Where Truth Happens: The Nepali House as Mandala

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Abstract: This article documents the existential possibility of the philosophical unreality of fundamental unity and diversity in the world. I explore this human experience through the cosmology and domestic architecture of Hindus in Nepal. In tantric Hinduism of Nepal, the presence of the worldly diversity of people and things as expressions of a cosmological unity is an existential experience and a fundamental moral issue. I describe how domestic space, configured in everyday activities as a mandala, is the medium through which these abstract cosmological ideas are given tangible form. Domestic mandalas are maps, microcosms and revelations of the truth of the cosmos. In them, everyday life becomes a dialectic of the practical and cosmological directed toward an ever-deepening tacit and embodied revelation of the ultimate unity and truth of the universe.

Keywords: cosmology, phenomenology, Nepal, architecture, mandala

Résumé : Cet article documente la possibilité existentielle de l'irréalité de l'unité fondamentale et de la diversité dans le monde. J'étudie cette expérience humaine par le biais de la cosmologie et de l'architecture domestique des Hindous du Népal. L'hindouisme tantrique népalais conçoit la présence de la diversité des personnes et des choses dans le monde comme l'expression de l'unité cosmologique. Il s'agit d'une expérience existentielle et d'une dimension morale fondamentale. Je décris la façon dont l'espace domestique, configuré comme un mandala dans les activités quotidiennes, est le moyen par lequel une forme tangible est attribuée à ces idées cosmologiques abstraites. Les mandalas domestiques sont des cartes, des microcosmes et des révélations sur la vérité du cosmos. Par eux, la vie quotidienne devient une dialectique entre le pratique et le cosmologique qui s'oriente vers une révélation tacite et incarnée, s'approfondissant sans cesse, de l'ultime unité et vérité de l'univers.

Mots-clés : cosmologie, phénoménologie, Népal, architecture, mandala

> The man who contents himself with the role of spectator of the world and of life and translates everything into a dialectic of abstract concepts exists indeed in one sense but not in another. For he wishes to understand everything and commits himself to nothing. The "existing individual," however, is the actor rather than the spectator. He commits himself and so gives form and direction to his life. [Copleston 1963:215]

Introduction

According to the philosopher Marvin Farber (1944, 1946): "experience (as well as logic) shows that" a monistic universe—"a complete unified reality"—is untenable; so too is its opposite, a world of a diversity of singularly unique events. If this is true logically and experientially, then the radically monistic Hindu universe—the truth of a fundamental unity that transcends time, space, cause and effect, and dissolves the diversity of all worldly phenomena—in which people of Nepal live is also untenable. My aim in this article is to show how and why in their everyday experience Nepali villagers do not find the truth of monism untenable. I do so through an account of how in their practical activities of preparing, cooking and eating rice, Nepali householders spatially configure their domestic compounds into mandalas, sacred diagrams that are simultaneously maps of the cosmos and machines for revealing the truth of cosmos as a fundamental unity. Living in domestic mandalas is productive of knowledge of the cosmos they represent.[1] Further, unlike the explicit and contemplative knowledge propounded by Farber about the truth of monism, the revelation of the fundamental unity of the cosmos produced in everyday activities is largely tacit and embodied. The approach taken in this particular case of Nepali domestic activities as simultaneously acts of building and revealing the cosmos is the general proposition that being-in-the-world is primarily praxical and embodied and that tacit knowledge enables, informs and enriches the actions

and knowledge upon which people explicitly focus their everyday lives.

The human condition is contingency: what it is to be human emerges primarily through our everyday, practical engagement with the world rather than through a contemplative reflection upon the world (Arendt 1958; Heidegger 1962; Jackson 1996). Accordingly, there is a difference between the lived immediacy of being-in-the-world and the distanced and reflexive accounts about being-in-the-world, between a pre-reflexive, pre-theoretical and praxical relation to the world—embodied actions of using and doing things in everyday life—and a contemplative and reflexive relation to the world. "The knowledge whereby one lives is not necessarily identical with the knowledge whereby one explains life" (Jackson 1996:2). Bourdieu makes a similar distinction: between the practical posture of people living-in-the-world with something "practical at stake" and the theoretical posture of the "external...non-practical, non-committed and non-involved" observer (or philosopher) who constructs theoretical models of living-in-the-world (Bourdieu 1990:60). He warns us not "to slip from the model of reality to the reality of the model" (1977:29): to assume that the model of reality constructed by the non-involved observer is the reality of the lifeworld of social actors about whom the model is constructed. From this perspective, Farber's analysis of the untenableness of monistic unity and chaotic diversity is epiphenomenal; it derives from the theoretical posture of the philosopher who constructs models of reality using formal logic and an abstract concept of "the world of experience" (1944:38). The possibility of monistic unity and its relation to chaotic diversity has a different look from the perspective of the lived experience of the Nepali people who do have something at stake in the world of everyday life: on the one hand, their pursuit of worldly prosperity; on the other hand and paradoxically, their renunciation of worldly prosperity.

Such being-in-the-world and the practical knowledge for doing so is largely embodied and tacit. "My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my 'symbolic' or 'objectifying' function" (Merleau-Ponty 1962:162). We are conscious with and through our bodies; we live in and constitute the world as embodied subjects. Further, this being-in and constituting the world as lived bodies is primordially spatial. Humans inhabit spaces through their body's constitutive consciousness and actions. We see, hear, feel and move in relation to things with our bodies and these things have a spatial relation to our bodies so that our inhabited space is constituted as bodily space. Through the lived body's consciousness and actions, we project ourselves into the world, embrace it, encompass it, and "*dwell*" (Heidegger 1975a:145) in it. We do not exist as conscious subjects without it; it does not exist for us without our consciousness. In this sense, body and the surrounding spatial environment are mutually constitutive; there is no body outside its sensuous relations to the world.

"We can know more than we can tell" (Polanyi 1966:4). Much of the knowledge by which we live our everyday lives is tacit. It cannot readily be put into words; activities can be meaningful even if the meaning is not able to be explained in words, explicit concepts or to be subject to reflection (Jackson 1966:34). "This sort of knowledge can be represented—made present—only through action, enactment, or performance" (Fabian 1990:6). This is not just the case that tacit knowledge is not formulated linguistically and not available for reflection, rather its effectiveness in enabling everyday life is founded on it not being explicit and linguistic (Polanyi 1966; Bloch 1998:11).

By synthesizing this praxical, embodied and tacit nature of everyday experience and knowledge, a pervading theme of this paper is the way Nepali villagers come to understand their paradoxical world of prosperity and its renunciation through the everyday concepts and actions of purity and impurity. More than being about the state of the physical body, purity and impurity affect the patterns of social relations and spatial movement of outsiders in the domestic mandala—what might be called spatial disciplines of the body. They are also the everyday registers through which abstract and largely unspoken cosmological themes of excessive attachment (impurity) to worldly diversity (the essence of prosperity) as well as the dissolution and detachment from it (purity) are experienced and known. This means that the activities of everyday domestic life and the places where they take place are multifaceted—corporeal, social and cosmological. As people move about their domestic compounds, they not only carry out everyday activities—entertaining guests, processing grain, preparing food, eating a meal—but also build their houses into mandalas, produce an embodied, tacit and revelatory knowledge of the enigma of attachment and renunciation and turn it into a "bodily hexis," that is, a permanent corporeal disposition of thinking and feeling (Bourdieu 1977:93-94).

How can I verify that Nepali villigers produce and gain this personal knowledge of the cosmos that I claim to be describing in this article? Again using Polanyi (1962), verification has the character of internal relations by which experience and knowledge themselves are constituted. In everyday life, the process of verification consists of demonstrating tacit knowledge through performing embodied practices, the same process through

which it was produced and acquired: we can only verify that we have acquired the tacit knowledge necessary to speak a language by speaking it (Gill 2000:56). So, too, my description of Nepali villagers' performance of embodied everyday domestic practices, and the explicit knowledge they verbalized among themselves and to me (another form of embodied practice) about them, is the mode of verification of their tacit knowledge of the cosmos that the ethnography itself transforms into explicit knowledge. As Polanyi writes:

> Yet personal knowledge in [our lifeworld] is not made but discovered, and as such it claims to establish contact with reality beyond the clues on which it relies. It commits us, passionately and far beyond our comprehension, to a vision of reality. Of this responsibility we cannot divest ourselves by setting up objective criteria of verifiability—or falsifiability, or testability, or what you will. For we live in it as in the garment of our own skin. [Polanyi 1962:64]

Kholagaun Chhetris

The people whose paradoxical lifeworlds I describe are members of a clan of high caste Chhetris living in the hamlet of Kholagaun in the village of Banaspati located in southern reaches of the Kathmandu Valley.[2] Kholagaun consists of approximately 100 household groups (*pariwār*). Two-thirds are members of a single agnatic Chhetri lineage. The other households are from a variety of castes: Brahmin, who are the highest ranking caste in the hamlet; other lineages of the next highest ranking caste, Chhetri; mid-ranking and touchable castes of Newar and Magar; and untouchable castes of Blacksmiths and Tailors. Kholagaun Chhetri household groups range in size from single person households (2), to nuclear households (39) and complex joint households (24). In most cases each household group occupies a single "house" (*ghar*) consisting of the house building and the compound that surrounds and encloses it.

In their rites and cosmological ideas, Chhetris of Kholagaun practice a syncretism of Vedic Hinduism and Tantrism characterized by three propositions about the world and the human condition. First, the danger of human being-in-the-world is excessive attachment to people and things of the world, the consequent illusion and loss of consciousness of the ultimate reality. This is the cause of humans being entrapped in the continual cycle of death and rebirth. Second, liberation and release from the cycle of death and rebirth is attainted through knowledge of the ultimate unity of the cosmos (*Brahma*) which transcends all worldly concepts of time, space and category. Third, there are the systematic equivalences between the macrocosm and the microcosm, that is, there are homologies and mystical connections between multiple planes of existence—the cosmos, the city as mesocosm (see Levy 1990), the temple and house in the *Vāstu Śāstras* (see Kramrisch 1976 and Chakarbarti 1999), the body and the mystic diagram, mandala.

This understanding of the human condition is founded upon a Hindu (tantric) cosmology that describes being-in-the-world as an enigmatic and paradoxical configuration of the diversity of human individuals and social groups on the one hand, and a transcendent unity on the other. Fundamental reality is an absolute unity that is a spaceless, timeless, causeless void. Juxtaposed to but derived from and encompassed by this ultimate cosmic unity is the ordered diversity of spaces, times, people, animals, natural forces and material things of the everyday world. The origin of this worldly diversity is described in the self-sacrifice of the primeval cosmic being, *Purusha*,[3] who embodies the fundamental unity of the cosmos. All that can and will exist is immanent in his body. His self-sacrifice is a creative act unleashing the diversity potential in his body and establishing the microcosmic–macrocosmic system of correlations between planes of existence. As a result of Purusha's sacrifice, all perceptible time and space, every different corporeal being and thing, and all the variety of natural energies and forces in the world are both distinct phenomena and an expression of the unified cosmos. To focus on the former is to experience reality as constituted only by the diversity of sensible worldly phenomena and to become attached to people and things through social and material relations (see Gray 1995). To understand such attachments as the goal of life is to be shrouded in ignorance, to be caught in the continual cycle of death and rebirth and to be consigned to a continual life-in-the-world of illusion. To focus on the latter is to experience the everyday world of diversity as ultimately an illusion that hides the fundamental unity of the cosmos; such enlightened knowledge leads humans to eschew the illusion of attachments and gain liberation or release from the round of death and rebirth.

Kholagaun Chhetris as Householders

The cosmological paradox of fundamental unity and epiphenomenal worldly diversity, asceticism and attachment, religious knowledge and illusion, liberation from and entrapment in the cycle of rebirth, also permeates the lifeworlds of Kholagaun Chhetris in the Hindu notion of the four stages of life through which high-caste people proceed. Together, they are cosmology iterated in the microcosmic form of the human life span.

The first stage is the *Brahmachārya*, the Life of the Celibate Student when a boy studies the religious texts under the guidance of a guru as a prelude to and a pre-condition for marriage and entering the Householder stage of life. Most Chhetri boys go through the Brahmachārya stage only as part of the rite of passage (*Bartaman*) in which they become adults. For women, the passage to adulthood and the Householder stage of life is the rite of marriage. The second stage is the *Grihastha*, the Life of the Householder, of life-*in*-the-world, fully and actively engaging with the diversity of people and things motivated by practical, everyday concerns. It includes marriage, raising children, living in a household and producing the material needs for its members, and worshipping the deities (see Gray 1995). The third stage is the *Vanaprasta*, the Forest Dweller, when, having discharged the duties of the Householder, a man and his wife retire to the forest where they devote themselves to meditation and the practice of austerities including chastity. All of the previous stages are a preparation for the final and most radical renunciation demanded of the final stage of life, the *Sanyāsin*, or Wandering Ascetic, when a person renounces all worldly desires, together with the social relations and attachments entailed by them.

All adult Kholagaun Chhetris consider themselves to be in the Householder stage. Both males and females experience a period of renunciation prior to marriage: for boys, it is the renunciation of the celibate Brahmachārya enacted during Bartaman; for girls, it is the analogous renunciatory celibacy of remaining a virgin until marriage. Kholagaun Chhetris told me that they could not remember anyone from the village who had become a Forest Dweller or a Wandering Ascetic. In effect, the four stages-of-life are reduced to a juxtaposition of two contrasting modes of being-in-the-world. One is the Householder, the ordinary person-in-the-world whose life is defined by moral duties (*dhārma*) that motivate actions and the aim of such action is to produce "practical" and beneficial results ("fruits") in this world. It is this action in and for the world that both produces and engages the diversity of people and material things which are the objects of one's attachments, desires and passions. But as a result of such worldly-oriented action and attachments, the Householder is caught in the continual round of birth-death-rebirth into the world. The other mode of being-in-the-world is the Renouncer, personified by the asceticism and detachment of the Brahmachārya, Vanaprasta and Sanyāsin. The goal of such detachment is to achieve liberation from the round of birth-death-rebirth and to realize the fundamental unity of one's self with all other selves and things.

To be a Householder, then, is to live in an enigmatic lifeworld that is at once practical and cosmological. As they engage in everyday domestic activities, Kholagaun Chhetris are at the same time fulfilling their sacred duties. Their Householder dharma is to live in and form attachments to the world; their aim is to prosper not just in the narrow sense of material wealth but also in the wider sense, captured by the Nepali word *samŕddhi*, of an abundance of those things that characterize the "good life": children, health, well-being and peaceful relations with oneself, other human beings and the deities. At the same time, they are enjoined to remain detached from these manifold worldly attachments, to resist enslavement by them (Madan 1987:3) in order to achieve liberation by seeing through the veil of illusion that conceals the fundamental unity of the cosmos. Their goal is to live a life characterized by the enigma of detached attachment or passionless passion.

Chhetri Houses

The house is the primary locus and focus of the Householder's life-in-the-world. Its architecture is another iteration of the enigmatic character of the human condition of the Householder. In Kholagaun, there are two types of houses usually consisting of two storeys. The type I call "traditional" (see Figures 1a and 1b) is built with sun-dried mud bricks, carved wooden window frames and doors, mud floors and tile or thatched roofs. Traditional houses generally have an open plan ground floor with four visible pillars forming a rectangle around a central pillar, a kitchen in far corner often behind a low wall to obstruct visibility from the doorway, and a worship room generally located on the second floor. The other type of house I call "contemporary" (see Figures 2a and 2b), indicating its more recent construction using concrete for wall construction with wooden window frames and doors. The main difference is that these newer houses have separate rooms rather than an open plan with the kitchen located in the room furthest from the main entrance or on an upper floor.[4]

Although they are distinguished by building materials and interior room layout, both types share four common architectural features. First, houses are built on rectangular sites surrounded by a low wall that defines the boundary of the domestic compound. They are located toward one edge of the site away from approaching public roads or paths, leaving space for a courtyard. This results in a configuration of nested domestic spaces—boundary, courtyard, verandah, main entrance and interior of the house (see Figures 1 and 2). Second, houses are oriented with the main entrance opening out onto the

Figure 1a: Traditional house

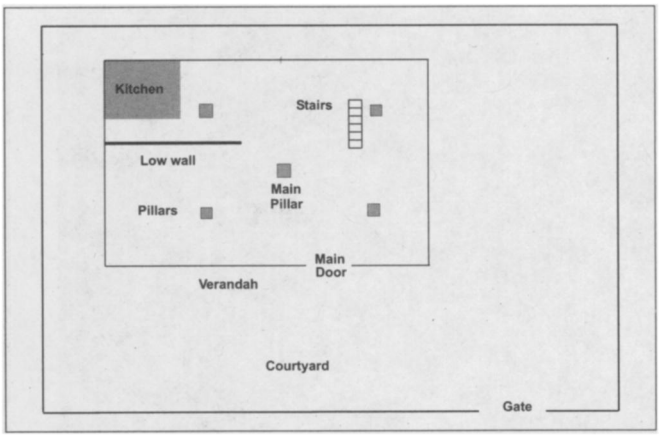


Figure 1b: Sketch plan of traditional house (ground floor)

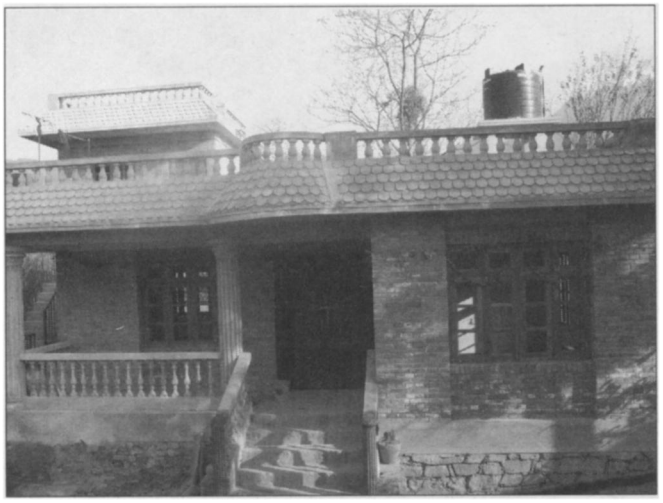


Figure 2a: Contemporary house

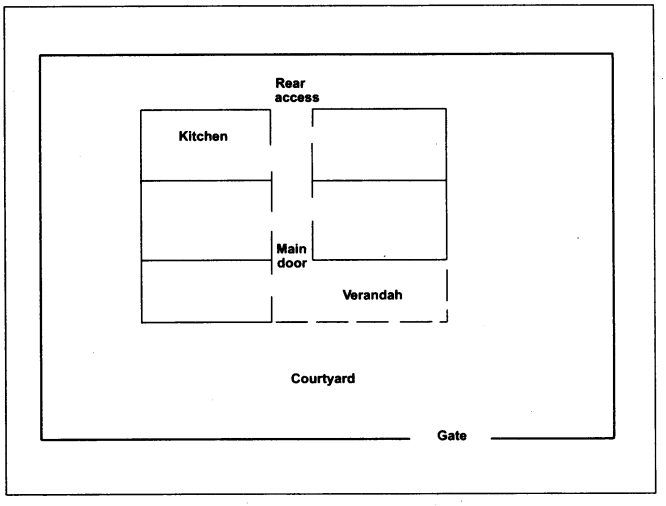
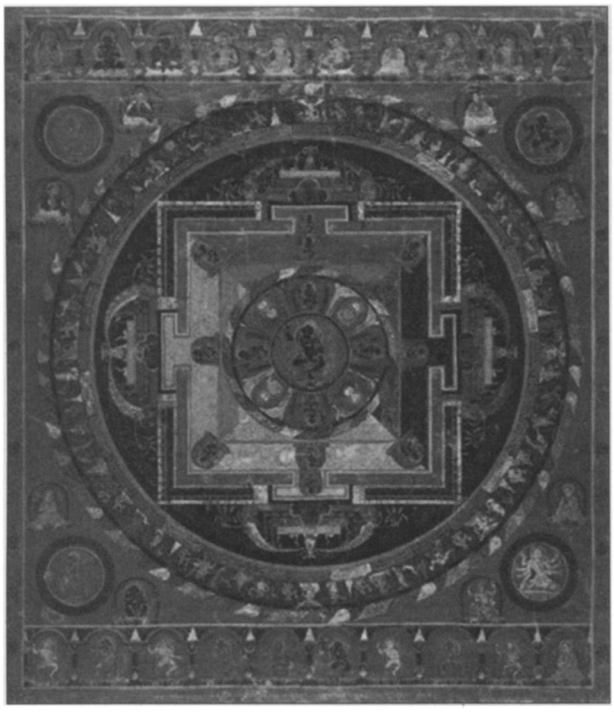


Figure 2b: Sketch plan of contemporary house (ground floor)

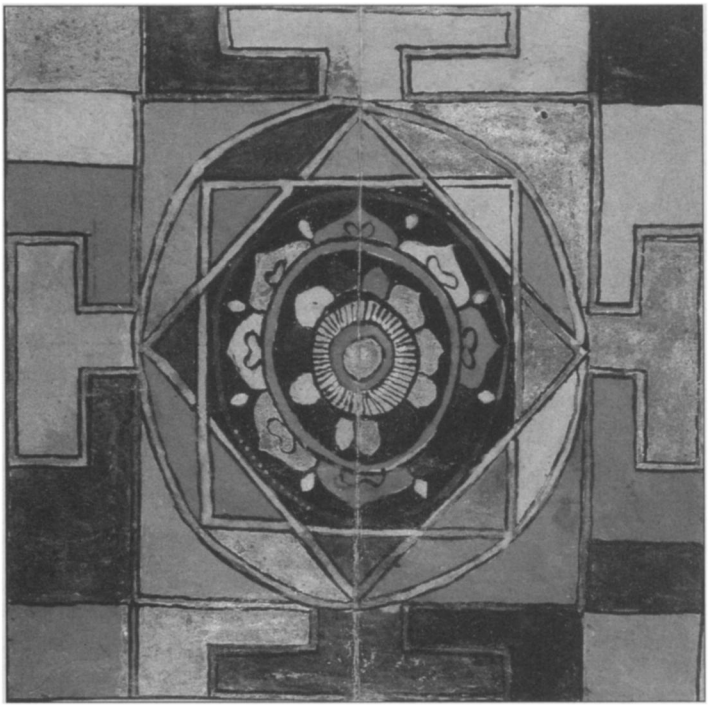
courtyard allowing household members a clear view of it and anyone who may be approaching the house from the public path or roadway. Courtyards are distinct spaces and one of their important architectural functions is mediating between the house and public thoroughfares outside the boundary of the house compound that are potentially dangerous places where impure people of lower castes, malign witches, malevolent ghosts and other spirits linger. Third, houses have a covered and raised verandah spanning the front of traditional houses and some portion of the front of contemporary houses; its location makes it another mediating space, now between the courtyard that is visible and the interior of the house that is not visible to those outside the compound. Finally, houses are in the spatial configuration of a mandala.

House as Mandala

A mandala is a mystic diagram. In Nepal, people use at least two terms, *mandala* and *yantra* to refer to drawings with cosmic significance.[5] Both are allegorical diagrams that represent the nature and order of the universe (see Figure 3). They are "map[s] of the cosmos...the whole universe in its essential plan" (Tucci 2001:23). Tucci's incisive description highlights three attributes of mandalas and yantras. First, their primary referent is the cosmos but each represents it in a different graphic mode: mandalas use pictures and icons to depict religious concepts and deities who in turn personify the primary bodies and natural forces of the universe as well as the qualities of humans; yantras use purely geometric designs—squares, circles, triangles and the point—whose shapes



Nairatma



Nepal, c. 18th century

Figure 3: Two forms of the mandala[6]

likewise stand for religious concepts, deities and the natural forces and human qualities they personify. Second, mandalas and yantras are maps of the cosmos and, as such, the *spatial* arrangement of the pictures and geometric elements in the composition depict important characteristics of the cosmos. Third, more than just an allegorical map of the cosmos, mandalas and yantras are microcosms of it. Whether composed of pictographic or geometric elements, they are revelatory of the fundamental unity of the cosmos as well as the normally hidden system of correlations between planes of existence immanent in that unity: the cosmos, the deities, the human world, and the body and psyche of the individual (Hopkins 1971:25; Tucci 2001:45); "knowledge of such mystical connections leads to power" (Gourdriaan 1979:57-58) and is a basis for ritual action and its efficacy (see Daryn 2002:164ff).

Despite their differences in representational form, mandalas and yantras share fundamental compositional design elements for expressing this cosmology and providing a "machine" (Zimmer 1972:141) for revelatory knowledge: as a whole they are oriented to the cardinal directions each of which is associated with a deity; they have a centre point (*bindhu*) surrounded by a concentric girdle—either circular or polygonic—of line(s) and space(s) that provide the dynamic quality of movement; and they have an outer boundary line enclosing a sacred space. This spatial configuration is constructed from three primary geometric elements: the square, the point and the circle, each representing a fundamental dimension of the cosmos.

The square is the perfect four-cornered polygon. In Hindu iconography, it is the geometric image of the space for terrestrial dwelling; it creates the spatial abode in-the-world for deities and humans. In the process of creation, the cardinal directions orienting the square and the terrestrial space it creates are the source of each other's existence. The four sides and the cardinal directions—east, south, west and north—are mutually constitutive; likewise the four corners and the intermediate directions—southeast, southwest, northwest and northeast. Each of the eight directions are associated with deities representing, reigning over and personifying particular aspects of the cosmos—the planets, natural forces, and human qualities. By focusing on these elements, we can abstract from the complex mandala a basic design configuration consisting of a four-sided, four-cornered polygon aligned with the cardinal directions surrounding a centre. In this configuration, the emphasis is on the terrestrial world as a space of human habitation created and defined by the sacred geography of the cardinal directions and their reigning deities. In this auspicious con-

figuration (see Figure 4), the mandala is a cosmological space for action in-the-world. The directions and their reigning deities have distinct qualities and meanings that organize terrestrial space into a template for orientating human action. Kholagaun Chhetris align their action in particular directions—either by physically performing it in a particular part of a structure or diagram or by bodily facing a particular direction during action—so that the nature of the action is compatible with the quality or characteristic of the direction toward which it is aligned. Such harmonious and auspicious alignment portends beneficent outcomes for the actions through which Kholagaun Chhetri Householders engage with and form attachments to the diversity of people, things and deities of the world in order to achieve a prosperous life-in-the-world.

Both the point and its central location in the diagram are a spatial rendering of the fundamental unity and truth of the cosmos in its un-manifested form before and after space, time and the diversity of beings and things of the world. Like Purusha, all is immanent in it; it is the point from which the world in all its diversity is created and it is the point into which all creation dissolves. Movement outward from the central point that forms a surrounding space is the force of creation and evolution of worldly diversity and the entrapment of attachment to it; movement inward toward the point is the force of dissolution and devolution of worldly diversity and liberation from its illusory power through knowledge of the fundamental unity.

The circle defines another type of space, a concentric zone around the all-embracing centre point without reference to the cardinal directions. The concentric zones do not immediately suggest the expanse of terrestrial space of human living but the space created by and for the diversity of people and things. Its orienting reference, then, is the centre point "as the universe in its un-manifested form" (Mookerjee and Khanna 1977:96), "as the principle from which all form and creation radiates" (Bühnemann 2003:41). The zone(s) marked out by concentric spaces around the point depict simultaneously the outward, expanding, centrifugal act of creating from the centre point the diversity of things and beings, as well as the space for them, and the inward, contracting, centripetal act of their dissolution into the centre point. By focusing on the point and surrounding concentric zone(s) elements, we can abstract another basic mandala design configuration consisting of concentric zones—whether circular or polygonic—around a point. In this revelatory configuration, the mandala is a guide for understanding the cosmos, whether achieved by meditation or action upon its form. In sensual and embodied contemplation, as the eye

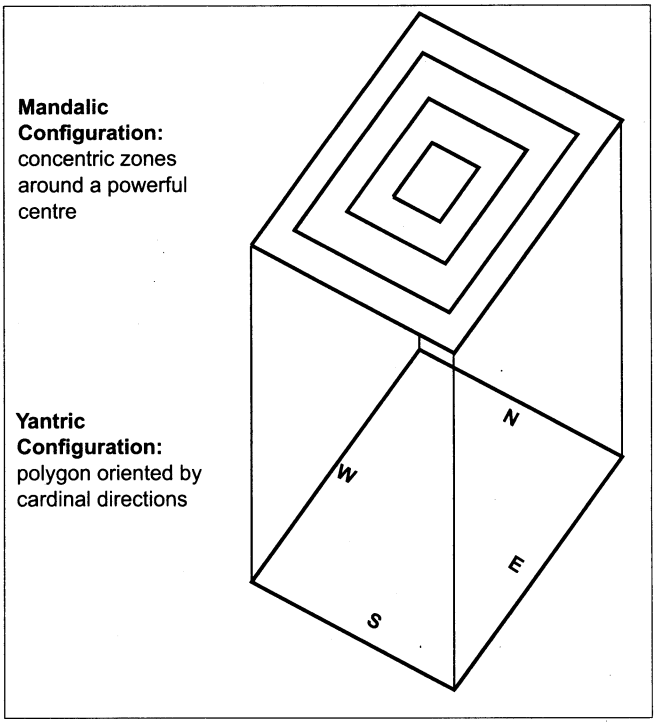


Figure 4: Two configurations of domestic space

fixes on the centre point and is drawn to move outward by the surrounding lines, the beholder experiences the unmanifested source, visualizes the creation of the diversity of people and things and feels the attachment to the world that traps humans in the round of death and rebirth. As the eye is pulled inward by the power of the point at the centre, the beholder experiences the obliteration of diversity, discovers the illusion of attachment to it and comes to understand the true nature of the universe as fundamentally a timeless and spaceless unity in which all forms of individual consciousness merge in the centre.

Intentional Construction of Auspicious Houses

As can be seen from the photos and sketch diagrams, Kholagaun Chhetri houses have the three characteristics of the auspicious configuration of the mandala: a four-sided polygon oriented to the cardinal directions with a materially or ritually established central pillar. Kholagaun Chhetris intentionally build this auspicious mandalic configuration into their houses through three interweaving processes of construction.[7] The first is the material construction of the house which has a number of stages: selecting the site, preparing the site, positioning the house on the site, laying the foundation and building the external structure and, finally, inhabiting the house. The second is linking these stages of material construction to the

flow of cosmic time so that they take place at auspicious times calculated by the household priest to be compatible with the horoscope of the owner. The third process is making the house an auspicious *place* for domestic activities, portending well-being and prosperity for the owner and his household group. This involves creating a harmonious spatial conjunction between the house and the space in which it is built, a space that is created in the act of building. Spatial auspiciousness entails ensuring compatibility and harmony between the physical structure and the spatial milieu in which the house is erected: during the process of selection of the site, worship is performed to the Deity of the Earth (*Bhumi Puja*); and, before the laying of the rectangular foundation, a "Foundation Ritual" (*Jug Puja*) is performed. In this rite, idols of deities associated with the cardinal directions are buried in the four corners and another in the centre of the rectangle. When the foundation is laid, these deities become part of the house structure itself and orient it auspiciously to the cardinal directions. In addition, rites are performed to neutralize evil or harmful presences from the land and the house itself.

This theme of auspiciousness is carried through into the spatial layout as well. Kholagaun Chhetris intentionally situate particular types of spaces auspiciously in relation to the cardinal directions.[8] The three most important are the main entrance, the worship room and the kitchen. The main entrance is, in most cases, oriented to the south for two reasons, at once practical and cosmological. First, it situates the courtyard so that it receives the warming sun during the cold winter months. Second, while the south is the inauspicious direction of the *Yama*, the deity associated with death, when entering the house, people are facing north, the auspicious direction of the deities, so that movement into the house towards the north portends the beneficence of the deities. The worship room should be in the northeast, the direction of the deity *Isān*, god of purity, knowledge and wisdom, which is the state, outcome and benefit of performing puja. In the majority of houses (66%) for which I have detailed room layout plans, the worship room is located in the northeast; in those houses in which the worship room is located in another quadrant of the house, the worship alter and idols are located in the northeast corner of the room itself. The kitchen with its cooking fire should be in the southeast, the direction of the deity Agni, the god of fire. However, in most Kholagaun Chhetri houses (72%), the kitchen is in the northern quadrant. This pattern makes sense in relation to the location of the main entrance in the southern quadrant: placing the kitchen in the northern quadrant of the ground floor means that it is the space or room farthest from the main entrance. When looked at according to the location relative to the main entrance, rather than aligned with a cardinal direction, almost all kitchens in traditional and modern houses are located far away from the main door either by being placed in the farthest corner or room of the ground floor or on an upper floor. In the next section I analyse how locating the kitchen far away from the main entrance in terms of physical distance is placing it culturally in the centre of the domestic mandala.

Conventional Construction of Revelatory Houses

Bourdieu developed the concept of "bodily hexis" (1977:93) to describe the way in which the knowledge and dispositions through which we conduct our everyday lives have not just a reflexive form in ideas and concepts that we may be able to verbalize but also a tacit form (see Polanyi 1962, 1966) in the gestures and movements of the body. This duality of the verbal–reflexive and tacit–corporeal characterizes the forms in which Kholagaun Chhetris experience cosmological ideas, build them into their houses, and their houses into mandalas. To paraphrase Bourdieu, "bodily hexis is [cosmology] realized, em-bodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" (1977:93-94). Bodily hexis entails moving in space and such motility creates culturally significant spaces. In the remainder of the paper, I describe how Kholagaun Chhetris create concentric spaces of inclusion and exclusion through the durable patterns of household activities and movement in their compounds (see Munn 2003). This creation is mediated by an ensemble of concepts and symbols that Kholagaun Chhetris constantly used to talk about purity and the dangers of impurity of lower caste people; these concepts, symbols and people transfigure the abstract cosmological concepts of diversity and unity, attachment and detachment, illusion and revelation, into everyday bodily practices of purity and impurity and activities of cooking and eating in the kitchen.

Purity and Impurity

For Kholagaun Chhetris, being Householders means that there are no more important media for living in the world than their bodies and the food they eat to sustain them. Purity (*chokho*) and impurity (*juthho*) are conditions of what Kholagaun Chhetris called the "physical" or "material" body (*bhautik sarir*) that people have because of and in order to live in the material world (*sansār*). Like Hindus throughout South Asia, they identify substances produced by the body—saliva, perspiration, urine, excrement, blood, semen and mucus—as the primary sources

of impurity as well as the products and signs of embodied life-in-the-Householder's-world. Eating is paradigmatic of actions that cause impurity. When people eat, the food they touch as well as the hand which conveys the food to their mouths become polluted with their own saliva. Likewise, defecating, urinating, sexual intercourse, menstruation, sleeping (during which time people perspire), and blowing one's nose are all everyday and necessary acts in which a person's own body becomes impure. These sources of impurity are all substances that flow from the inside to the outside of the body and the impurity they produce is the result of transgressing the body's boundary. This means that vital, life-maintaining, organic processes inherently "produce" impurity. Kholagaun Chhetris cannot avoid them as part of their physical being-in-the-world just as they cannot avoid the passions and attachments of their moral being-in-the-world as Householders. This parallel necessity of, on the one hand, corporeal life and the impurity it entails and, on the other hand, the dharma of the Householder and the attachments it entails suggests that impurity is the everyday bodily transfiguration of attachment, and by implication, that purity is the everyday bodily transfiguration of detachment.

Purity as Detachment

Purity is a state of perfection characterized by a completeness, wholeness and integrity that has not been corrupted by human action (see Madan 1987:58ff) or by breaching the boundary between inside and outside. Maintaining or restoring purity entails bodily deeds of detachment and asceticism. Bodily-produced impurity is personal and temporary. It is personal in the sense that only the individual whose body produces the impure substance necessarily becomes impure. It is temporary in the sense that a state of purity is easily restored by two kinds of activities—cleansing and abstinence. In cleansing, impurity is removed and the integrity of the body's boundary restored with running water that courses over the body and flows away. This is effective because water has the property of absorbing the quality of the object with which it comes into contact. For this reason, cleansing always involves water flowing over the impure part of the body taking the impurity it has absorbed away from the body and thereby re-establishing its wholeness by creating a separation from the organic substances which breached its boundary. The physical separation from polluting organic substances effected by bathing is a sensual practice of detachment from the corporeal life of the Householder and the worldly attachments it necessarily entails and from which it is impossible—like organic life itself—to abstain. By cleansing after coming into contact with impurity inevitably produced by the processes of the body, Kholagaun Chhetris perform and experience their detachment from these processes.

The other method of purification is ascetic practice, usually consisting of abstinence from eating and copulation, activities which produce impurity. Such abstinences involve avoidance or non-involvement with things of worldly enjoyment—good-tasting food and the physical pleasure of sexual intercourse. They are metonymic of a Householder's lifeworld and the necessary attachment to or passion for people and things—food, kinship relations and sexual relations. The purity achieved by abstinence from such passions and pleasures is another corporeal experience of detachment in the midst of the attachments of everyday life.

Impurity as Attachment

Impurity also has a permanent and collective form associated with castes whose members are affiliated through current or presumed historical practice with occupations that require contact with the impure substances or actions of others' bodies: Washermen with other people's sweat in the clothes they wash; Tailors with the skin of dead animals used in the drum they play at weddings; and Leatherworkers with the skin of dead animals in making shoes. In these castes, the occupation involves not just physical contact with pollution but also a permanent and excessive attachment to it in the sense that the activity is understood to have traditionally provided the means of subsistence. People engaging in these occupations embody such impurity and pass it on genealogically so that collectively the pollution defining them as a distinct caste group is part of their corporeal substance. Even if a particular person in one of these castes does not engage in the traditional occupation, Kholagaun Chhetris still insisted that they still embodied the collective impurity of the caste through genealogical transmission.

If the body is the source and locus of impurity as the everyday transfiguration of attachment, food and water are its main conductors. Caste groups in Banaspati are characterized and ranked as "caste groups from whom drinking water is accepted for consumption" and "caste groups from whom drinking water is not accepted for consumption." Within the former category there is a further hierarchized division between "castes from whom boiled rice is accepted for consumption" and "castes from whom boiled rice is not accepted for consumption."

Such an extended and elaborate ensemble of concepts and practices about the dangers of impurity transmitted through food and physical contact renders the prepara-

tions and consumption of food not just nutritionally essential but also socially sensitive and cosmologically significant. It is through the patterns of including and excluding impure people from the increasingly interior concentric zones of the domestic compound—courtyard, verandah, and kitchen—where rice is prepared and eaten, that Kholagaun Chhetris protect themselves and their food from the impurity of low caste people and, at the same time, map the cosmos onto their domestic compounds, building them into a mandala of concentric zones around the kitchen as the centre (see Figure 5).

Courtyard

The courtyard is the space most visible from outside the low boundary wall and most vulnerable to the impurity and dangers of impure people from outside the compound. It is the place where raw grains are dried or processed. When rice is harvested in autumn, it is threshed in the fields and brought to the house as paddy (*dhān*) to be dried in the sun before milling. Once milled to remove the chaff, rice (*chāmal*) is in the next stage of its transformation into food. After milling, the courtyard is the place where rice is winnowed to remove the remaining chaff. It is still considered raw because it is uncooked and it has not been subjected to human action corrupting the wholeness of the grains. It is in the process of cooking that the grains become vulnerable to the impurity of lower castes.

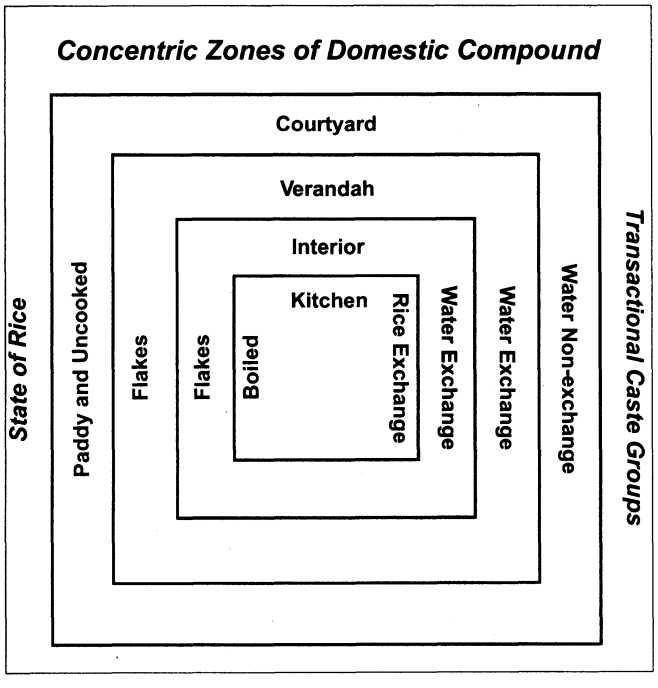


Figure 5: The domestic mandala in the concentric configuration

Because raw grain is immune from impurity, there are few, if any, protective spatial exclusions. The courtyard is the place where anyone is allowed to enter relatively freely. In this respect the courtyard is the only place where members of untouchable castes can enter. The reverse is also the case: Kholagaun Chhetris do not fear becoming impure by entering the courtyard of low caste people.

Verandah

The verandah mediates the visible courtyard and the invisible interior of the house. Since it runs across the front of the house which faces into the courtyard, it is, like the courtyard, visible from outside the boundary. But like the house interior, the verandah is also a raised area above the courtyard on the same level as the ground floor and it is covered by a roof. Its architecturally mediating character is matched by its use as a socially mediating space between the public courtyard and the more secluded house interior. In traditional houses, there is often a raised wooden platform at one end of the verandah that people use for sitting in the sun and entertaining guests accompanied by snacks; in modern houses, either chairs or a grass mat are brought out for host and guest. In terms of spatial inclusions and exclusions, the visitors and guests entertained by Kholagaun Chhetris on their verandahs are most often people of equivalent purity. They sometimes sit and talk with people of lower castes from whom they will accept water but snacks are not offered. People of untouchable castes (from whom they will not accept water) are usually not allowed on the verandah, particularly when snacks are being served.

These spatial inclusions and exclusions are imposed because the method of preparing the snacks makes them more susceptible than raw paddy and uncooked rice to impurity and danger. Snacks are prepared inside the house where, in the process of converting raw grain into an edible state, the food, the preparer and the cooking process are out of sight and touch of people in courtyard and on the verandah. The most common snack is tea served with a small metal bowl of rice flakes (raw milled rice that has been boiled, then roasted and finally pounded into rice flakes). Alternately, dry-popped maize, dry-roasted soybean or commercially made biscuits may be served with tea.

Because of their method of preparation, rice flakes and other snacks are susceptible to impurity, but less so then other forms of cooked food. When rice or other grains are cooked, they are placed in a medium—either water, oil or air (dry)—and heated over a fire rendering them porous, that is, the boundary of the grain becomes per-

meable and open to absorbing the qualities of the medium in which it is being cooked. The medium absorbs and conducts to the food the impurities of anyone who touches or sees the grain with evil intent during its transformation from raw to cooked. Different cooking media have different potentials for absorbing and conducting: water has the most, air the least and oil is in between. The snacks served on the verandah are doubly shielded. First, they are cooked inside the house out of touch of low caste people who might be in the courtyard. Second, they are cooked and served dry (*sukhā*) to guests without further cooking or preparation.

Compared to the courtyard, the verandah is more "interior." By this I am referring to the increasing need to protect the purity of food with spatial exclusions upon people from outside the household group because the snack served is cooked and more vulnerable to impurity and danger than the raw grains dried and winnowed in the courtyard.

Kitchen

Kholagaun Chhetris eat two main meals each day, usually consisting of lentil broth, a curry of vegetables or meat and rice cooked in water (*bhāt*). Water is the most transitive medium because it readily absorbs the character of any object with which it comes into contact. As a result, it can purify as well as pollute. In purificatory bathing, water flows over the object or person, absorbs the pollution and takes it away into the ground. Conversely, while it is boiling, rice sits in water which conducts the state of the cook to the permeable rice.

Because of food's openness to absorption, cooking and eating in the kitchen are dominated as much by an explicit concern with protecting the purity of the food, the people who eat it and the place where it is cooked and eaten as by the practical tasks of preparing food and consuming it (see Daryn 2002:30-31). The kitchen in traditional houses consists of an earthen stove in the corner of a raised earthen platform (see Figure 6). Women told me that mud is a very absorptive surface that is particularly prone to pollution from eating—bits of food made impure by saliva may fall on the ground—so they must sweep and seal the floor with a purifying mixture of cow dung and water after every meal. In some modern houses, where the kitchen is a separate room with floors of less or non-absorptive concrete, marble or other hard surfaces, the floor need only be washed with water after each meal to remove impurity.

The kitchen has the most exclusive spatial prohibitions. Only Brahmins and other Chhetris, the castes from whom they will accept cooked rice, were allowed to enter

Figure 6: Kitchen in a traditional house

Kholagaun Chhetri kitchens when meals were being prepared and eaten. People of the water-acceptable castes were allowed to enter the verandah during a meal; they were occasionally allowed to come just inside the main entrance to ask a question but they could not enter the kitchen. When food was not being prepared or eaten, people of water-acceptable castes could enter the kitchen, but I never saw this happen. Untouchables (water-unacceptable castes) could not even enter the house of a Kholagaun Chhetri without causing defilement of all living spaces, public and private. Thus whenever an Untouchable wanted to interact with a Kholagaun Chhetri, they had to remain in the courtyard and call out to the householder.

Compared with the courtyard and verandah, the kitchen is the most interior of domestic spaces. For Kholagaun Chhetris, it is the room where their food and their bodies are most vulnerable to impurity and danger so they do their utmost to ensure it is pure by locating it in the most inaccessible place, purifying it before and after eating and imposing the most exclusive spatial prohibitions on people entering it. Taken together, courtyard, verandah and kitchen form a concentric series of increasingly exclusive interior spaces where rice and the people eating it are increasingly vulnerable to impurity and danger, and where maintaining and protecting purity is increasingly important.

Everyday Practice, Cognitive Knowledge and Embodied Revelation

What I have tried to illustrate is that among Kholagaun Chhetris, the Hindu (tantric) concern with equivalences between various planes of existence means that the activities of everyday domestic life and the places where they take place are multifaceted—corporeal, social and cosmological. Eating nourishes the organic body, pollutes the

social person, and is an embodied experience of a Householder's attachment, illusion and the entrapments of life-in-the-world; washing after eating cleans the body, cleanses the social persona of impurity and is the embodied experience of detachment and renunciation so central to balancing the attachments of the Householder's life-in-the-world. Concomitantly, in carrying out these activities, Kholagaun Chhetris create multifaceted concentric spaces in their house—at once functional, social and cosmological—that form a mandala. Their houses likewise are multifaceted: they are places to live their daily lives, they are maps of the cosmos, and they are machines for revelatory knowledge.

Conclusion

I now end by returning to Heidegger to reflect upon Nepali domestic architecture by way of a contrived pun, "architechnē," that sees architecture as more than the making and manipulation of space for human use but also as a structure of revealing. In architechnē, the production and practical use of space for human dwelling is at the same time a presencing of its enframing truth.

In contriving the word architechnē, the prefix "archi" refers to the architect and the practice of architecture which "produces space" (Till 1969:9); "creates boundaries out of otherwise unbounded space" (Kent 1990:2); is "the thoughtful making of spaces" (Khan in Till 1969:9); "is integrally identified with human activity, experience and expression, for, in ordering space, [it] also orders human action" (Blier 1987:2); and, "involves not just the provision of shelter from the elements but the creation of social and symbolic space—a space which both mirrors and moulds the world view of its creators and inhabitants" (Waterson 1991:xv). In all these definitions of architecture, the central idea that the architect—whether professional, vernacular (see Rapoport 1969:2), indigenous (Waterson 1991:xv) or the architecture without architects (Rudofsky 1964)—makes space for human habitation. *Technē* is a Greek word that Heidegger points out is usually associated with the skills and activities of a craftsman in making something useful. However, for him the essence of technē is a bringing-forth (*poiesis*) into presence through the human use of skills and activities, something that is possible and concealed; it is a form of revealing; and revealing (*alētheia*) is the essence of truth:

> It [technē] reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us...Thus what is decisive in technē does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in the revealing...It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that technē is a bringing-forth. [Heidegger 1977:295]

For Heidegger, truth is not a set of propositions, statements or knowledge about the ultimate nature of the world and the people and things that exist within it. Instead the world is fundamentally a field of possibilities in which the existence and nature of phenomena—the people and things that exist for us—are not given directly to our consciousness. Phenomena have only possibilities for our experience of them; human thought and action bring forth certain of these possibilities to consciousness. Which possibilities are brought forth depends upon an historically and culturally specific whole or framework against, from and within which entities appear in consciousness. This enframing whole is usually tacit, consisting of "what is taken for granted by the humans who inhabit such a world" (Ihde 1979:105). From Heidegger's perspective, then, truth is a structure of revealing to consciousness certain of the world's possibilities and, by implication, of concealing other of the world's possibilities. Technē refers to human action which brings forth this structure of revealing and concealing. In this context of truth and technē, architecture may be thought of as a production and ordering of useful space for human habitation and architechnē as the bringing forth of inhabited space as a structure of revealing and concealing.

Kholagaun Chhetri domestic compounds are the result of architecture and architechnē. As architecture, they are configured by instrumental design and practical conduct both as auspicious spaces portending beneficent and prosperous outcomes from the everyday tasks of Householders to bear and raise children, to sustain themselves through productive activity and to worship the deities, and as increasingly pure and exclusive spaces to protect inhabitants from the impurity of lower caste people. These are the possibilities of the world that come forth into Kholagaun Chhetris' everyday consciousness as their lifeworld of the Householder. They appear in their consciousness against, from and within their cosmology of attachment and detachment, entrapment and liberation, illusion and revelation.

However, in Kholagaun Chhetri everyday engagement with domestic space, household members and household activities, the structure of revealing that is their cosmology is, paradoxically, obscured. "It disappears into usefulness" (Heidegger 1975b:46). Yet, as Heidegger's approach helps us to see, Kholagaun Chhetris come to know the structure of revealing that is their cosmos only through their everyday active engagement with and consciousness of the things of the world. This is what I was

trying to illustrate with the spatial distribution of activities surrounding the preparation and consumption of rice and the associated spatial prohibitions. The concentric space constructed by these activities and spatial prohibitions produce a tacit and embodied knowing of the Hindu [tantric] cosmos. This is the sense in which everyday acts are architechnē acts, bringing forth the cosmos in the form of the domestic compound as the structure of revealing. This mandalic space is both a map of the cosmos and a machine for revelation of its fundamental truths. In this sense, Kholagaun Chhetri architechnē is human action and skill that brings forth a spatial structure of revealing the enigma of the Householder's lifeworld as detached attachment—a space where truth happens.

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Notes

1 The mandala form is widespread throughout South Asia. See Gutschow and Kölver 1975; Gutschow and Bajracharya 1977; Kramrisch 1976; Barré et al. 1981; Levy 1990; Slusser 1982; and Gellner 1992.

2 The ethnographic material upon which this paper is based was collected during periods of fieldwork in Banaspati between 1973 and 2004.

3 See the *Rig Veda* "Hymn to Purusha" (10:XC).

4 When I began fieldwork in 1973, all the houses in Kholagaun were of the traditional type. By 2001, traditional houses were in the minority (31 of 69). Most of the new houses were built by young men after their marriages when they separated from their joint families and established separate household groups.

5 In Nepal *mandala* tends to refer to mystic diagrams associated with the Buddhism of Newars and Tibetan groups and *yantra* with the Hinduism of Brahmin-Chhetris.

6 From "Early Tibetan Mandalas: The Rossi Collection." With the kind permission of Rossi & Rossi Ltd., London, Ajit Mookerjee Collection. From *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*, by Madhu Khanna, Thames and Hudson, London.

7 See Levy for a description of the Newar house as also an interweaving of the material and the symbolic (1990:186-192).

8 In explaining the construction and layout of their houses, Kholagaun Chhetris rarely mentioned the Hindu Vastu Shastras (*bastu*), the elaborately codified architectural texts that use mandala spatiality in the construction of temples, neighbourhoods, villages, cities and houses.

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