for what remains to be won.

The first song in the competition begins with an acknowledgement of the occasion and moves on to immediate political concern: the promised CA elections, and the doubts about whether or not they will actually be held. The first three couplets are in a celebratory tone likening the coming of democracy to the festival of Deepawali, while in the fourth, Manju raises the issue of implementation: “it’s been a year since we’ve had democracy, and nothing’s been done, you know.” Sriram’s answer in couplet 5 offers his interpretation of what exactly should be done: *bikās*, development.²² Manju’s words of suspicion continue throughout the song, voicing another popular discourse of distrust for politicians. In this and the next song, martyrdom is invoked to remind people today of their responsibilities in carrying out the unfinished project of establishing democracy.

Krishna Reule and Devi Gharti’s next song highlights the ambiguity of the situation: on the one hand, Krishna sings, “the feudalists’ web of lies has been destroyed,” and “Mother Nepal is laughing with happiness.” Devi sings, “Birkhe and Harke were lost, peace came to the country and they came home.”²³ There are indeed many things to celebrate. On the other hand, there may be “arguments about progress,” and “the Tarai’s still closed.” To “fully realize the martyrs’ dreams,” “murder, violence, and corruption must still be stopped,” and of course the goal of republican democracy remains unachieved. This theme continues throughout Junu and Naresh’s next song, as Junu sings, first in celebration, “everything was arranged in the villages, citizenship was given to get the elections done,” and then reminds listeners that despite this, “it’s been a year that they’ve been moving the election date.”

Phulmaya and Badri’s next song poetically addresses the topic of loss, and here it seems that they are singing about more than just the nineteen-day People’s Movement.

²² For discussions of the significance of ideas of development in Nepal’s national imaginary, see, for example, Ahearn (2001), Pigg (1992), and Tamang (2000, 2002).

²³ “Birkhe” and “Harke” are men’s names; using the word “*harāeko*” for “lost,” this couplet refers to the various types of migration and displacement the People’s War engendered, and the reappearance of migrants and displaced people when they felt it was safe to return home.

1. Badri: *dherai roe āmā ra buwā* Mothers and fathers cried so
kati bhae bāśaimā much,
viduwā So many were widowed in
 the prime of youth.
2. Phulmaya: *kākh rittiyo śir bhayo* Children were lost, heads
khāli wiped clean [of vermilion, a
nayā nepāl bancha ki sign of marriage]
yas pāli Will there be a new Nepal
 this time?

The word order and rhyme scheme of Phulmaya's response stresses *this time*, as a reminder that there have been several previous struggles that have fallen short of reaching their goal (though what exactly defines this version of the new Nepal remains ambiguous), and sounds a note of hope that *this time* things might be different. The song continues in the vein of both mourning and hope, and Phulmaya's final couplet again reminds listeners that much work remains to be done:

20. Phulmaya: *lyāunai parcha garibko* We must bring poor their due
sattā Some are in jail, some are
koī jelmā chan kohī still disappeared.
ajhai bepattā

Satyawati's next short song between its male and female sides contrasts with previous mentions of celebration and hope, sounding a note of despair. Krishna Reule questions, "Why does truth never win in this country?" and Manju Mahat sings of village-level politicians, "They're passing the time accusing each other of thievery, There has been no change in the villages."

The last two songs, in the final round, return to the topics previously brought up, from celebration and commemoration of the 2006 People's Movement to unfinished dreams, loss, uncertainty, and despair, and propose solutions to these problems in increasingly violent terms. It is in the sixth song between Devi and Naresh that Devi reiterates her call for *ganatantra*, and Naresh begins to sing about "destroying the houses of the feudalists." He first uses this phrase early in their song, and comes back to it at the end after an exchange about the ongoing violence in the Tarai:

17. Naresh: *kurā hāmle nabujhyā* It's not that we don't
haina ni understand,
sāmantiko ghar dhalyā The houses of feudalists have
chaina ni not yet come down.
18. Devi: *kopilāko loktantra phalne* The budding democracy will
cha bear fruit,
śāsan dhalyo ghar pani Their rule came down, their
dhalne cha houses will too.
19. Naresh: *cārai killā cār diśā jelaū* Let's surround them and bind
dhālne haina jarā nai them from every direction,
ukhalaū We won't just knock them
down, we'll pull out their
very roots.
20. Devi: *chaina ke kām nahune* Nothing is impossible,
khāle If the Nepali people dare to
āṭepachi nepāli jantāle do it.

This exchange is intentionally ambiguous, and the destruction of feudalists' houses could be metaphorical or literal or a combination of the two, as "houses" can refer not only to physical structures but also to the houses of government, and the structures of kin and fictive kin relations upon which much of Nepal's political culture is based (Snellinger 2010). In Phulmaya and Sriram's final song, discussed below in the section on martyrdom and blood, the imagery of violence and war is less metaphorical and contains more direct references to historical events.

There are three aspects of the lyrics that bear more detailed discussion: the use of progressive song terminology common to Nepal's many communist parties; references to martyrdom and blood; and the tension around different terms for different kinds of democracy.

Pan-Leftist Terminology

Many of the couplets sung in this competition use phrases familiar from other progressive songs, communist songs, and broader political discourse not necessarily associated with the Maoist party.²⁴ Some of these are common leftist terminology, such as *sarvahārā* (proletariat), *sāmanta* (feudal), and references to the people awakening and uniting toward a

²⁴ For a thorough examination of the lyrics of progressive songs, see Grandin (1996). For a discussion of musical styles in progressive songs, see Grandin (2005).

common goal. References to *pratigaman*, or regression, invoke the “Movement Against Regression,” officially titled as such, made up of the seven mainstream political parties against royal rule from late 2002 up through the 19-day People’s Movement in April 2006, and is thus more of a pro-democracy term than a communist term, and *janatā* (the people) is used by all parties in spoken and written discourse, though its use in songs is more common among communist parties.²⁵

Other uses of popular terms either directly quote or refer to a particular communist song, *Gāũ Gāũ Bāṭa Uṭha* (*Arise from the Villages*). Written by a composer of *pragatiśīl gīt*, Shyam Tamot from Bhojpur, in 1978, and popularized by the group Ralfa; singers associated with the CPN (UML); and the 1990s film *Balidān* (*Sacrifice*); it is now considered a leftist anthem. I have heard it sung and seen dances performed to recorded versions at CPN (UML) cultural programs, in Nepal and among Nepalis in the US. It is known widely enough that even if an artist had little or no exposure to communist songs, he or she would probably know a few strains of *Gāũ Gāũ Bāṭa Uṭha*. The refrain is simple:

<i>gāũ gāũ bāṭa uṭha, bastī bastī</i>	Arise from every village, arise from every settlement ²⁶
<i>bāṭa uṭha</i>	Arise from every village, arise from every settlement
<i>gāũ gāũ bāṭa uṭha, bastī bastī</i>	Arise to change the face of this country
<i>bāṭa uṭha</i>	Arise to change the face of this country.
<i>yo deśko muhār phernalāi uṭha</i>	
<i>yo deśko muhār phernalāi uṭha</i>	

²⁵ Though the Nepali Congress and the monarchist parties do have their own cultural programs, the communist parties are much better known for the extent of their cultural production. My association of use of the term “the people” with communist songs may just be due to the much greater number of communist songs that exist. Later in 2007, I did stumble upon *dohori* being performed at a Nepali Congress rally at Kathmandu’s Khula Manch, with singers singing couplets about “the people.” This seemed to me to be a very recent development for Kathmandu, and was perhaps led by Congress-affiliated professional *dohori* singers.

²⁶ Some translate “*bastī*” as “slum,” as it is the same word used in Hindi to describe slums in Indian cities. But, in Nepal the term is often used to refer to a settlement of a particular group that perhaps doesn’t yet have the cohesiveness of an established village or town, i.e. “Tamang *basti*” as a settlement of Tamangs, or Sainik Basti, “Soldiers’ Settlement,” the official name of a relatively new town outside of Pokhara where many Gurkha soldiers returned from the British and Indian armies have bought land and settled.

Sriram Adhikari makes the first reference to this song in couplet 19 of his first song with Manju Mahat, singing “*deśle muhār ho phernu parne*,” “the country must change its face.” Krishna Reule then references it again in couplet 5 of his song with Devi Gharti, singing “*uṭhnu parcha gāū bastī cheu kunā*,” “villages, settlements, borders and corners must rise up.” In the next song, the third of the competition, Junu Shris quotes *Gāū Gāū Bāṭa Uṭha* and elaborates on its theme of “rising up” from villages throughout her dialog with Naresh D.C.: in couplet 8, she sings “*Gāū gāū bastī sab bāṭa uṭha*” “arise from all the villages and settlements,” and the following exchange further into the song:

- | | | |
|-------------|---|--|
| 14. Junu: | <i>hāmī jantā ekai juṭ bhaera
jaḡāū aba gāū gāūma gaera</i> | We the people becoming
united,
Let’s awake, going from
village to village |
| 15. Naresh: | <i>uṭhchan jantā mecī ra kālī
bācnu parcha bhaera nepāli</i> | The people will rise up from
the Mechi to [Maha]kali,
We must survive as Nepalis |
| 16. Junu: | <i>gāū gāū bāṭa sab kurā
milāiyo
cunāb garna nāgarikatā
dilāiyo</i> | Everything was arranged in
[from] the villages,
Citizenship was given to get
the elections done |

Junu’s continued use of the same phrases, after two other singers have already quoted from the same song, makes her seem less inspired in her improvisatory choices. I wondered if she had perhaps less experience with political songs than the other singers, which might explain her reliance on phrases from the Nepali left’s best-known song. Whether they came across as fresh and interesting or banal, these references to *Gāū Gāū Bāṭa Uṭha* situate the singers who use them within a history of Nepali leftist song that encompasses multiple communist parties.²⁷

²⁷ Nepal’s many communist parties have a convoluted history of splits and mergers, which have resulted in multiple forms of communist parties with different structures, philosophies, and policies, and complicated connections to regional histories, to each other, and to other non-communist parties. For a diagram detailing the splits and mergers up until the mid-2000s, see Thapa with Sijapati (2005).

Martyrdom and Blood

References to martyrdom and blood, however, take on a more Maoist association due to these topics' centrality to the Maoist rhetoric of the past decade. In couplet 12 of Satyawati's song against Bhimeshwor, Manju Mahat first raises the issue of martyrdom: "Democracy's been established, the martyrs' dreams are only half realized." Sriram Adhikari's response and Manju's next response suggest that the martyr's dreams referred to here concern the establishment of the constituent assembly through elections. After this exchange, in couplet 15 Sriram introduces the related metaphor of a river of blood: "This country will be better now, a river of blood did not just flow for no reason." Manju counters his optimism with more skepticism using the same metaphor: "everything is becoming empty, the value of blood has not been written [i.e. determined]." In the following song, Krishna Reule sings two couplets about martyrdom, using in one of them the common Maoist image of the martyr's blood speaking: "They must win with the votes of the people, This is what the blood of the martyrs is saying." In another couplet, he sings, "The martyrs' existence must be carried on, Murder, violence, and corruption must be stopped." In the final song of the competition, Sriram Adhikari and Phulmaya K.C. sing an exchange about martyrdom that goes on for three couplets: Sriram begins: "They gave up their bodies, the great ones among the people, So many asked for water but did not receive it." Phulmaya responds, "We were not afraid of the feudalists, Some of us became martyrs, some became handicapped." Sriram's response to that is, "Let's come to know the martyrs' blood, Let's not trample it while walking."

These references to martyrdom and blood resonate intertextually with nationalist songs from the 1960s and 70s, such as Gopal Yonjan's famous *Deśle Ragat Māge (If the Nation Asks for Blood)*; with *pragatiśīl gīt* from the 70s and 80s; with discourses of martyrdom in much earlier monarchist rhetoric and Hindu tradition; and with the celebrated national martyrs in earlier democracy movements, such as the four who died in the 1941 movement against the Rana regime, who are memorialized by the Shahid Gate monument in central Kathmandu. While images of martyrdom and blood are clearly not unique to Maoist rhetoric in Nepal, many analysts have commented on the frequency of these metaphors' occurrence in Maoist cultural production, much more than in previous nationalist and

leftist songs, perhaps beginning with Masal's²⁸ musical group Raktim Pariwar (Family of Blood) in the 1990s (de Sales 2003), and growing throughout the Maoist movement (Lecomte-Tilouine 2006; Mottin 2010). Many Nepalis will rightly argue that to talk about martyrdom in Nepal today does not situate one within a Maoist discourse, but I argue that because of the heavy reliance on these topics in Maoist cultural production throughout the People's War, martyrdom and blood now have a heightened association with Nepali Maoism that was not previously present.

What is, perhaps intentionally, ambiguous throughout the songs of this competition is to which martyrs the singers refer. This is Loktantra Diwas, so the most logical reference is to those who were killed in the nineteen days of the People's Movement in April 2006. But nowhere do the singers separate these martyrs – recognized by all the democratic political parties as such – from the Maoist martyrs of the People's War, and their invocation of the term could very well be heard from a Maoist perspective, as referring to these martyrs as well. The final song of the competition, sung between Phulmaya K.C. and Sriram Adhikari, discusses martyrdom and the whole movement in a much more warlike sense, framing it not just as a movement, but as a battle. Indeed, Sriram's first couplet frames it as an epic battle analogous to those of the Ramayana: "The success of democracy is like Sri Ram killing Ravana." References to "nineteen days," "curfews," and people "pouring water from the rooftops" make it clear that they are discussing the April 2006 movement. But the framing in epic terms and the increasingly warlike terminology in both Sriram and Phulmaya's couplets seem to situate this People's Movement as part of the Maoist People's War. Their imagery in this song is the most bloody of all the songs in this competition, with references to "bombs and grenades," "enemy bullets," "orders to shoot with bullets," and the people becoming *ākrośit* or enraged, a common trope in Maoist songs. In couplet 17, in response to Phulmaya's mention of conspiracies in the previous couplet, Sriram responds with what amounts to a violent call to arms in service of democracy: "Even if it becomes necessary to kill them [regressive conspirators],²⁹ that kind will

²⁸ Masal's political philosophy relies strongly on Maoist principles, though Mohan Bikram Singh's Masal has consistently remained separate from the party currently known as UCPN (Maoist); it is in this sense that I refer to Raktim Pariwar's songs as "Maoist."

²⁹ *Mārnai pare tyastailāi mārincha/phūlcha phalcha sarvatra charincha.* "They"

be killed, It [democracy] will bloom, it will bear fruit, it will spread everywhere.”

Loktantra, Ganatantra: Defining Democracy

There are three terms used to denote democracy in the Nepali language. In their current usage, each connotes a particular configuration of democratic government with reference to the presence or absence of a monarchy. *Prajātantra* translates as “subjects’ rule,” implying the presence of a monarchy to whom the people are subject. *Loktantra* literally means “people’s rule,” implying but not outwardly connoting democracy without monarchy. *Ganatantra*, on the other hand, unambiguously means republican democracy with no monarchy in power.³⁰ At this time, loktantra served as a useful middle term between democracy with and without a monarchy, and was suitable to describe Nepal’s democracy in this period of uncertainty: the king had stepped down from autocratic rule, but the ultimate fate of the monarchy was yet to be decided. There were those who argued that a ceremonial monarchy would still be acceptable under loktantra.

On this day, celebrating Loktantra Diwas, the issue of ganatantra was highly loaded. At this time it was officially only a Maoist demand,³¹ and thus supporting ganatantra could have been seen as one way of branding oneself a Maoist supporter. But “outing” one’s party affiliation was not the only factor causing tension around advocating ganatantra. Another

in the English translation and “*tyastailār*” (literally “[to] such people”) in the Nepali here are understood in the context of the previous three couplets, in which the singers detail ways that supporters of the monarchy tried to stop the movement for democracy through use of force and conspiracy; hence my gloss of “regressive conspirators.”

³⁰ Before the fall of the Rana regime, the word ganatantra was often used for democracy, in the sense of a democracy with a system like India’s, as ganatantra remains the word commonly used to describe India’s political system. At that time it seems not to have connoted republican democracy as it does today.

³¹ Maoist demands to have Nepal declared a republic before the Constituent Assembly elections were one of the many issues that had to be negotiated before elections were held. At this time support for ganatantra was widespread among individual members of the major political parties though the Koirala faction in Congress still opposed it, along with the monarchist parties. However, no party but the Maoists had made ganatantra part of their official platform yet. Hence I stress the word “officially” in this sentence. Ultimately, ganatantra and the end of the monarchy were proclaimed after a vote at the CA’s first meeting, adding another Democracy Day: Ganatantra Diwas.

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|------------|--|--|
| 6. Devi: | <i>śahīdako ragatle ke
bhancha
lokatāntrik gaṇatantra le
bhancha</i> | What does the blood of the
martyrs say?
It says “give us republican
democracy.” |
| 7. Naresh: | <i>gaṇatantra pachi ko kuro
loktantra nai huncha ki
adhuro</i> | Republican democracy is for
afterwards,
Might democracy itself
remain only half realized? |

Like Krishna in Devi’s previous round, Naresh reminded her that there were problems to be solved before calling unilaterally for a republic. Devi’s mention of ganatantra again created tension among the audience, as those busy in conversations with their neighbors grew silent to hear what direction the song would take. No one around me directly voiced an opinion, but I began to suspect that some audience members thought that singing in support of ganatantra on Loktantra Diwas was inappropriate. Was it because ganatantra was still officially portrayed as a primarily Maoist agenda, and mentioning it was thus seen as partisan, or because artists were supposed to be celebrating what had already been achieved rather than concentrating on the challenges still facing the democratization and peace process?

Those I talked to afterwards suggested that those same questions may have been in the minds of others at the competition, and the radio listening audience as well. One singer, a Nepali Congress (NC) supporter, told me that “now was not the time to sing about republican democracy.” Another singer, also a Nepali Congress (NC-D) supporter, who was listening over the radio, suggested that Devi had been brave to advocate republican democracy and all the other singers had just been too scared to try. Another musician in the dohori world, a former CPN (UML) cadre and Janasanskritik Manch performer who now expressed support for the Maoists, admired Krishna’s and Naresh’s responses to Devi’s republican democracy couplets because they “showed understanding of the uncertainty of the situation.”

The situation *was* uncertain, and there were no clear rules about what was really appropriate and what was not. People whose party affiliations were not matters of public knowledge, like most of these artists, were uncertain about what it would mean to say certain things in dohori couplets on national radio, or what it would mean to express support for certain couplets as a member of the Radio Nepal audience. Others’ political commitments may have influenced what they sang or supported

more strongly. Devi Prasad and his circle of Nepali Congress friends wrote down every couplet that had something to do with the potential of the Nepali people to accomplish things together, applauding and giving shouts of encouragement when they heard a particular couplet they liked. They cheered for and wrote down this couplet of Manju's from her first song against Sriram:

8. Manju: *niḥswarthī man buddhako* With unselfish hearts,
 bheśako wearing the mantle of the
 saccā sevak cāyācha deśako Buddha,
 The country's true servants
 are needed.

I noticed that they did not write down or cheer for the more violent couplets or the ones that referred to martyrdom, though the Nepali Congress has a long history of reverence for its own martyrs. Their choice of couplets to support seemed to me to be a small protest against framing the work still to be done on the peace process as the continuation of a war, a view perhaps too close to the Maoist idea of continuous struggle, or protracted war, for their liking.

Love and Politics Together: Form and Meaning

Together, the words of the couplets sung in these songs situate this competition at an intersection of political perspectives, with debts to pro-democratic and communist songs and rhetoric from multiple eras, including the Maoist cultural production of the past decade. If we pay attention only to the couplets, it seems like this competition was primarily political and had little lyrical connection with mainstream, love-song dohori. But attention to the refrains, repeated after every couplet, reveals how this competition not only brought different political perspectives together, but also situated them alongside the love-song conventions of mainstream dohori.

Announcer Shanti Gurung was especially keen to separate love and politics, to point out that dohori had political potential beyond the love songs many deemed to be politically irrelevant. After the first two songs of the competition had finished, she gave a short speech praising the singers' political awareness:

Our artists don't only sing songs of love, they're also politically aware. They know democracy, they know the basic principles of the constituent assembly, they know the ultimate goals of democracy and republicanism,

and they can sing songs that carry messages about making democracy a reality. They don't only sing songs about *kānchī* and *kānchā* (young lovers).³²

This speech echoed the discourses opposing love and politics that have long persisted in Nepal, and in other areas of South Asia.³³ It could be heard as praise for dohori singers from the communist perspective, showing that mainstream singers are politically aware even though they spend most of their time singing about love. It could also be heard as a defense of dohori itself in the communist context, showing that the genre can encompass more than the love songs it is known for. But this defense only applied to part of the songs sung at this competition, because while the couplets were undeniably political, the refrains repeated after every couplet remained the same as their love-song sources.

In dohori competition and restaurant performance, popular recorded dohori songs serve as the basis for improvising new couplets. While the couplets are new, the refrains are usually not modified from their original recorded form. Even if the couplets have nothing to do with the theme of the refrain, the refrain is left alone, and improvisational creativity is concentrated on couplets only.

In political dohori outside of the restaurant and competition setting, however, I have heard many love-song refrains modified to fit their contexts.³⁴ Rubin Gandharva inaugurated this competition in exactly this way, by repeating the following refrain several times:

³² *hāmrā kalākārharū māyā ra piratikā gīt mātra gāūdāinan, rājñitik rūple pani unīharū sacet chan, unīharūlāi loktantra thāhā cha, sambidhān sabhāko mūl mantra thāhā cha, loktāntrik ganatantrako antim bisauni thāhā cha, unīharū loktantralāi banāūne sandeśmūlak gīt pani gāūna sakchan, mātrai kānchī ra kānchākā gīt gāūdāinan.*

³³ Margaret Trawick discusses ancient Tamil poetry as divided into two categories, *akam* (of the inside) and *puram* (of the outside). *Akam* is love poetry and *puram* is about “the warlike exploits of kings” (Trawick 1992: 25). In both types, as in dohori, metaphor and ambiguity increase erotic intensity but are still considered civilized (Trawick 1992: 27).

³⁴ At the Maoist Gurung Lhosar celebration in 2006, singers Srijana Birahi Thapa and Shila Ale turned the refrain *dhokā dinelāi ke bhanaū ra khai timī hāsa bho mai bāchaulā roī* (What can I say to a traitor? You can laugh and I'll survive, crying) to *dhokā dinelāi ke bhanaū ra khoi jantā hāsa bho rājā basdā roī* (What can I say to a traitor? The people can laugh while the king sits, crying). On the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly in 2008, in the streets outside of the assembly hall, a women's group from Gaighat, Udaypur, and two artists from the Janasanskritik Manch changed the refrains of many dohori songs to have to do with *gañatantra* (republican democracy). Comedy

banko kāphal bankai carilāi
lokatantra nepālī jantā lāi hāmro nepāl śriṣṭi bharilāi
 Forest berries³⁵ for forest birds,
 Democracy for the Nepali people, our Nepal will last as long as creation.

This is the refrain of a popular 2005 dohori song, with the second line modified to carry a political meaning. The original love-song refrain is:

Timro māyā duī dinko bhae ni mero māyā junī bharilāi
 Even if your love lasts only two days, my love is lifelong (Thapa et al. 2005).

Some of these juxtapositions were rather jarring. The refrain of the song sung by Devi Gharti and Naresh D.C., originally referring to lovers who are separated, was difficult to make sense of in relation to political couplets: “*Dailā muni jau, bhandeu na niṣṭhuri, timī kahā chau?*” (“Barley below the house, tell me, cruel one, where are you?”) (Saurag et al. 2006).

Yet sometimes the couplets offered new possibilities for interpreting the refrains, as in this example from Sriram and Phulmaya’s final song: a refrain of undying love juxtaposed with a couplet about honoring martyrs suggests further emotional dimensions to the act of remembering.

9. Sriram	<i>tyo śahīdko ragatlāi</i> <i>cināū</i> <i>helā gari kulcera</i> <i>nahīdaū</i>	Let’s come to know the martyrs’ blood, Let’s not denigrate it and trample it while walking.
Refrain	<i>siri siri hāwā bahunjel,</i> <i>mero māyā mardaina</i> <i>māyālu sāgaramā pānī</i> <i>rahunjel</i>	As long as the wind softly blows, my love will not die, sweetheart, as long as there is water in the sea (Chhetri et al. 2007)

duo Madan Krishna Shrestha and Hari Bamsha Acharya routinely modify refrains (in much-less-improvised, carefully planned comedy sketches), and *Gāijātrā* songs provide new words to entire songs as political and social satire.

³⁵ *Kāphal* is a red berry which grows on trees in the forest.

These are my own interpretations. But how do performers and listeners interpret the juxtaposition of couplets and refrains with different and seemingly unrelated topics? This varies according to their level of familiarity with restaurant and competition dohori conventions. The songs chosen for this competition were competition and restaurant standards, in whose melodies and with whose refrains the performers had already improvised hundreds if not thousands of couplets on many different topics. For these singers, as well as for the judges, instrumentalists, and others like my companion Devi Prasad who were used to this dohori format, the relation between couplet and refrain in this context was not highly relevant. I myself, with extensive restaurant and competition experience by this point, found myself listening attentively to the couplets while letting the meaning of the refrain words fade into the background. Familiar songs with familiar words, the refrains' lexical meaning took a back seat to the meaning of the couplets, becoming more like another part of the musical setting in which the couplets were being placed.

But not all listeners were as enculturated into the competition and restaurant dohori framework, and not all were comfortable with the unchanged refrains. Dipika, a lok and dohori fan who had changed the words to a popular solo lok git to perform between competition rounds, wondered aloud to me why the competition organizers had not changed the refrains. Announcer Shanti Gurung, in her comments after Phulmaya and Sriram's last song, suggested a change to the refrain, saying that "as long as there is water in the sea" could be changed to "as long as the people have courage."³⁶

It is hard to tell what listeners outside of the groups of artists I knew in the competition and restaurant dohori worlds thought about the juxtaposition of political couplets and love song refrains. Ethnographic research about various types of dohori practices in rural areas, in various languages and among various ethnic groups, describes the widespread use of different topics in couplets sung to one refrain. As in most discourse about restaurant and competition dohori, the refrain is thought of in these instances as part of the musical base upon which to improvise couplets, the refrain words being secondary to the dohori conversation held through couplets (March 1998; Parajuli 2000). But, Calla Jacobson's research among Tamang and Sherpa villagers, whose interaction with Nepali language dohori songs is primarily through cassettes and the radio, suggests that while they may often dismiss refrain words as "just song

³⁶ "Janatāko sāhas rahunje!"

words,” they also do include them in their interpretations of songs’ meanings (Jacobson 1999). My own research supports Jacobson’s findings, as even in restaurant and competition *dohori*, singers and audience members, there primarily to have fun and dance (or, as musicians, to encourage audience dancing), will reject songs that have too much focus on *dukha*, or troubles and sorrow, as bases for improvising flirtatious love songs. There are also musical and dance-related components to these choices: songs labeled “*dukha* songs” are often slow, melismatic, and rhythmically and vocally more complicated than other songs. Such songs require a different, slower style of dancing than that preferred in most competition and restaurant settings. Songs with themes of *dukha* that are musically simpler, slightly faster, and more danceable in the *jhyāure* and fast *khyāli* styles³⁷ are not rejected as often as those that are musically complicated. This suggests that perhaps refrains of any kind are seen as compatible with couplets of any kind *as long as* they do not create an excess of emotional or cognitive dissonance between the lyrical, musical, and dance levels.

At this competition, this kind of emotional/cognitive dissonance was present at many levels. Dipika’s comments about changing the refrains and Shanti’s speech and attempts to change the refrains suggest at least some discomfort with juxtaposing political couplets with love-song refrains. Devi Prasad and his Congress friends’ choices to ignore the more violent couplets suggests that they were less comfortable with such imagery, now that violent revolt (historically a Congress specialty as well) was seen to be the province of the Maoists. Republican democracy remained a touchy subject that set the whole audience on edge when mentioned in the songs.

³⁷ For example, two songs used in this competition, *Dhokā Dine Lāi* (a breakup song, Pant et al. 2006), *Siri Siri Hāwā Bahunjel* (a song of separation, Chhetri et al. 2007) can be understood as having themes of *dukha* that remain in their refrains even without the original narrative of recorded couplets. But they have very simple vocal lines and straightforward rhythms, making it easier for singers to concentrate on improvising lyrics, and they can also be played fast for dancing (both have fast *khyāli* beats). *Dukha* songs that were major recorded hits but are much less common in competition and restaurant settings include Raju Pariyar and Laxmi Neupane’s *Banko Kāḍāle* and Bimal Dangi and Bima Kumari Dura’s *Pānasmā Batti Bāleko* and *Timi Gayau Arkaiko Dolimā*, songs of unrequited love with long, melismatic melodies and slow beats. In these both the subject matter and musical setting are considered unsuitable for flirtatious love songs.

These disagreements simmered below the level of overt expression, as participants were aware that direct discourse could be taken in many different ways in these times of uncertainty. As Verdery describes regarding socialist Romania, “No one effectively controlled what was said: as people’s words entered into a discursive field, they were instantly available for reinterpretation, to be seized and turned against their speakers” (Verdery 1991: 9), or to be taken in other directions with intertextual references leading both backwards and forwards in time (Volosinov 1986[1973]: 41). Dohori’s tradition of ambiguity, metaphor, and allegory, within the genre conventions of short couplets, leads to songs that crystallize contradictions into poetic forms, where the compressed potential meanings create couplets vibrating with possibility. This has parallels with Walter Benjamin’s idea of the dialectical image, a representation of contradictions that, like a photograph of motion, conveys the idea of change and process through something that is itself static.³⁸

But instead of interpreting this dohori competition solely in dialectic terms, it is perhaps more useful to view it in terms of Bakhtin and Volosinov’s concept of dialogics, viewing words, poetic tropes, musical phrases, genres, and other social signs as “products of the living interactions of social forces” (Volosinov 1986[1973]: 41), which continually inform and are informed by each other, in a relational, intertextual process such that all contain multiple voices and inspire new linkages to others, both looking backwards in time and anticipating what might happen next (Bakhtin 1981). Here I also adopt Kavouras’ (2005) conception of dialogues as interactions between logics, which builds on Bakhtin and Volosinov as well as Kavouras’ own work on dialogic song:

Dialogue in its general sense is neither defined nor bound by any concrete and definite expression of the dialogical element as in a conversational relation. It constitutes both the symbolic possibility and the symbolic manifestation of a subjectivity’s encounter with the temporality and spatiality of any juxtaposition resulting to the unification of various logics and, eventually, realities. (2005: 2)

³⁸ In his introduction to Benjamin’s collected works (*Schriften I*), Adorno uses this idea to describe Benjamin’s entire oeuvre: “to understand Benjamin properly one must feel behind his every sentence the conversion of extreme agitation into something static, indeed, the static notion of movement itself” (Adorno 1955: xix).

Various logics coexist in the same space, and thus brought together, have the potential to create new, hybrid and transformed logics and subjectivities. Rather than a synthesis of opposites, such a dialogic transformation is a process of increasing pluralities. Imagery of bloody battles and commitment to upholding the martyrs' dreams juxtaposed with love-song refrains are transformed dialogically based on the narratives listeners construct to bring them together. And, the pairing of lowbrow, populist live dohori and prestigious, exclusive state mouthpiece Radio Nepal meant very different things from different political viewpoints – the adjectives I use here come from the dohori artists' perspectives, and might be very different from another point of view. All of these often-contradictory logics coexisted at this competition, much as they coexisted in Nepal's political reality of the time. This competition brought them together in a highly public act, with multiple possible results. The stated goal was to commemorate Loktantra Diwas, but the goals that the various groups and individuals involved hoped to pursue, as well as their interpretations of what exactly was being commemorated, were no doubt numerous and conflicting. Moreover, I have presented one short narrative linking the songs and focusing on some key aspects, but others might focus on quite different things.

Laura Kunreuther, William Mazzarella, and others have focused on the idea that media such as television or radio create the social entities "society," "nation," or "culture" that they claim to represent on air (Kunreuther 2006: 325; Mazzarella 2004: 357). These theories rely on Althusserian ideas of interpellation, calling or naming, as constituting subjects: audiences or publics cohere around a particular program or medium by responding to its call, and thus identifying with the categories indicated by the name. Such a project of interpellating national subjects was central to Radio Nepal's goal from its inception (Amatya 1983; Onta 2004) and remains so today, albeit in a highly diversified multimedia world. Yet both the events of Nepali history, and the growing body of ethnographies of public culture,³⁹ demonstrate that such top-down projects of cultural nationalism are only ever partially successful, and that there is much more going on than a media-directed creation of national

³⁹ See, for example, Askew (2002), Dent (2009), Fox (2004), Stokes (2010), and Yano (2001), among others, for analyses of music and national imaginaries that examine the continually shifting interactions of media production and reception, live performance in myriad settings, and the recontextualizations and resignifications of circulating musical texts.

subjectivities. A dialogic conception of this project must also take live performance and reception into account as sites of multiple recontextualizations and resignifications (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 1992). This live performance of dialogic song on the national radio involves multiple levels of “production” and “reception,” as singers interact with, appropriate, and recontextualize each others’ words. They do this within the formal patterns of music from recorded hit songs within a nationalist (though culturally intimate and marginalized) genre, and their performances are broadcast live on national radio. Listeners, then, may listen attentively and write words in their notebooks for later use in other dohori songs or even political speeches; hear the music in the background as they do other work without paying attention to the words; think about the implications of this genre, with these words, in this context; and engage in myriad other ways; of course many did not listen at all. My ethnography here has concentrated on the level of production/reception that lies in the singers’ performed dialog and its relations with the history of the musical genre and the politics of lyrical imagery and tropes. Instead of focusing on what the individual singers may have meant to say, or on their individual political projects, I have discussed the interacting fields of signification surrounding what they did say, and the musical and lyrical settings for how they said it.

It may be at the level of genre that this competition was the most radical, bringing live, improvised dohori onto Radio Nepal for a political competition, and thus implying that it was not only worthy of inhabiting the national airwaves, but also a worthy medium for political discourse. Most dohori artists saw both of these implications as a victory for their profession, and connected this victory to the new Maoist leadership of the Communications Ministry as a case that illustrated the success of the common people in gaining control of the main state organ of national representation. In her ethnography of Tanzanian musical nationalism under changing state structures, Askew calls for us to reconsider theories of top-down nationalism in light of cases where those less privileged have used the power available to them to change the courses of nationalist representation and practices (2002: 12). I think that dohori artists were justified in viewing this competition as one of those cases, as live dohori performance remains a less-privileged genre, performed by less-privileged people, despite its centrality to the national imaginary. Both of these aspects become advantages in this performance and broadcast. The world of dohori encompasses state and wealthy capitalist actors and the poorest villagers, remaining rooted in populist practices and imaginaries

(associated most with live performance) even as it has become big business (associated most with the recording industry). It connects the rural subaltern with the political center not just metaphorically in song, but through circulating recordings and radio broadcasts that not only interpellate but also present themselves to their listeners to be critiqued, appropriated, reshaped, and reoriented.

It is useful to look at dohori – politics, love songs, and all – as a practice that brings multiple political and intimate logics into dialogic interaction, which can lead to new formations and assemblages of power. This competition made such new formations possible through juxtaposing different political perspectives in various artists' improvised couplets with love-song refrains on the national radio, in a live broadcast from inside Singha Durbar, the seat of the democratic state. It performatively linked Maoist rhetoric and cultural production with the central state apparatus, to which it had been running parallel and in opposition for so many years. It did so in the context of commemorating Loktantra Diwas, remembering the nineteen-day movement against autocratic monarchical rule in which the Maoists and the mainstream political parties had worked together toward a common goal that changed the course of Nepali history. In the tenuous political climate of 2007, this competition was one effort to performatively re-organize the components of Nepal's national imaginary, this time to include the Maoists and exclude the monarchy from the center of state power. The dialogic nature of dohori song brought out some of the political tensions that as yet remain unresolved, but in juxtaposing the languages of Maoist songs, other leftist songs, love songs, and poetic renderings of the everyday, this competition began to create a common public space for previously polarized political discourses, and discourses that had perhaps never even shared a space. The structures of feeling associated with dohori song gave this space a decidedly rural and populist feel, one that brought musical imagery of a national unity based in the sounds of the rural hills together with the violent political struggles that had occurred in the land the beats and melodies brought to mind. And, bringing this culturally intimate genre to the heart of the "New Nepal's" national radio sent the message that voices like these, at once marginal and central to the dominant national imaginary, might now be conceived of as truly central to its political public sphere as well. The multiplicity of voices heard here illustrate a partial success at enacting Radio Nepal's newly articulated mission to be the "inclusive voice of New Nepal." Even though they did not verbally articulate a definition of democracy for others to follow, they succeeded in demonstrating the coexistence of

multiple viewpoints, multiple voices, and the potential for interaction among them, in the dialogic space they created through dohori song.

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