This article explores issues related to the symbolism of power and the power of images in Nepal, a country situated on the periphery of the area of Indian cultural influence. The scenography enacted during the late Malla period (17th–18th) in Kathmandu Valley ceremonies clearly reveals that ancient Nepalese kingship could not simply be reduced to warfare, domestic political matters, and disputed successions. It was rather based on a symbolic system of representation that was regularly re-enacted in the course of suitable selected rituals. During these events, the king appeared mainly as a pious figure, responsible for the welfare and prosperity of the kingdom. The semiotics of power during the period of Rana absolutism (1846–1951) reinforced another set of ideas: Kings and Rana Prime Ministers were widely represented by photos, paintings and sculptures in a warrior secular posture. These images, influenced by Western patterns, induced a new topography of power and were consistent with a much more ‘heterogenetic’ model of state. Lastly, the iconoclastic violence towards the statues of Shah Kings by Maoist activists in 2007 echoes similar stances that have emerged during other national revolutions. This phenomenon reveals some measure of continuity with the preceding period, as well as important signs of rupture.

The recent decapitation of the statues of Shah Kings by Maoist activists throughout Nepal during the 2007 national movement (Andolan II) against the autocratic policy of King Gyanendra Shah raises interesting issues related to the symbolism of power and the power of images. How is this iconoclastic violence to be interpreted in a country usually presented to the Western imagination as a sort of Shangri-la, a peaceful heaven anchored around immemorial traditions? More generally, what meanings were attached in the past to the display of images of royalty and ministers in public...
places? These are the two questions I wish to answer in this article. In other words, this work is concerned with the semiotics of power: the way rituals and ceremonies were related to power in the pre-modern period, and how they are challenged today. More particularly, I will focus on the kings’ images and symbols that are put on display. What are the authorities seeking in displaying these images to their subjects? To what special political ends were their powers directed? With what kind of substitutes have Marxist-Leninist activists proposed to replace them in the recent period? To date, these issues have not been addressed in a comprehensive and global manner. The present essay is one part of an effort to help turn this tide of neglect and to carry out a preliminary exploration of the subject. Political understandings in Nepal, as everywhere, were and are mediated through symbols and spectacles. This is done in a manner that makes perceptions particularly salient and compelling (Kertzer 1988). Bearing this in mind, I contend that royal images and ceremonies are closely related. Taken together, they can be seen as a constructed performance displaying signs of authority and delivering a visual message. My emphasis will be on the ceremonies of power, the social content of urban symbols, the cultural dimension of the state, and a contextualized anthropology of art, with parallels in South Asia and beyond.

I will adopt a historical perspective. Firstly, I will deal with the late medieval Malla period (seventeenth-eighteenth centuries) within the highly Sanskritized and urbanized Kathmandu Valley, located in central Nepal. Secondly, I will consider the Rana period (1846–1951), a hundred years of despotic regime starting a few decades after the unification of Nepal under the aegis of the Shah dynasty. Finally, I will address the post-Rana period and the latest events from 1996 onward, i.e. the beginning of the Maoist revolt, and the progressive shift from monarchy to republic. I am particularly interested in the continuities and the ruptures between these three periods. Sociologically, what sorts of changes have brought about the shift from small quarrelsome city-kingdoms to a more or less pacified large state at the close of the nineteenth century? To what extent do Maoist revolutionaries radically introduce innovations in their work on collective symbols and their propagandistic images? Here history will be revisited in anthropological terms to provide a better understanding of the politics of images and ceremonies at different periods. This approach will also shed some light on the way history itself is portrayed.¹

¹. With some exceptions, which are duly indicated, the dates following the name of a King or a Prime Minister are regnal dates or the dates of terms in office. Nepali and Newari
The Malla dynasty ruled over the Nepal Valley, as it was called at that time, from the thirteenth century until 1768–9, a date that marked the conquest of the Valley by Prithivi Narayan Shah, a prince belonging to the distinct royal house of Gorkha located in present-day western Nepal. The Nepal Valley (= the Kathmandu Valley), in Nepali नेपाल देश, was a small bowl-shaped basin surrounded by hills on all sides, situated in present-day central Nepal. Mallas were Hindu kings of mixed origins, partly Indian, partly local, claiming a Kṣatriya status. They ruled over a hybrid population that spoke Newari (or नेवार bhāy), a Tibeto-Burmese language. This population started to be known and to refer to itself by the ethnonym of Newars (Newāhpīṃ) from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Their members practised Hinduism and Mahāyāna Buddhism, predominantly of the Vajrayāna school, with syncretistic traits between the two religions. The list of Malla sovereigns is made up of three different lines that reigned successively on the throne. The last and longest-lasting of these descent groups was the one founded in the fourteenth century by Jayasthiti Malla (1372–95), a prince who came from the kingdom of Tirhut (now Mithila) in northern India, just next to the Nepalese border. During the later period (seventeenth-eighteenth centuries), the Valley was divided between three small cousin kingdoms, each with its own capital: Kathmandu (Yeṃ in Newari), Bhaktapur (Khwope) and Lalitpur (Yela).

Royal rituals performed at that period are not well documented by contemporary sources. We have a number of inscriptions and other written documents dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, but none of them gives a detailed description of the rituals in which the king physically took part. It is known, however, that sovereigns were crowned according to Hindu rituals, either in the palace of their respective capital cities, or in Pashupatinath, in the centre of the Valley, a religious site devoted to the cult of a state Shaiva deity taking the form of the ‘sovereign of animals’. Coronation ceremonies do not seem to have been observed by the public at large, though ritually speaking they were fundamental: they transformed an ordinary mortal person into a celestial monarch viewed as an incarnation of

words appear in italics. I wish to thank Chiara Letizia, Bernadette Vasseux, Anuj Rimal, Rajendra Pradhan, Bernadette Sellers, Xavier Cucchi, Davide Torriand, and David Phelps, for their help with this paper. Needless to say, the responsibility for flaws and shortcomings in the text remains solely mine.
Vishnu, the god of preservation, symbolizing manifold aspects of the royal function. There is also scanty information on the initiation ceremony and the marriage of the Crown Prince. These rituals of royalty seem to have remained predominantly private affairs. The royal Malla ‘cousin’ families of the other two kingdoms were nevertheless invited to these occasions. By contrast, kings’ funerals were great events, embodying an extensive public dimension. It is reported in the *Padmagiri* chronicles, composed a few decades after the conquest of the Valley, that since the time of King Jayashthiti Malla all Newar castes had been compelled to participate in the royal funeral procession, playing their own musical instruments. They were instructed to precede the ruler’s bier on the way to Pashupatinath, situated on the banks of the Bagmati River, where the sovereigns were cremated (Hasrat 1970, 55). Hence almost the whole of the Nepal Valley society actively participated in this highly theatrical ceremony. This ritual thus represented a kind of microcosm of society, a consensual image of the realm, epitomizing the kingdom’s social order. It reinforced caste hierarchy, with the king and his Brahmans at its head. It emphasized the central role of the king in local society, and stressed his responsibility as far as the prosperity of his subjects was concerned.²

Local festivals, particularly the three main ones (*mū jātrā* in Newari) performed in each capital at distinct times of the religious calendar, also possessed an obvious royal dimension, highlighting in many ways the religious representations associated with Malla kingship. They are of particular importance to our subject since they conveyed numerous visual images of the kings. These ceremonies included the Bisket Jātrā, performed in the former kingdom of Bhaktapur, at the beginning of the month of Baisak (April-May), the Matsyendranāth festival (*Bũgadyah*), which extended over four months from Caitra to Bhadau (August–September), and finally the Indra Jātrā (or *Yenyāḥ*), carried out in Kathmandu between the months of Bhadra and Asvin, at the end of the rainy season. The sources from which these periodic ceremonies may be reconstructed include written documents from the Malla period (inscriptions, *thyāsaphū*, local chronicles) as well as the first Western descriptions of the country, in particular reports by William Kirkpatrick (1811) and Francis Buchanan Hamilton (1819), two East India Company emissaries sent to the Himalayan kingdom at the end of the eighteenth and at the start of the nineteenth century. The manner in which they are celebrated today is also of primary importance. Some changes have

². See Toffin (2007, 340) for further discussion of this ritual and its historical authenticity.
occurred over the last two centuries, but these festivals have survived and are still performed today with little alteration over the years. The new Shah dynasty has preserved them, as specific Newar customs, and even incorporated them, at least Indra Jātrā and Mastyendranāth Jātrā, into the new religious order constructed by the conquering dynasty.

Each of these collective ceremonies, in which the whole population of the kingdom, rural and urban, and nearly all castes, high or low, actively participated, bears a strong local character. They were inscribed in the religious landscape of the particular kingdom in which they were carried out and were dedicated to its main and most powerful local deities. Significantly, they were called deś jātrā (dey yāh in Newari), ‘the festival of the place’, of the locality. They lasted for several days and included a number of figures from the Hindu and the Buddhist pantheons. They were mainly centred around processions of gods and goddesses, carried in a long palanquin or in wooden carts with four solid wheels pulled by ropes. These protective and patron deities were carried all over the city and worshipped by the local population with rice, vermillion, food offerings and music. A number of animal sacrifices (buffalo, goat, chicken and duck) were offered to them. According to the chronicles, all these ceremonies were founded by Malla kings for the prosperity and the protection of their kingdoms. One of the sovereign’s main duties was to perform these rituals. Kingship itself is often compared in Hindu classical texts to an endless sacrifice. A specific association, guthi, linked to the royal palace, and consequently called läykū guthi (from läykū, ‘palace’), was in charge of managing the main rituals. These guthi were placed under the authority of the Brahman or Tantric Karmacarya priests in charge of the royal cults. During the Indra Jātrā festival of Kathmandu the procession started from the king’s palace, located in the centre of the city. It ended at this very same place after circumambulating the entire city. In the two other festivals, the ceremonies enacted a similar symbolic representation of space based on a cosmocentric model, a maṇḍala, a widespread pattern in South and South-East Asia. The rituals mentioned therefore transformed these capitals into sacred centres, analogous to the heavenly cities of the divinities, and thus again and again publicly exalted the royal function. They were clearly rituals of royalty.

The king was not only viewed as the main founder and the organizer of the festival, its main sacrificer, yajamāna, according to the old sacrificical scheme, pervasive in the celebrations, but he also actively participated

3. As in all local festivals. Cf. Toffin (1982) for the significance of this sacrificical model in important local Newar festivals.
in the rituals. He attended them, visited the temples associated with the festival, worshipped the deities presiding over the destiny of his capital and offered sacrifices to them. The leftovers from the offerings, prasād, made to the main tutelary deities were presented to the king. He himself sometimes took part in the procession behind the deity’s cart, carrying his sword (khaḍga) in his right hand. On other occasions, he was represented symbolically by this very sword, the symbol of his mighty and tutelary goddess, or by a horse, another royal symbol and image. From end to end, the king appears not only as a warrior, a Kṣatriya, but also as an agent through whom order and well-being are continuously regenerated. He was assimilated to the gods, simultaneously transcending the mundane social order and guaranteeing its security and fertility. The foundational myth of the Matsyendranāth Jātrā, for instance, specifies the king as a rain-maker. And this aspect also prevails in the Indra Jātrā.

By and large, these ceremonies combined two different and notewor-thy aspects: a festive one, marked by a visit to one’s family, entertainment and rejoicing, social interaction, a large amount of (meat) eating, indulging in alcohol, and diversion from the daily routine and rhythms; and a much more formal, ritual one, consisting in a long series of rites arranged in a succession of sequences. Interestingly enough, the show offered to the eye and ear possessed an obvious theatrical and spectacular aspect. Processions of gods, animal sacrifices, musical bands, masked dances, and religious theatre were displayed to a public, of both men and women, who gathered in great numbers to watch them. A Newari expression, jātrā swa vanegu, ‘to go to see the festival’, highlights this spectacular, visual dimension. It is particularly used by married daughters, who used to revisit their natal homes on these occasions. People used to comment at length on the aesthetic qualities of the events and took great pride in the celebrations performed in their localities. As was suggested by Paul Veyne when speaking of Greek and Roman religion, such rituals were saturated with aesthetics: ‘Ceremony was the major art of these societies’ (1988, 14). In Nepal as in ancient Greece, a process of the aestheticizing of the liturgy was at work. The visual effects of these pageants were designed to call forth emotions and instil a sense of beauty in the minds of the participants.

All things considered, the model sketched by C. Geertz (1980) for the Hindu pre-modern state of Bali applies fairly well to these Newar medieval kingdoms. In Nepal as in Bali, the Malla states interfered little in the life of their subjects. With the exception of war, which always remained a kingly affair, the court’s activity mainly took the form of religion, and in particular of rituals. As is revealed in local chronicles, vaṃśāvalī, the language of
power and the language of rites overlapped significantly (Toffin 1993). The two codes were built on the same notions and vocabulary. In the Kathmandu Valley, the king’s power was to a great extent based on complex and prestigious ritual scenarios, like the Newar local pageants referred to above, displaying to everybody their respective places in society and in the hierarchy. On these occasions, the urban landscape became a theatre in itself. Kings frequently remodelled or reordered these ceremonies, according to their own political needs, their subjects’ demands and the exigencies of the deities worshipped. The conflicts and rivalry between the kingdoms took on ritualized forms, as was explained above. It was not only a question of legitimizing the king, but also it was the kingdom’s own identity that was at stake: ‘The state cult […] was an argument, made over and over again in the insistent vocabulary of ritual, that worldly status has a cosmic base, that hierarchy is the governing principle of the universe’ (Geertz 1980, 102).

The metaphor of theatre upon which the American anthropologist’s model of the Balinese state is constructed has been rightly criticized. Even when limited to rituals in a restricted sense, this notion presupposes a distance between image and reality, a fictive ingredient that probably did not exist that clearly in Newar (and Balinese) royal ceremonies. Their spectators were in fact at the same time devotees fulfilling a religious obligation. Furthermore, the links between local political turmoil — the struggles within the royal family on the one hand, and external relations on the other — and the whole historical framework need to be further scrutinized. However, on the whole, the dramaturgical analogy is accurate: the boundaries between theatre and rituals were more fluid in these pre-modern societies than today. There was no strict separation between ‘participatory’ (directed mainly to the performers and their fellows) and ‘presentational’ (performed on stage for an external audience) performances, to use a pair of concepts introduced by Andriy Nahachewsky (1995).

It is worth considering other kings’ images, in particular statues representing the sovereigns that were exhibited in public places. Three of these gilt statues still exist, one in each of the former Malla capitals. All of them are placed on the top of stone pillars standing in front of the royal palace, and more to the point facing the temple of the Taleju goddess, the tutelary Tantric goddess of the Kathmandu Valley’s Malla dynasties, who was imported from India in the fourteenth century. In Kathmandu, the statue stands in front of the temple of Degutale, the king’s lineage deity. The first bronze statue, surmounting a splendid capital of carved stone (Slusser 1982 ii, fig. 239), was erected on Kathmandu’s Darbar Square in 1670. It represents Pratap Malla, king of Kathmandu between 1641 and 1674. He is in
the company of two of his favourite queens and a number of sons. All are represented in a kneeling position, with their hands joined in the sign of adoration, *namaskāra mudrā*. A few years later, in 1693, the king of Lalitpur Yoganarendra Malla (1684–1705) erected another pillar with a statue of himself on the Darbar Square of his royal city. He is surrounded by two other statues, much smaller in size, with his wife on his left side, and his son on his right. The last votive column, much shorter than the two previous ones, was raised in Bhaktapur, the third capital, probably by Jaya Ranajit Malla, in the memory of his father, Bhupatindra Malla (1692–1722). This pillar bears a statue of Bhupatindra on a square throne, *gaddī*, decorated with four lions, one in each corner (fig. 1). His shield and sword are arranged at his side. The throne is laid on a stone-carved lotus and a Nāga serpent. There is a story about the statue raised by Jaya Ranajit Malla (though some sources speak of Bhupatindra himself). This king sought to equal or outdo the column in Kathmandu, but had to seek help from that city for his undertaking. The king of Kathmandu duly dispatched craftsmen, but secretly instructed them to break the pillar. This they did; but, in response to the rival king’s appeals for help, they also skilfully repaired the shattered pillar. And in doing so, they are alleged to have earned a noble recompense from both kings (Slusser 1982, vol. 1, 207). This anecdote sheds light on the emulation and rivalry that arose among the Three Kingdoms in the fields of art and religion.

These three gilt portrait images had been cast more or less in the imitation of each other, just as the Taleju temples of Kathmandu and Lalitpur within the precincts of their royal palaces were constructed as replicas of the original one in Bhaktapur. The statues are made of golden bronze and represent the king in a seated position, his two hands joined in a gesture of adoration and respect toward his personal goddess, from whom much of his power is said to be derived (Toffin 1993). In Lalitpur, a snake emerges from behind the head of the sovereign and serves as a canopy to protect the king. Elsewhere a gilt parasol, *chātā*, decorated with *Ficus* leaves, is raised over his head. These Malla kings are invariably portrayed with a moustache and a towering turban. It seems that the workers employed to erect these pedestals were Manandhar oil-pressers, a Newar caste called

4. The statue of Pratap Malla riding an elephant is also worth mentioning. It is located on the southern bank of the Rani Pokhari rectangular pond, at the northern end of the Tundikhel parade ground, Kathmandu. Pratap Malla built this artificial lake in 1667 to console his wife over the death of their son who had been trampled by an elephant. The statue, in stone, dated from the same year. It faces a Shaivite temple built in the middle of the pond.
upon for the raising of wooden poles during important religious festivals. It was even recommended that the Kathmandu pillar should be oiled on Mahāṣṭamī (during the Dasain festival every autumn). Noticeably, these portrait images are erected so high up that they cannot properly be seen in any detail by the people. They primarily highlight a private relationship between the king and his tutelary goddess.

These sculptures were part of an outstanding urban landscape common to the three sister towns of the Valley. This landscape was focused around the royal palace (lāykū), which was built in the centre of the city. Associated temples devoted to Vaishnava and Shaivaite divinities were clustered around a large square surrounding the palace. The magnificence conveyed by these monuments enhanced the centrality and the sacredness of the king. Remarkably enough, these votive pillars recall the pillars surmounted by statues of Garuḍa [Vishnu’s vehicle] that are to be found in front of various Vaishnava temples throughout the Kathmandu Valley. These pillars, dating from the Licchavi period (fifth-eighth centuries), are topped by gilt (or stone) statues of Garuḍa genuflecting, his hands together as if in prayer. Pal (1970, 118–20) has suggested that some ancient stone Licchavi Garuḍa sculptures portrayed local kings, who had commissioned these anthropomorphic images. This is particularly the case with the Garuḍa located in the Changu Narayan sacred complex, with his firm lips, moustache, sensitive nose and open eyes. This statue strikingly resembles the portrait of a royal donor in a reverential attitude. Since early medieval times, the sovereign was regarded as an incarnation of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇ. What I want to imply is that common ideas were circulating from one type of pillar to another. Clear links between kings and gods were consequently established.

These representations clearly illustrate a major aspect of the royal function in the Kathmandu Valley during medieval times. Hindu Malla kings were not imagined as being above the gods, reigning in some magnificent and all-powerful attitude. They are depicted in a pious posture, humbly paying respect to their tutelary goddesses. The sovereign is first of all a devotee, publicly acknowledging his inferiority to the gods. His power over his subjects is to a large extent based on this devout attitude. His ability to overcome his enemy, to avoid epidemics and other calamities, and to maintain the prosperity of his kingdom are mainly derived from the gods and

5. From comparison with the European monarchy, see the seminal study by J.M. Apostolidès (1981) on the spectacles, ceremonies and royal architecture as displayed by Louis XIV in the seventeenth century.
the daily cult performed in their honour. Such a cultural trait, which was common at that time (and before) in princely India, is further corroborated in religious paintings in which Malla kings are represented. Unlike statues, Newar cloth paintings (paubhā) were not for public display. They were kept in sacred places, and eventually in the royal palace. One of the nicest paubhā images, of great significance for our subject, represents the king of Kathmandu Pratap Malla and his youngest son Cakravartendra Malla just below their Taleju temple in Kathmandu’s old palace (Vergati 2005, 149). The son is being weighed on a balance and his corresponding weight in gold (or silver) and precious stones is offered to the goddess Taleju. This type of gift, quite common during Malla rule, was called tulā dāna, ‘the gift of the balance’.

The court, ministers and priests are assembled all around to watch the ceremony, a central one in royal ideology. By virtue of his sovereign status, the king is a gift-giver par excellence, the sustainer of religious life and a builder of temples. In this painting, dated AD 1643, King Pratap Malla is portrayed in a praying attitude. He wears a beard and a moustache. His turban, cloths and ornaments indicate a Mughal influence from North India (Vergati 2005, 156). A number of other royal painted portraits are recorded in books or catalogues devoted to the Newar art of that period. In a couple of paintings reproduced in vol. 2 of Mary Slusser’s Nepal Mandala (photos 67 and 68: a banner and a manuscript cover) Pratap and Srinivas Malla (1661–84), for instance, are respectively depicted at prayer and worshipping the god Rāto Matsyendranāth, the protective god of the kingdom of Lalitpur.

**The Theatre of Power during the Rana Period**

In 1846, Jang Bahadur Kunwar, a senior army officer at the Shah court, and a member of an old Gorkhali family of Khas extraction, seized power with his six brothers, after the elimination of their rivals in a bloodbath known as the Kot Massacre (kotparba in Nepali). He downgraded the Shah king to a purely honorific status and founded a hereditary military aristocracy that exercised power until 1951, somewhat like the shoguns.

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6. Similar donations were also made during the Rana period. For instance, Maharaja Chandra Shamsher once celebrated a suvarṇa tulā dāna, i.e. a gift of gold corresponding to his weight. The money collected was distributed to the poor and destitute (Landon 1976 [1928] ii, 173). See also Sever (1993, 346) regarding Juddha Shamsher.
7. Khas was the former name, which has now become derogatory, for Chetri, the equivalent of Kṣatriya.
Japan during the eighteenth century. Shah kings were merely the puppets of this familial oligarchy. On 5 May 1849, the Kunwar brothers obtained from the king the right to be called Rana, and were therefore recognized as the equals of the royal family in terms of caste. This opened the way for a series of marital alliances between the Ranas and the Shah dynasty. Jang’s sons and daughters were married to King Surendra’s children. Intermarriage between the two families continued beyond the fall of the Ranas, an argument often given today by activists who want to get rid of the Shah family, as the Ranas were overthrown in 1951. For them, the two families are one and the same. Interestingly enough, the Rana clan started claiming descent from a cadet branch of the ruling house of Mewar in Rajasthan. This prestigious Thakuri descent was invented so that the members of the group could claim full royal status.

The Ranas governed in an absolutist manner. Their regime was of an oligarchic and militaristic type. The highly anglicized nobility were living in unbelievable luxury behind the walls of their palaces, while the greater part of the population barely managed to survive on subsistence mountain agriculture and animal husbandry. The Ranas invested and made fortunes in India and other foreign countries while almost completely ignoring their own nation (Liechty 1997, 41). A number of Nepalese were forced to migrate to India in order to earn money to pay the taxes collected by the Rana government. The court and the people were two entirely different entities. For all these reasons, today their regime has an extremely bad reputation. It is seen as a dark age, a period of tyranny, censorship, isolation, and stagnation. Yet, noticeably, the Ranas preserved Nepal’s independence from the East India Company. From a South Asian perspective, the Ranas were nothing other than a princely Hindu family of native rulers, much like the various native Hindu and Muslim princes of India, exercising autocratic power or the like. Their many fancy palaces copied from European styles to some extent resemble those of the princely states of India (for instance: Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh). Indeed the Ranas and the Shahs maintained close relations with most of these petty Indian rulers, especially those of Rajasthan and Gwalior. But unlike these Indian native princes, the Ranas were the rulers of an independent nation.

Two opposing and somewhat complementary cultural trends can be identified in the Rana regime. On the one hand, these rulers were highly westernized in their lifestyle, and sometimes even in their thinking. In 1850, Jang Bahadur, accompanied by two of his brothers, became the first mahārāja of the Indian subcontinent to undertake a trip to England, and then to France. The two countries fascinated Jang and his companions.
These travellers compared Paris and London to the heavenly paradise of Kailasa. Jang even seriously thought of resigning and definitively settling in Europe. A second journey to England was undertaken in 1875. But it was interrupted in Bombay owing to a riding accident in which Jang was injured. In many respects the journey made by Chandra Shamsher (1901–29) — one of Jang Bahadur’s nephews — to England, France and Italy from April to August 1908 was also important. From the 1850s onwards, the political aristocracy introduced many elements of European civilization in their court, not only in the field of commodities, art and architecture, but also in terms of its military and judicial aspects. They were famous for their anglicized habits and taste for European consumer goods. The Rana government lent effective support to British rule on the subcontinent, and did not hesitate to send Nepalese troops to India during the 1848 mutiny to help to repress the Sepoy Rebellion. In the same way, during the First World War, Chandra Shamsher massively expanded Nepalese recruitment into the Gurkha regiment of the Indian Army and committed much of Nepal’s own army to the Allied cause. Various contacts with the British aristocracy and the king’s family at big-game hunting sessions in the Tarai strengthened relations between Nepal and the United Kingdom. Interestingly enough, a twenty-one-gun salute was fired in honour of the English Queen’s birthday during much of the period of Rana rule.

On the other hand, the Ranas continued to adhere to a strongly traditionalist Hinduism and were much concerned about upholding Rajput ideals. They admired the urban civilization of the West, its armies and its cities, but religiously speaking, they still considered Europeans as mlecchas, pagans, barbarians, not distinguishable in status from the Muslims, Musalmāns. Time-consuming rites of purification were required after contact with beef-eating Europeans and for anyone returning from outside the Hindu world. Besides, it has been remarked that, behind their grand façades and their glass-lined neo-classical reception halls (baitthak), the Ranas lived in much smaller rooms in an indigenous way (Liechty 1997, 47). Their private apartments (at least some of them) displayed the low ceilings and doorways, step-ladders, and trapdoors characteristic of most native houses (Oldfield 1974 [1880], 106–7). Moreover, if European goods were in great demand, foreigners were forbidden to enter into the Himalayan kingdom,

8. It must be noted that the developing taste for European goods and styles antedated the Rana rule by some decades. Bhimsen Thapa (born in 1775, died in 1839) played an extremely important role in this respect.
or only allowed in in extremely restricted numbers. The seclusion of the country was legitimized on the grounds of the purity of the realm.

Besides their titles of Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of Nepal (‘Field Marshal’), Jang and his brothers received from King Suren-dra Shah on 6 August 1856 the right to hold royal titles and sovereignty over Kaski and Lamjung, two historic regions of central Nepal that for a long time had had matrimonial relations with the Gorkha kings and with which the Shah dynasty had been closely associated. A distinction was made between the titles of the two families: the Shahs were called Śrī Pāṅc (five) Mahārājādhirāja (or Sarkār), ‘five times illustrious ruler of rulers’, while the Rana elite were only entitled to Śrī Tin Mahārāja (or Sarkār), ‘three times illustrious ruler’, and were therefore seen as inferior in quality: theoretically, the Rana autocrats were thus subordinated to the Shah kings. This difference in number was inscribed on the helmet (or crown), mukuta, decorated with bird of paradise feathers, which was worn on all official occasions. The front part of the Shahs’ helmet was made of five circular metallic plaques decorated with pearls, large diamonds and rubies, while that of the Ranas was only of three plaques (Landon 1923 i, 238–9). Nonetheless, the Rana prime ministers were considered to be kings, mahārājas.

Most Rana festivities thus had a royal dimension. Fortunately, we do have information on some of these public ceremonies from the narratives of English officials based at the time in Kathmandu and from various publications containing old photographs of that period. The coronation and the inauguration of Ranas’ reigns were accompanied by massive state processions, called sindur jātrā, in both the new town and the old Newar city of Kathmandu. The Mahārāja’s elephant was followed by others carrying members of his family, the rāj gurus priests, and the most senior officials of the kingdom (Sever 1996, 313). Behind them marched several regiments of soldiers, dance troupes and bands. Dev Shamsher (1901) extended these triumphal processions to Lalitpur and Bhaktapur. After moving round the city the Prime Minister generally ordered public gambling. It is also known that all national festivals (Holī, Dasain, Tihār) and birth anniversaries were accompanied by military parades that exerted an irresistible attraction over ordinary folk. The Dasain (Daśehrā) Hindu festival in September-October included for example a review of troops of some importance. Here is the description given by Percy Brown (1989 [1916], 111–12) of this event at the beginning of the twentieth century:

The review is a very popular affair with the Gurkhas, as the martial spirit burns keenly within them, and upwards of ten thousand troops line up in
a hollow square on the great maidan or parade ground on the outskirts of the city of Kathmandu. The Prime Minister, the Commander-in-Chief, and all the officers of the state arrive mounted, and await the approach of the king, under the shade of a large and conspicuous tree in the centre of the field. His majesty motors from his palace on to the scene, and is greeted with great acclamation, several bands playing the Nepalese National Anthem [...]. The air is impregnated with much noise, smoke [from the artillery] and music, and a wholesome martial ardour thrills.

Life-cycle ceremonies, such as wedding ceremonies and male initiation bratabandha, seem to have been followed by the same kind of spectacle within Kathmandu. The public at large gazed at royal entries, military commemorations and princely marriages. Describing the marriage of the eldest daughter of King Surendra Shah (1847–81) and the eldest son of Jang Bahadur, Oldfield writes:

> The Maharaja, as the bride’s father, met the bridegroom at the Tundikhel and escorted him to the darbar [Shah’s palace]. The procession was a very gay one; regiments marching before and behind, bands playing; Niwars dancing, and fireworks and muskets being discharged in all directions. (1974 [1880], 408–9)

The same festivities occurred the next day for the return of the bride to the bridegroom’s paternal house [Tapathali]. At last, as on every similar occasion, a grand parade of all troops was held at the Tundikhel. The departure and return of the Prime Minister from a foreign country were also duly celebrated in a festive mood with the people’s participation. The troops were lined along the road and guards of honour were posted everywhere. Such participation, it may be supposed, was intended to strengthen the people’s ties to their mahārāja and to make them forget the misfortunes incurred by their poor conditions. 9 Besides, the Ranas participated, as Malla kings did in the past, in the old Newar festivals, such as the Matsyendrāth and Indra Jātrā, along with some officials of their court. They sometimes rode elephants on these occasions. They were the patrons of these ceremonies performed for the welfare of the Kathmandu valley and the whole king-

9. Even within the Rana nobility, the visual display of Rana grandeur was an important source of legitimacy. ‘Rana and their progeny had to assemble at Singha Darbar regularly to have darshan of their Maharaja’ (G. Rana 1986, 90).
dom. Incidentally, they thus became legitimized in their ruling functions in the eyes of the Newar autochthons.

Among the images representing the Nepalese nobility, photographic portraits are crucial. The first photographs taken inside Nepal in 1863 were by Clarence Taylor (1830–79), an assistant of the British resident (Heide 1977). Jang Bahadur and other members of the political elite were immediately willing to pose for him (Onta 1998, 188–9). These photos by C. Taylor are kept today in the Oriental and Indian Office Library Collections of the British Library, London. It seems that the first Nepalese photographer was Damber Shamsher J.B. Rana (1859–1922), a member of the political elite himself. He was taught photography most probably by Bourne and Shepherd, two Englishmen who opened a photography studio in Calcutta in the 1860s and visited Kathmandu in 1875. Besides, various foreigners visiting the country took photographs of the Kings, Prime Ministers and mahārānis in their palaces, in extravagant and composite dress compared to the simpler costume worn at the same period by Indian princes (Oliphant 1852, Chapter 27). Finally, the Chitrakar Newar caste of painters and mask-makers became photographers for more than a century, and are still partly associated with this tradition. They worked under the patronage of the Ranas and other officials.

Portraiture photographs (tasbir) of illustrious Rana figures, Mahārājas in uniform or full formal dress, the Rānis ornamented with rich jewellery, alone or with their numerous children, became very popular throughout the Rana period.¹⁰ This, however, was for private usage, mainly to record and memorialize the achievement of family members. Family portraits recounted the whole history of the Rana family and offered self-identification to the nobility, a powerful statement of the vitality shown in the extendedness of family life (Onta 1998, 195). Significantly enough, photo consumption was the prerogative of the ruling Ranas until at least 1910.

A number of statues (sālik) of Rana Prime Ministers and consorts were raised in various places in the Kathmandu Valley during Rana rule. At present I am unable to provide a complete inventory of these public sculptures. As a matter of fact, the history of such statues (gilt, or more generally made of bronze) is rather difficult to document: some images have been moved from one place to another during the course of history.

¹⁰ Likewise, expansive oil paintings were used to decorate the reception halls of their white mansions with their classical façades. Some of these paintings were done in England and France during Jang Bahadur’s belait yātrā to Europe (Wright 1966 [1877], 9). Later, others were produced locally by Chitrakar Newar painters.
while others have disappeared. In the following paragraphs, my purpose is to explore the meaning of these statues and highlight some of their significant features.

One of the first in this series seems to be the statue of Jang Bahadur, which was raised on a large base in the very middle of the Tundikhel:

> In the centre [of the Tundikhel] is a square stone building about thirty feet high, which was erected by Sir Jung Bahadur after his return from England in 1851. On the top, till lately, stood the figure of Sir Jung Bahadur, holding a sword in one hand and a scroll in the other; and at the four corners were hideous brazen griffins or dragons. (Wright 1966 [1877], 8)

Oldfield indicated that the statue was gilded and stands on ‘a peculiarly ugly stone column’ (1974 [1880], 108). It was inaugurated on 15 March 1853, with great show:

> There was a review of all the troops and artillery, with firing. On the following evening, there were general festivities, a grand display of fireworks; all the troops were feasted, as were a number of the common people; Niwar dancing, etc. (1974 [1880], 408)

Most of the Rana statues were inaugurated in the same manner, with great pomp and show. Our two main themes, images and ceremonies, are particularly closely intermingled here.

Another ancient statue of Jang Bahadur is worth mentioning. It is a gilt statue of the first Rana Prime Minister raised on a pillar, his hands raised in prayer, under a ceremonial umbrella. It is placed in front of a Nārāyaṇ temple, in Kalmochan, Tripureshwar (Kathmandu), and was erected by Jang Bahadur himself in 1874, during the period of King Surendra Bikram Shah Bahadur. This image differs greatly from the previous one. It is still very much in continuity with the earlier Malla style. Jang

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11. Besides public statues, Rana palaces were filled with westernized sculptures: ‘Bronze statuary was literally everywhere’ (G. Rana 1986, 90). Some French-style bronzes representing allegorized women were even set up in temples. Furthermore, Rana palaces contained a number of statues dedicated to illustrious members of their family.

12. According to J. Whelpton (1983, 83), it was first raised within the Tundikhel military parade ground and then placed on its present-day site towards the end of Jang’s lifetime. But I suspect that there is some confusion here: it is difficult to imagine such a pious statue on a military parade ground.
Bahadur is represented here as a devotee, wearing Nepalese (or Oriental) dress. He obviously needs the protection of the gods. Martial features are conspicuous by their absence.\footnote{According to Govinda Prasad Koirala, the main priest of the temple, the statue was erected to efface the sin Jang Bahadur committed during the Kot Massacre.}

The subsequent bronzes are of a totally different style and resemble the first one. More often than not, they represent the Rana figure in military uniform riding a horse. Three are worth mentioning: (1) the equestrian statue of Jang Bahadur in the Tundikhel that was inaugurated in 1884 by his brother Ranoodip Singh, through public subscription, with a military parade and in the presence of a great number of personalities (Rana et al. 2002, 112–13); (2) an equestrian statue of Ranoodip Singh Bahadur Rana (1877–85), brother of Jang Bahadur, nowadays to be found in another corner of the same Tundikhel; and (3) the statue of Bir Shamsher (1885–1901), Jang Bahadur’s nephew and adopted son, who succeeded his uncle Ranoodip Singh in 1885: Bir Shamsher is represented riding on horseback, at the eastern end of New Road, near New Road Gate (fig. 2). The images of these warriors come across as brave (bīr in Nepali); their weapons are dressed or otherwise aggressively evident. Most of them wear the royal head-dress mentioned above, with a bird of paradise feather stuck at the front.\footnote{According to Landon (1976 [1928] i, 233), these bird feathers were first introduced in Nepal by Mathbar Singh Thapa (1843–5), successor to Bhimsen Thapa, after his sojourn in the Punjab court.}

Among the numerous statues representing the Rana Premier Minister in a standing position, we may mention the one of Juddha Shamsher that can be found at the western end of New Road, near the Nepal Bank office, towards the old royal palace of Hanuman Dhoka. It was erected between 1936 and 1942, some years after the earthquake that affected the country and neighbouring areas in India on 5 January 1934. It commemorates the opening of ‘New Road’ (formerly called Juddha sadak) in the old city of Kathmandu after the sudden and massive destruction of houses. Interestingly enough, it was erected at the time of Juddha Shamsher himself. The statue is raised on a high stone pedestal.\footnote{Some statues, such as the one of Jang Bahadur Rana that formerly stood near Sundhara, Kathmandu, in front of the Central Post Office, have been removed to another place (mainly on to the Tundikhel ground) to facilitate the flow of traffic.} Two statues of Rana Prime Ministers’ wives or relatives are well-known statues. First, the bust of Chandrashamsher’s Mahārānī, which stands in front of the former Malla royal
palace in Lalitpur (fig. 3).\textsuperscript{16} It was erected after her death in February 1905. Second, the statue of Krishnakumari, the wife of Juddha Shamsher’s elder brother, bhāuju, in Jawalakhel, inside the zoo (fig. 4).\textsuperscript{17} The first of these bronze statues was formerly surrounded by a pond and a small garden, but these two elements have disappeared over the years.

Equestrian statues hint at the growing importance of the horse in the life of the Nepalese nobility from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and more precisely from the time of Bhimsen Thapa (1806–37). In 1831, the British Resident, B.H. Hodgson, wrote: ‘Within the last fifteen years, the gentry of Nepal have become universally horsemen’ (1972 ii, 111). These horses came from India. Interestingly enough, commoners were forbidden to ride them (Lietchy 1997, 41), probably to differentiate the Rana nobility from the common people. Likewise, the European military dress adopted in these images by the various commanders of the army confirms the extended use of such uniforms among Nepalese troops. The narrative of Jang Bahadur’s journey to England and France reveals the Ranas’ keen interest in martial dress, military parades, and everything related to arms and armies in the countries visited (Whelpton 1983).

These bronze statues of hereditary Prime Ministers and rulers in dazzling attire were made by local artists, probably Newars. They were raised on square or rectangular bases made of stone and/or plastered bricks. Apparently, the Ranas borrowed such a taste for bronze statues not only from England but also from the princely families in India. The Scindia Maharajas of Gwalior, with whom Chandra Shamsher maintained close ties (Landon 1976 [1928] ii, 89), as well as other Indian royal families, used to erect statues in equestrian style in memory of illustrious members of their family. In Nepal, these images were raised to enhance the martial stature of the Ranas, to confer a heroic attitude upon them. In the same manner as their large European-style stucco palaces, the Rana statues associated the local nobility with a non-vernacular world standing in sharp contrast to their indigenous culture. They convey the image of a separate world, organized internally by its own strict rules, too powerful to be seriously contested and fought against. They were part of a competitive and ostentatious mode of displaying signs of power. Spatially speaking, these statues were concentrated within the Kathmandu Valley.

\textsuperscript{16} I have no explanation to account for the statue’s specific location in Lalitpur.

\textsuperscript{17} Another statue, dedicated to the mother of Juddha Shamsher, in sitting position, is located within the precincts of the Jawalakhel zoo.
in three main areas: the Tundikhel parade ground, New Road (formerly Juddha Sadak) and the zoo. They delineated a new urban landscape, made up of palaces, arsenals, military cantonments, barracks, temples and a square tank (Rani Pokhari), a landscape that spread outside the congested old royal Newar cities within their former encircling walls.

It must be stressed that the shift from the former petty Malla city-kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley to the unified Nepalese state of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century represents a considerable change in scale and nature. The Ranas ruled over a nation and commanded the resources of an entire country, while the Mallas controlled only a very small stretch of land. To take just one example: the Singha Darbar compound, which was the residence of the Rana Prime Minister and the seat of the government from the time of Chandra Shamsher onwards, occupied a space that was half the size of the old town of Kathmandu (Liechty 1997, 51). In striking contrast, Malla palaces cover no more than 4 per cent of the entire old city.

Sociologically speaking, the distinction introduced by the two anthropologists Redfield and Singer in their seminal article on the ‘Cultural Role of the Cities’ (1954) opposing an orthogenetic to a heterogenetic city proved to be useful and can valuably be applied to larger units such as states. Newar Malla kingdoms were clearly of the first type. Like Athens and other ancient Greek cities, they developed from a long-established culture, where different traditions have merged within a small well-delineated territory. They were primarily organized around religious values and notions. The concept of the Kathmandu Valley as a bounded ritual realm, a cosmicized territory, was deeply entrenched in ceremonies and politics. Time was thought to be cyclical. The city and the country were integrated in a synergetic manner. By contrast, the Rana state was of the heterogenetic type. It was profoundly militaristic in nature and it developed from the confrontation between different cultures. In the Kathmandu Valley, such a confrontational pattern opposed two alien populations and cultures: on the one hand the Newar autochthons, on the other hand the Parbatiyas invaders from outside the area. The conquered and the conqueror lived side by side, with little contact between them. Rana palaces owe nothing to the traditional Newar architecture of the Kathmandu Valley: they were fashioned on the models of Buckingham Palace, the architecture of English nobility’s private country houses and the Chateau of Versailles. Their Western statues, photographs, palaces and parades were intended to leave a deep impression on visitors and commoners. In fact, the Rana authorities monopolised most outward signs of power, a significant fact in
a country where what is visual took precedence over the writing world. The two contrasting varieties of images of sovereigns and rulers, the Mallas and the Ranas — pious kings devoted to religion and art versus aggressive conquering warriors — must be seen in this light. In the first case, spectators and actors shared the same values and codes. During the Rana period, the spectators gazed at a show from which they were excluded.

**SHAH STATUES AND ICONOCLAST REVOLUTIONARIES**

In February 1951, four years after the departure of the British from South Asia and the Proclamation of the Independence of the Republic of India, the Nepalese Rana regime collapsed. King Tribhuvan Shah returned to Kathmandu from New Delhi, where he had taken refuge a few months earlier. The Shah dynasty was restored and a democratic political system, inspired more or less by India, was established. The Nepalese Congress, which had fought for a long time against the autocratic Ranas, was the foremost political party and the ruling political organization of the period. From that time onward, Nepal rapidly opened her door to the outside world and established international relations with a growing number of countries. Tourism was recognized as a highly profitable industry, and foreign aid started to play an important role in the development of the country.

In 1960, King Mahendra Bikram Shah, the son of Tribhuvan, put an end to democratic institutions. Political parties were banned, the liberty of expression suspended. A direct rule under the aegis of the king was established, and became known as the Panchayat system. The authorities presented it as a more indigenous mode of governance, more suited to the Nepalese spirit than Western democracy. It was in fact a disguised form of political absolutism and was modelled on similar authoritarian regimes in existence in Pakistan, Egypt and Indonesia. The royal palace remained the effective centre of government. In all important issues it was the king who mattered. The official propaganda spoke of ‘guided democracy’ under the auspices of His Majesty the King. Three decades latter, in the spring of 1990, a mass movement (Andolan I) brought to an end the partyless Panchayat system. It succeeded in forcing King Birendra to remove the ban on political parties and to promulgate a constitutional monarchy in which power was to be exercised by a parliament and sovereignty vested in the people. Democratic institutions were once more reinstated and the liberty of the press was restored.

What about the images in the urban landscape? In the mid-1960s, under King Mahendra’s rule, the government paid homage to the so-called martyrs, śahīd, of the anti-Rana fight. A Martyr’s Memorial was
built near Bhadrakali temple in Kathmandu (fig. 6) to commemorate four members of the Nepal Praja Parisad, Nepal’s first political party, secretly founded at Ombahal, Kathmandu, in the mid-1930s. These four persons were executed in January 1941 on the orders of Juddha Shamsher Rana (1932–45). Two were hanged, while the other two were shot. They included Dharma Bhakta Mathema (King Tribhuvan’s physical instructor), Shukra Raj Shastri, Dasrath Chand and Ganga Lal Shrestha. The busts of the four heroes are displayed on a concrete arch, and the fatherly statue of the late King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Sha Dev, in the middle, dominates them (fig. 7), since this king is held responsible for the fall of the much-hated Ranas. The memorial stands as a symbol of Rana tyranny and cruelty. It should be noticed that the notion of śahīd prevails in post-1951 Nepalese politics. It was to resurface in 1990 and 2000 during Āndolan I and II, with, here and there, new statues being erected.

But the bulk of the public statues dedicated during this period are standing sculptures, mostly made of stone or bronze, of Shah kings, namely Tribhuvan (1911–55), Mahendra (1955–72) and Birendra (1972–2001). The Panchayat era was a period of glorification of the Shah dynasty. The Shah kings were presented to the population as guides, fathers of the nation, those who brought together an extremely diverse country, unifying the tiny royal principalities that predated them. Their lineage, in direct line from Prithivi Narayan Shah, and before him from Drabya Shah (mid-sixteenth century), the founder of the dynasty, was associated with the most glorious and original past of the kingdom. Hindu Shah kingship itself was identified with the country. It represented its insightful identity and unity, while political parties were identified with private interests and therefore banned from public life. Successive Shah rulers are portrayed as a succession of brave and glorious beings devoted to their people. Emphasis was laid on the kingdom’s own model, its particularities, the Nepalese character in every sphere, even in political matters. Nationalism, especially in opposition to India, the powerful neighbour to the south, was a crucial element in this political ideology.

To express these ideas, life-sized statues were raised on Kathmandu’s main avenues and roundabouts (Durbar Marg, Tripureshvar, near the Dasrath National Stadium, etc.) and in the surrounding area (Banepa).

18. Birendra Shah’s statues were dedicated, after his tragic death in 2001, within the precinct of the royal palace, Kathmandu, as well as in other places. They were unveiled by his successor on the throne, Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah.
They were also set up in the other main towns in Nepal, in the Terai (Hetauda, Biratnagar) as well as in the hills (Pokhara, Shyangja). The country in its entirety was to be engaged by this message. The king is depicted in a hieratic posture, wearing Nepalese clothes and a specifically Nepalese cap (topi), the newly promoted national headdress. One of the most often commissioned artists for these works was Amar Chitrakar, a Newar born in Kel Tol, Kathmandu, in 1920, who died in 1999.

In the mean time, a statuary cult grew around the figure of Bhanubhakta (1814–68), a Nepalese nationalist icon, famous for his translation into the Nepali language of the Rāmāyaṇa epics. For many Nepalese, this poet became, after the conqueror Prithivi Narayan Shah, the cultural unifier of the country. This cult apparently originated in the Nepalese Diaspora settled in North Bengal. A first sculpture was dedicated in Darjeeling, at Chaurasta (an important road junction), in 1949, at the very end of the Rana rule in Nepal. It was commissioned by Balchandra Sharma for the Nepāli Sahitya Adhyayan Samiti, a literary association for the development of the Nepali language, and unveiled during a major ceremony in which students, personalities and a military band took part. The sculptor was an Englishman named Thomson who was in that area around 1947–8 (Onta 1999, 93). Funds were raised from various institutions and individuals. The statue was destroyed during the Gorkhaland movement in the Darjeeling area in August 1992 and was replaced by a nine-foot tall statue, under the directive of the Nepāli Sahitya Sammelan (1999, 90). A bust was inaugurated much later in Kalimpong, in July 1966 (fig. 8), on the 125th anniversary of the birth of the poet. In this second image, Bhanubhakta stands with a Rāmāyaṇa book in his hands and is depicted in traditional Nepalese dress. He is presented as the first, original, poet, ādikavi, of Nepal. The association that commissioned it is politically close to the Gorkhali-language activists in India who want to obtain their autonomy within the Indian Union and to be recognized an identity totally distinct from the people of Nepal.

The utilization of a literary figure, a poet or a novelist, to communicate a politico-cultural message, is common throughout the world. One only has to think of Voltaire, an eloquent spokesman for right and justice in eighteenth-century France, and Victor Hugo, himself a legend and a symbol of Republicanism. These two major French literary figures were propelled to the front of the scene by revolutionaries and republicans to fight against reactionary forces and pro-Catholic parties. Hugo’s funeral

19. The sculptors were S.C. Kar and B. Mitra.
in 1885 drew an estimated two million people and served as a political demonstration for sympathizers. Major spectacles were organized by the France Republican state around these two names in the course of the nineteenth century (Rearick 1977, 448). In many cases, these new heroes have become a more widely acceptable substitute for politicians.

In Nepal proper, as in the Darjeeling district, Bhanubhakta became a national icon, the symbol of the unity of all Nepalese people. In 1959, a bust (by Amar Chitrakar) was inaugurated by King Mahendra in front of Darbar High School. In the late 1960s, the Panchayat elite declared him a rāṣṭrīya bibhūti, ‘a national hero’. Bhanubhakta, it was said, had brought about the emotional unification of all Nepalese people through his rendering of Rāmāyaṇa in colloquial Nepali. A number of sculptures, mostly in stone, were disseminated in several places and cities during the period: the site of Prithivi Narayan Campus in Pokhara, Ghasi Kuwa, Dhading Besi, Dharan, Birgunj, Janakpur, etc. This commemorative stance continued during the post-Panchayat era. A statue was inaugurated in Balaju, Kathmandu, by the Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala in 1994. In 1999, another one (artist Balkrishna Tuladhar) was set up in the Higher Secondary School in Kalanki, Kathmandu, and in 2000 a bust of the ādikavi was unveiled at the Royal Nepal Academy. The objective was clearly to bring to life a national symbol and a common culture presently dominated by the higher Hindu castes (Bahun and Chetri) of the kingdom. Bhanubhakta’s birthday on 29 Asar (mid-July) has even become a national festival throughout Nepal. But today the recent upsurge of ethnic groups in various parts of the country, demanding recognition for their own languages, has challenged this trend.20

The Panchayat period was also the period when photo portraits of the King, along with those of the Queen, were widely displayed in all official buildings throughout the country. These portraits (tasbir) could also be seen in many private houses and shops. They received offerings of lamp and incense every morning, like the other deities of the house. This usage persisted throughout the post-Panchayat period. Interestingly enough, the Nepalese continued to hang King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya’s photographs on their walls even after the assassination of the royal couple in June 2001 in the Narayan Hiti palace, instead of photographs of the

20. Statues of two other literary icons were also erected during that period: the playwright Balkrishna Sama (e.g. in Kamaladi, Bhikchhu, Kathmandu), and the mahākavi, ‘the great poet’, Lakshmi Prasad Devkota (e.g. in Dilli Bazar, Kathmandu). The two statues mentioned were made by Amar Chitrakar.
new King Gyanendra, who they suspected of being responsible for the slaughter. Signs of power were thus diverted from their official use, and appropriated by common people as a sign of resistance against the new branch of the royal dynasty.

In early 1996, six years after the Andolan I movement that overthrew the Panchayat system and compelled King Birendra to restore democracy, the Maoist Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-M) launched what it called the ‘People’s War’, jan yuddha. Their members chose violence and fought against the royal security forces, the police first of all, and then, from 2002 onwards, both the police and the army. The structural cause of this insurgency was the widespread poverty in the country and the rising disparities between a small urban elite that profited from foreign aid and the majority of the people, whether in the Terai or in the hill-country hinterlands, who benefited little from the development of the country. This divide is a direct legacy of the Rana period. The incapacity of the major political parties to implement a substantive democracy in the country and to adopt the necessary reforms to scale down the disparities between Kathmandu and the country over the preceding years (1990–5) is among the circumstantial causes. The Maoists, maobadis, extended their influence over remarkably wider and wider rural areas of the country, as the state virtually collapsed in vast swathes of rural Nepal (where it has never been very influential). Broadly speaking, the degree of the central state’s neglect of a region was proportional to the extent of the Maoist presence there. The insurgents focused their attacks on small isolated district towns (Tansen, Panauti, etc.), airports or other infrastructures. Their ability to block, on several occasions, all the roads leading into Kathmandu, in spite of actions by the Royal Nepal Army, was a clear sign of their strength. Central government could not wipe out the revolutionary movement by military means. The civil war lasted for ten long years before an agreement was concluded between the left-wing political parties and the guerrillas.

What kind of policy did the Maoists instigate regarding religious and civic ceremonies? A major intervention they made in that field was the ban on the Dasain festival, the national festival of Nepal (equivalent to the Indian Daśehrā) and the largest public holiday in the country, occurring in September-October. These ten-day-long rituals were not merely a small-scale familial affair, with, in most houses, the making of animal sacrifices to the local altar of the goddess Durgā: they also implied public rites, celebrated at the local kot (military fort), which renewed a chain of hierarchy culminating at the top with the king in his palace in Kathmandu. One of the symbolic meanings behind the ceremonies was the legitimacy of the
hierarchical links within the family, as well as within the kingdom itself. Further, Dasain long served as a key component of Hindu national identity, despite the diverse ways it was (and still is) celebrated among the ethnic groups of Nepal. It was precisely for these reasons that the maobadis (and some ethnic organizations) decided to boycott the festivities, with admittedly little success (Hangen 2005).

In the areas they controlled, the insurgents representing the ‘people’s government’, jan sarkār, attempted to replace such religious festivals by collective civic ceremonies, cultural programmes and mass rallies, with a mass of red flags, banners, headbands, placards and Maoist slogans. Much work remains to be done on these modern secular festivals for a better understanding of their politics. But, so far as we know from films (taken in Kabrepanchok district in particular) and photos, these pageants conveyed the message of communion between the revolutionary party leaders (CPN-M) and the local ‘popular forces’. They unambiguously relied on traditional ethnic culture to enforce a political message. Yet these ceremonies and programmes were dissociated from the scheduled calendrical religious festivals, which were widely followed by everybody. They clearly legitimized the CPN-Maoist rule through the maintenance of a broad level of popular support or acquiescence. Religious images were replaced by portraits of the supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal, alias Prachanda, exhibited as the new icon of the world communist movement, after Lenin and Stalin.

In the same manner as in the mass demonstrations in the streets of major cities, what is shown here is the people itself, its strength, without any specific representation.

These ritualized celebrations were explicitly organized to inculcate Marxist-Leninist values. They sought to involve local people in the movement and to provide new activists devoted to the Maoist cause. Some appeared to be clearly artificial and were performed in a contrived manner, but further inquiries need to be carried out on this subject before making any generalized statement. In any case, the difficulty in organizing purely secular, non-religious pageantry in a country like Nepal, where religious values and rituals are deeply embedded in social life, has to be stressed. It must also be said that the puritan ethics of the maobadis in sexual matters, their condemnation of alcoholic drinks and animal sacrifice, do not suit the celebration of authentic, spontaneous festivals, as traditionally performed among the

ethnic minorities of the hills. Besides, the attitude of the Maoists toward religion is ambiguous. Most of them respect local customs, local beliefs and faith, but exhibit an anti-religious stance in many matters and advocate a separation between Church and State, like the one promulgated in France at the beginning of the twentieth century. They succeeded in imposing the idea of a secular state on other left-wing political parties that were traditionally much more favourably inclined toward a model of constitutional monarchy. In other words, they want to break with the older order of religion, even if this willingness is not fully accepted by the people. Even among Newar agriculturists in the Kathmandu valley, communist militants do not hold religious matters in contempt. Their political ideas fit in harmoniously with the regular practice of their traditional Hindu-Buddhist religion, *dharma*.

From 2003 till May 2007, Maoist cadres, activists of the Young Communist League (YCL), and sister organizations of Nepal’s Maoists, such as the All-Nepal National Independent Students’ Union-Revolutionary (ANNISU-R), carried out acts of vandalism in major towns around the country. Their first target was the statues and busts of the last three Shah kings: Tribhuvan (fig. 9), Mahendra and Birendra. One or two statues of Mahendra were blasted in 2003, but most of them were destroyed in February, April and May 2007, particularly during Āndolan II against King Gyanendra, the brother of the late King Birendra. In May of that year, about ten royal statues of Birendra and Mahendra were demolished in different parts of the country. Four statues were vandalized in Pokhara, and six in the capital. In Kathmandu, these included two statues of the late King Mahendra, one in Kalimati Chowk, and another one in an alley leading to Rasthra Bank Chowk; and three of Birendra, located in Ram Bazar, and Shanti Ban Batika. Interviewed by the press, the Maoist leader Madan Ale declared that ‘the vestiges of the Shah Kings are being removed as the country is heading toward a republic. There is no directive from the party to stop these acts. We have been acting in the spirit of the people’s wish’ (www.ekantipur.com May 15). Others statues were vandalized at the same period in Gulariya (Bardiya district), Biratnagar (Surkhet), Syangja, Hetauda, Banepa (Kabrepalanchok), Nepalgunj, etc.

Interestingly enough, the statues of the three kings were demolished without making any distinction between them as to how each was treated.

22. On this topic, see P. Ramirez (1997). During the civil war (1996–2006), Maoists insurgents protected most Hindu/Buddhist pilgrimages and sacred sites. They were only asking devotees to celebrate festivals and to make offerings with no alcohol or gambling. Some well-known Maoist leaders made donations to the temples of Ridi Ghat (personal information: Chiara Letizia).
Tribhuvan, who is seen by most historians as the father of democracy, the ruler who caused the downfall of the Rana regime in 1951, and Birendra, who notably hesitated in mobilizing the army against the Maoist insurgency and who was applauded as a great patriot by Maoist leaders after his death in 2001, were treated in the same manner as King Mahendra. Their statues, mostly erected during the preceding Panchayat period, were dismantled, felled or beheaded with lump hammers and ‘domestic weapons’. All of them were viewed as symbols of the royal family, which had to be expunged from the political landscape of the country and replaced by a secular republic. In addition, King Gyanendra’s photographs were often defiled and burned after his accession to the throne in 2001.

In the name of Loktantra, the Republican democracy sought by Maoists and other left-wing parties, even the life-sized bronze statue of Prithivi Narayan Shah (erected in January 1965), standing on a pillar in front of the main gate of the Singha Darbar, the present headquarters of the Government Secretariat and the seat of Nepal’s Parliament, was vandalized by demonstrators in 2006. The conqueror of the Kathmandu Valley in AD 1769 and the father of the unified kingdom of Nepal is represented in this image in battle-dress, the forefinger of his right hand pointing skywards, signifying, so popular interpretation says, that Nepal is one kingdom: ‘We all come together as one’. The remains were enveloped in a red shroud by the authorities for eight months. When they were uncovered in January 2007, the crown and the sword of the ruler were missing (fig. 5). Three years prior to that, in 2003, a similarly accoutred statue of Prithivi Narayan Shah (artist Amar Chitrakar) was blown up in Devighat, near Nuwakot, in the centre of a park set up to commemorate the place where the unifier of the country passed away in AD 1775. On 18 May 2007 another bust of the unifier of Nepal was demolished in Gorkha, his native town, by district-level Maoist leaders. The reality is that such symbols of the country’s unity are at present judged severely by the numerous Tibeto-Burmese-speaking ethnic minorities of the country. These groups had been forcibly hinduized by a succession of Shah rulers over time and had their territories conquered, just as the Newars’ ‘historic’ territory of the Kathmandu valley was annexed by the Gorkha armies in the eighteenth century. Today, the unitary, Kathmandu-centric, political ideology of Hindu caste, dominated as it is by the upper castes, is rejected, together with the image of Prithivi Narayan Shah.  

23. Several busts or statues of historical figures of the Congress and Communist party have been inaugurated during the post-1990 period. See for instance the bust of
This iconoclastic fury against key figures in Nepal’s history has been the subject of heated debates in the newspapers, on the Internet, and in every household. A number of people have judged it negatively. It brings to mind the iconoclast movement of the French Revolution, and can be viewed as a ritual simulacrum of the decapitation of the real king, such as actually occurred in France (involving both the king and his wife, Marie-Antoinette) in 1793. Even the Maoist leaders, for whom the French Revolution is a historical model, point to this similarity. Like the mao-badis, the French revolutionaries of the late eighteenth century wanted to rid the country of all reference to kingship and monarchical tradition. The first objective of the Maoist insurgents before making a ‘new Nepal’ is therefore the destruction of the old order and its symbols. It remains to be seen whether they will not in fact none the less perpetuate some aspects of the monarchical regime when actually ruling the country.

CONCLUSION

We have journeyed in the preceding pages over three different periods in Nepalese history (four if the Maoists are taken into consideration), each with its own characteristics and specific political regime. As we have seen, images, sculptures, and ceremonies were endowed with powerful visual representations and played a significant role in the symbolics of power and politics. However, they portrayed rulers and leaders differently during each of these periods. Newar Malla kings were represented as pious rulers, encompassed by a transcendent order that they had to obey and comply with. Their theatrical ceremonies had a cosmic significance and were performed primarily for the fulfilment of magico-religious ends. Rana Prime Ministers and Maharajas were depicted to spectators at large as noble warriors in a pure secular posture. Regular spectacles were organized to strengthen the ties between them and the ordinary people, two groups

Manmohan Adhikari, the first communist to be elected prime minister of Nepal in 1994, in Lalitpur. See also the busts of B.P. Koirala in Dang and K.P. Koirala in Biratagar (sculptor: Laya Mainali).

24. A number of salient convergences between the Panchayat royalist doctrine and the Nepalese communist ideology have rightly been noted. Until very recently, both shared a common nationalism in opposition to India and a similar emphasis on ‘Nepaliness’.

25. The April 2008 elections of members to the Constituent Assembly have recently given the Maoists a majority in Parliament. In the meantime, some Maoists have apparently converted to democracy.
belonging to totally different worlds. Shah kings were depicted as unifiers and fathers of the country, the symbol of its unity and ‘Nepaliness’. Maoist leaders, whose posters are placarded in the streets, on banners and in newspapers, are portrayed as heroic figures, military commanders guiding the people along the path to progress. Their pageants and programmes are aimed at linking the individual ever more tightly to the Maoist Communist Party. Indeed the Party and the interests of the people are identified.

Such differences are sociologically significant. Everywhere political and social life involves a fundamental ritual and symbolical aspect. But the dialectic between the different elements composing the social whole is not the same in every country and in all historical eras. The roles of religion and politics, as well as of other social agents, differ from one society to another. The historical perspective adopted in this essay is thus an explicit criticism of anthropologists who consider the role of images and spectacles to be ubiquitous in every type of society, and who compare, too swiftly in my mind, the ceremonies of pre-modern civilizations with the secular, ritual-like activities of the modern period in advanced Western countries. Significant dissimilarities oppose these two types of society. Even within each of these two large groups, it will be possible to distinguish further important sub-types with major differences in these matters. My contention is that the social context greatly determines the form and the effectiveness of the royal ceremonies and of their associated images. This enjoins caution in making swift generalizations about power, pomp and royal images.

Broadly speaking, images and ceremonies pertaining to pre-modern societies cannot be seen entirely as mere mystifications dissimulating personal strategies or as ideological representations justifying the pretensions of such and such a king to rule a country. In most parts of traditional Asia, kingship cannot be reduced to warfare, internal politics, challenged successions and disputes within the royal family. To represent power-holders as cynically manipulating ceremonies and royal images in order to fool a gullible population is a misrepresentation. Rituals may obviously serve political purposes, even in pre-industrial civilizations. They can be manipulated here and there by kings and their ministers. But they are encapsulated within a symbolic system of representation that is regularly enacted during appropriate and selected ceremonies. They belong to an encompassing world to which the authorities are themselves subjected. The rulers in fact believe in them just as much as, or more than, the ruled. Therefore displaying images and symbols of power was not only a way of asserting one’s authority, but also a means of conforming to a wider symbolic order.
Clifford Geertz obviously exaggerates when he claims that in the Hindu kingdom of Bali, ‘power served pomp, not pomp power’ (1980, 13), but he is right in stressing that in many pre-modern societies pomp and royal ceremonies can define the state, whose activities sometimes interfere little in the life of the people. In my own research on Nepal, I have demonstrated that Malla Nepalese royalty could not be understood without taking into account the numerous religious Hindu representations and symbols associated with the king (Toffin 1993). Similarly, I have stressed the penetration of religion at all levels of the social structure and its pervasiveness in Newar society. The Marxist dynamic model of divided societies deeply opposed in antagonistic and competing classes, each with its own contradictory interests, applies much more (though this can be contested on many points) in modern industrial societies. So do Marxist and neo-Marxist ideas concerning the political use of religion, the hegemonic role of the dominant culture (Antonio Gramsci), or the respective importance of cultural capital versus economic capital (Pierre Bourdieu). Within our industrialized contemporary world, there is a more fundamental opposition between social groups, while religion has been marginalized. The acts of belief and faith are more or less privatized. They can no longer play the role they enacted in former times. Moreover, now other (new) cultural values and agents, the media for instance, turn out to play an extremely important role, sometimes virtually to the point of replacing religion.

What clearly emerges from Nepalese history is that the passage from the Malla kingdoms to Rana rule entailed a radical shift in the relations between religion, politics, and image. During the Malla period, and possibly during the first decades of the nineteenth-century Shah dynasty, deities were transcendent agents who enabled rulers to achieve their function. The ruler pleased the deities with gifts so that they would bless the state in time of adversity. In contrast, throughout the Rana period, the state emerged as the transcendent force in society, though all the while legitimizing itself with reference to religion (Burghart 1996, 272). Images and rituals became much more instrumentalized by politics, and were used in the sovereign’s own interest. They were mobilized to effect the domination of the rulers over the country in a more direct and mechanical fashion than hitherto. Such a radical change opened the way to the post-1951 period, and modernity. The building of the nation under the guidance of Shah kings during the Panchayat period is another example of a policy deliberately designed for political aims, even if some traditional religious concepts, such as dharma, were sometimes referenced. The messianic and utopian message conveyed by Maoist ceremonies and images sought a similar hegemonic political effect.
My purpose in this essay has been to show that statues, images and ceremonies constitute a fertile ground for analysis by both historians and anthropologists. Societies cannot be seen to be entirely determined by economics and politics. Even in material affairs, values, images, symbols and rituals play a significant role: depending on the circumstances, they can determine societal and human behaviour, and/or be manipulated by groups and parties for political ends. Sometime, both factors simultaneously play a role. An ethnographical approach to such subjects yields a new understanding of the functioning of culture, religion and politics in various societies, historically situated in the past. At a time when traditional societies are rapidly disappearing and pre-modern civilizations are caught up in the pace of globalization, such perspectives on the societies of the past deserve our attention. They might open new paths for anthropological studies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


1. Gilt bronze statue of King Bhupatindra Malla (erected in the 17th century) on his pillar, in front of the royal palace of Bhaktapur (photo: G. Toffin).

2. Equestrian statue of Bir Shamsher (r. 1885–1901) erected during the Rana period at the eastern end of New Road. Today this statue has been displaced (courtesy P.P. Shrestha).


5. Statue of Prithivi Narayan Shah (erected in January 1965) in front of the Singha Darbar, Kathmandu. The photograph has been taken in 2008, after the vandalizing of the statue by demonstrators (photo: X. Cucchi).


7. Garlanded bust of King Tribhuvan; Martyr Memorial, Kathmandu (photo: X. Cucchi).

11. A Maoist girl is playing guitar, a Western musical instrument, at a Maoist festival (reproduced from Nepal News).


9. The beheaded statue of King Tribhuvan in Banepa (2007). Since then, the statue has been removed (photo: B. Vasseux).

10. Maoist leaders at a meeting, honoured with garlands of flowers. Prachanda, the supreme leader, is seated in the middle (reproduced from Nepal News).