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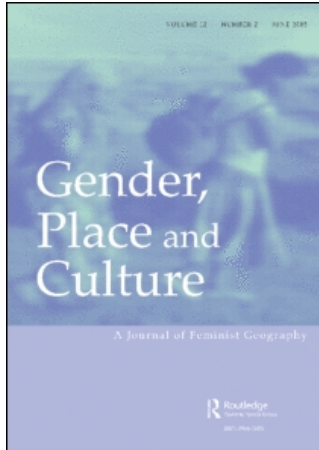
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## *Cultures of Economies: gender and socio-spatial change in Nepal*

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**ABSTRACT** *This article contributes to ongoing debates animating geography today about the boundaries between ‘economy’ and ‘culture’ and their implication for policy planning. It explores the mutual embeddedness of culture and economy through an ethnographic analysis of the interrelationships between spatial practices, economic strategies and gendered symbols of status in Nepal. The fine-grained ethnographic analysis presented here is intended specifically to challenge ‘best practice’ approaches accompanying the recent ‘discoveries’ within economic geography about the significance of culture in determining and promoting regional competitiveness and in presenting alternatives to capitalism. The article draws particularly on the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu to reveal how local ‘economics of practice’ in Nepal establish and maintain gendered ideologies that structure material opportunities differentially for men and women. Feminist geography, meanwhile, contributes a spatial dimension to practice theories, important for understanding the relationship between individual consciousness, action, and social change. Throughout, the article reflects on the implications of processes of cultural production considered here for the epistemological frames within which development takes place.*

Geography has by now produced an extensive literature reinterpreting the boundaries of the ‘economic’—rejecting both its positivist and empiricist legacy and its substantive focus on market principles (e.g. Lee & Wills, 1997). This work has explored how social factors underpin economic competitiveness, how market institutions are embedded in regulatory structures and networks of social relations at various spatial scales, and (at the more creative end of the spectrum) how economic discourse constitutes capitalist globalization as dominant and obscures alternative futures evident in ‘non-capitalist’ economic activities (see, for example, Peck & Tickell, 1995; Gibson-Graham, 1996; Amin & Thrift, 1997). Much of this rethinking about economy–society relations has been informed—whether self-consciously or not—by earlier work of feminist geographers challenging conventional notions of work and the capacity of macroeconomic statistics to capture non-market modes of economic activity (see McDowell [2000] for a recent review of this literature). It also reflects a more general ‘cultural turn’ across the social sciences: a shared interest in cultural practices of identity formation and meaning signification (Crang, 1997).

Although these discussions have focused relatively little on ‘peripheral’ contexts beyond the ‘core’ of the capitalist world system, they have important implications for the epistemological frameworks within which ‘development’ is planned and implemented [1]. For example, the recent interest in the socio-spatial construction of markets challenges a

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key assumption underlying the now dominant market-led approaches to development, namely, that market access *in itself* creates opportunity for the poor and disenfranchised. Within the field of gender and development in particular it challenges the expectation that economic opportunity—say, income or access to credit—can help women overcome their subordinate social position and ultimately transform hierarchical social relations (e.g. Drèze & Sen, 1995). A social constructivist view of the economy points instead to the significance of cultural ideologies (that may persist or even intensify in the wake of economic change) in configuring structures of inequality, as well as the significance of cultural practices for both reproducing and resisting those structures.

At the same time, analyses within this recent tradition in economic geography (and especially their attendant applications in planning and development) have too often suffered from problematic assumptions about the culture–economy nexus. The problem is threefold. First, the search for cultural bases for economic competitiveness as much as for non-capitalist alternatives encourages a best-practice approach: we can best craft competitive and humane economies, the argument goes, by drawing on cultural practices informing economic alternatives at the periphery of the world capitalist system—or in its most economically successful regions. The tendency among scholars and policy planners to select ‘best practices’ for replication reifies culture as an explanatory variable in its own right. Second, in the search for alternatives to capitalism, scholars too easily overlook the role of culture in producing inequality within ‘non-capitalist’ as much as capitalist contexts. And third, when geographers debate the cultural foundations of regional competitiveness, they too often take economic value itself as given [2].

This article explores the mutual embeddedness of culture and economy through an ethnographic analysis of the interrelationships between spatial practices, economic strategies and gendered symbols of status in Nepal. It seeks to further develop recent discussions about the role of culture and social life in economic geography, but rejects each of the assumptions noted above. In so doing, it draws on the tradition of ‘practice theory’ within anthropology to explore the role of human agency in producing, maintaining, and challenging the cultural norms and values within which economic practice occurs. Specifically, I engage Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of an ‘economics of practice’ to investigate the cultural processes through which value is created in both material and symbolic domains and how competing regimes of value in turn structure socio-spatial organization and behavior. I focus particularly on the relationship between gender ideology (as a form of symbolic production) and material opportunity for women, although caste ideologies are also duly considered.

The emphasis on culture as production (not product) raises questions (of relevance to development as much as economic geography) about the nature of individual consciousness in relation to practice. I thus explore the ways in which ideological constructions occupy the minds and lives of women as common sense—resulting in behavior that appears as acquiescence to domination. Rejecting notions of false consciousness, however, I also discuss the extent to which Nepalese women do recognize the established order as a constructed political order and have manipulated available material and symbolic resources to advance their interests in quite strategic ways. This discussion highlights the critical resources available within culture should development planners learn how to recognize them [3].

Methodologically, anthropologists rely on ethnography, entailing not just interviewing, mapping and other conventional qualitative research methods, but also, characteristically, participant observation—long-term residence in the research community during which the ethnographer observes people in their own time and space and to the

extent possible participates in community events and daily life activities. As Michael Burawoy *et al.* (1991) have argued, participant observation makes possible a hermeneutic dimension of social science research; it enables the investigator to juxtapose claims against practice, assess how people interpret events that are observed, and account for the presence of the researcher in the research process. Ethnographic approaches are thus ideally suited for the interest here in viewing cultural economics as *processes* entailing not just the production of ideology, but also the role of social practice in questioning, even transforming, established ideas about the organization of social and economic life. This article is based on ethnographic research in the Newar merchant community of Sankhu, located 17 km northeast of Kathmandu and populated by people of the Newar ethnic group. Within Nepal, Newars have historically been most associated with commerce and long-distance trading; Newar society is stratified by the most elaborate caste system in Nepal but its attitudes toward women's participation in commerce are liberal relative to the politically and numerically dominant Parbatiya [4]. As such, this society provides an interesting context in which to consider social differentiation in processes of cultural production.

Ideology and critical consciousness also have a spatial dimension which is often overlooked in anthropology. In this respect, I draw on the contributions of feminist geographers to consider gender ideology as a spatial praxis, as well as the implications of women's spatial strategies for rethinking the dominant market-led approaches to development. As feminist geographers have further argued, gender ideology and spatial practices are never contained within any 'local' space, but are always embedded in other spaces and scales. In this vein, the article considers how economic globalization and associated neoliberal 'open market' policies articulate with Newar economics of practice in Sankhu. Today the residents of Sankhu palpably feel the transition to 'open market' policies—especially through the emerging labor and commodity markets these policies generate—but the structuring force of caste and gender ideologies still prevails in significant ways, shaping the experience of macroeconomic change. Trends of entrenched constraints on women's mobility suggest that access to markets through income or credit in itself may play a relatively marginal role in determining social opportunity for women—and that planners could effect more structural and sustainable impacts by creating institutional and social spaces to channel women's existing levels of consciousness into collective forms of social criticism and action.

### **The Economics of Practice and the Spatial Politics of Culture**

Anthropologists have long debated how to interpret 'culture,' and in this article I engage particularly an approach derived from theories of practice. In the age-old structure–agency debate, practice theory puts the emphasis on how the structure is produced, reproduced, and transformed through human agency. An 'anthropology of practice' thus approaches culture through what people *do*, not, as more structural approaches would, through the rules and norms (religious, scientific, philosophical, ideological, and so on) that provide a template for the organization of social processes. I thus follow anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (1991, p. 21) in viewing culture as:

the semantic ground on which human beings seek to construct and represent themselves and others—and hence society and history. ... It has form as well as content; is born in action as well as thought; is a product of human creativity as well as mimesis; and, above all, is empowered.

While culture has symbolic content deriving from the meanings people assign to the world and their actions in it, it is also dynamic—never fixed or given. Culture is not a pre-constituted object, but a creation. As a form of production, culture has material as well as semantic dimensions. And cultural practices can work to reproduce or transform existing social structures.

A practice-theoretic approach thus requires an understanding of economic value as culturally given, rather than as an inherent property of commodities or markets [5]. Arjun Appadurai, for example, has argued that objects circulate in different ‘regimes of value,’ through which ‘desire and demand, reciprocal sacrifice and power interact to create economic value in specific social situations’ (1986, p. 4). By examining the *contexts* of exchange it is possible to think of capital not merely in the narrow (material) sense often reserved for money, machinery, and other physical assets, but as any form of wealth intended for exchange or investment. Through an analysis of ‘symbolic capital,’ for instance, Pierre Bourdieu extends economic analysis beyond material processes to encompass any form of symbolic value that may be in demand within specific social situations [6]. His ‘economics of practice’ thus accounts for the social and cultural dimensions of profit and exchange:

the theory of strictly economic practice is simply a particular case of a general theory of the economics of practice. The only way to escape from the ethnocentric naiveties of economism, without falling into populist exaltation of the generous naivety of earlier forms of society, is to carry out in full what economism does only partially, and to extend economic calculation to *all* the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation—which may be ‘fair words’ or smiles, handshakes or shrugs, compliments or attention, challenges or insults, honor or honors, powers or pleasures, gossip or scientific information, distinction or distinctions. (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 177–178)

Individuals acquire ‘symbolic capital,’ then, by manipulating the system of social symbols to acquire various forms of cultural recognition (see also Axel Honneth [1995] on Bourdieu). Where honor is a central form of capital (as in Sankhu along with most culturally South Asian societies), then much of social practice must be interpreted in terms of producing and consuming, hoarding or expending honor. I refer to investments that generate such non-material forms of wealth as ‘social investments.’

The emphasis on cultural production highlights questions of agency, the circulation of power, and social differentiation within an apparently uniform community. Following Bourdieu, again it becomes possible to recognize in the logic of symbolic capital a mechanism for mobilizing power and maintaining inequality. Bourdieu’s ethnographic analysis of Kabyle society in Algeria, for example, shows how gifting to those junior in status appears as gestures of kindness, but in fact functions as a form of domination, a ‘symbolic violence’ that blinds the oppressed to their own oppression through feelings of trust and obligation [7]. Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) can provide further clarification here in their distinction between ‘agentive’ and ‘nonagentive’ forms of power. Agentive forms of power require conscious command over various modes of cultural production, like the education system, the media or norms of socialization. To the extent that the established social order is accepted by the oppressed as the natural state of the world—a nonagentive manifestation of power—such ideological constructions may be said to have achieved a temporary state of hegemony (or ‘doxa’ in Bourdieu’s lexicon). Under such

circumstances ideological constructions converge with perceptions of those in subordinate social positions, as revealed in the domain of practice Bourdieu calls ‘habitus.’

Yet the possibility of converting sectarian world-views into universal truths is always limited by the possibility that those in subordinate positions will recognize the established order as an arbitrary, human construction. When this happens, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, p. 8) put it, ‘the contradictions between the world as represented and the world as experienced [will] become ever more palpable, ever more insupportable’—a dissonance which Bourdieu identifies as ‘political consciousness.’ Now, feminist research on the politics of consciousness has revealed a far more complex, less linear, understanding of women’s relationship to patriarchal structures than offered by Bourdieu’s typology of ‘doxa,’ ‘habitus,’ and ‘political consciousness’. As we will see here (and as other research in Asian and Middle Eastern contexts has shown), women often recognize (even covertly resist) male domination as ideology, but also comply in strategic ways to ensure their material security [8]. The key point for our purpose here is to acknowledge the potential for contradictory forms of consciousness to catalyze politically more potent and collective forms of reflection on structural patterns of oppression.

Anthropologists have pioneered in documenting with thick description the politics of culture. Yet while anthropologists have studied *in* places, they have not studied the significance of place *per se*. The specific contribution of geographers has been to explicate the spatial dimensions of culture, and the role of space in adjudicating power. Like culture, space, too, is socially constructed, filled with power, struggled over (Jones *et al.*, 1997; Massey, 1999; Escobar, 2001). Here the work of feminist geographers proves particularly instructive. This work, by now quite extensive in its geographic scope as well as theoretical development, has shown how space is gendered; how gender ideology entails spatial practices; how the social construction of space produces and maintains power relations. In so doing, feminist geographers have examined the physical construction of the built environment (Robson, 2000); the social and economic paths women trace in places (Massey, 1994); the dialectical relationship between space and identity (Peake & Trotz, 1999); and how women in different localities combine different forms of work, as well as the implications of work for women’s location in space (McDowell, 2000). Implicit in these studies of how gendered power relations are produced through space is a tactical understanding of the role of space in challenging and transforming dominant cultural ideologies. Here I consider both sides of the coin: the spatial dimensions of gender ideology as well as women’s (spatial) strategies to subvert ideology.

Feminist geographers have also pioneered in exploring the multiple scales of influence on the spatiality of everyday life. They have thus identified the body as a key site for understanding the gender politics of globalization in so far as it serves as a ‘cultural battleground’ (North American Congress on Latin America [NACLA], 2001, p. 12, cited in Nagar *et al.*, 2002) on which such issues as reproductive rights, the commodification of sexuality, and the gendered construction of workers are negotiated and struggled over (Nagar, 2000; Nagar *et al.*, 2002). And they have traced how men’s and women’s engagement with global cultural and economic flows in particular places transforms or entrenches gender relations and identities within the household and community (e.g. Peake & Trotz, 1999). I thus refer to the ‘articulation’ of local cultural forms with global political-economic processes in order to emphasize the ways in which such processes are firmly rooted in historical and cultural foundations. Viewing these processes in terms of competing and conflicting ‘regimes of value’ highlights the cultural tensions inherent in global–local articulations and challenges the notion—endemic even

within the realm of gender planning—that one can merely replace ‘traditional values’ with ‘market values.’

### **Honor and the Newar ‘Economics of Practice’**

Within most culturally South and Southeast Asian societies prestige systems play a powerful role in regulating local economics of practice. Honor operates as a most significant currency in the Asian marketplace of value, and among Newars it functions as an important arbiter of caste and gender identity [9]. Honor, or *ijat*, can accrue to either individuals or households, which in Newar society are structured patriarchally, with residence being patrilocal (women live in their husband’s extended family household) and inheritance being patrilineal (father to son). Households typically comprise extended joint families; the senior man is the unequivocal household head, while the senior woman designates work responsibilities among other married women in the household and possesses the coveted keys to the family storeroom. As the fundamental economic unit in Sankhu (often undertaking both subsistence and commercial forms of agriculture as well as several business enterprises), households practice a fierce solidarity with respect to outsiders, expressed spatially by the most private domains (kitchen, storeroom, shrine) being located on the top floors of the house. A household’s honor, however, must be continually defended and replenished by meeting numerous religious and social obligations that link it to the wider society. These obligations, often organized around the practice of feasting, come around with remarkable frequency and impose no small burden on household budgets [10]. Failure to offer feasts and perform the social and religious rituals associated with them does not just incur the wrath of gods, ancestors, and ghosts; one’s honor is also at stake and, as we will see, there is a lot to lose.

These obligations are often carried out under the auspices of the characteristic Newar *guthis*—place-based associations that enable households to fulfill their social and religious obligations through group action. As such, *guthis* play a crucial role in regulating social life in Newar communities (see also Quigley, 1993). Every household, (through a senior male representative) should belong to at least two *guthis* (a *digu dya guthi* and a *si guthi*), through which worship of lineage deities and performance of mortuary rites are organized respectively. *Guthi* members adhere to a rigid organizational structure that facilitates monitoring behavior to ensure compliance with social norms. Located only 17 km from the capital city and having fairly reliable electric and telephone service (the latter being affordable to only a small minority of the town’s 1500 residents), Sankhu has long encountered forms of modernity associated with electronic media, urban labor markets, and commodification of food, clothing, and other basic subsistence goods—which have intensified since the post-1995 trade liberalization and market deregulation. Competing ideologies of mobility and freedom notwithstanding, *guthis* in particular have functioned as an important stabilizing force in Sankhu, viewed by many (and not only those with direct interests in preserving established distribution of power and resources) as the surest mechanism for protecting ‘traditional Newar culture’ against ‘outside’ influences of modernization [11].

As such, *guthis* are distinctively place-based organizations. Membership roots an individual in a particular town, in a particular neighborhood (*tol*), as a descendant of a particular lineage. Membership also commits an individual to social obligations that are distinctively *local*: the rounds of feasting, worship of lineage deities, and performance of mortuary rituals on the death of any adult belonging to a member household—in addition to other forms of sociality spawned by such obligations—create a web of

community ties that work to encircle Sankhu in a space-based social, emotional and economic interdependency. In the calculus of the ‘honor economy’ within Sankhu, *guthi* practices ensure the sound social standing of individuals and households who meet the arduous round of obligation [12]. They are thus forms of social investment (along with other forms of religious piety, hospitality and ritual) through which finance capital must be transmuted into symbolic capital. Sankhu Newars describe such social investments as a kind of social welfare system: the generosity and hospitality that goes along with religious and social duties such as *guthi* membership, works to redistribute resources and level economic differences; ‘no one goes hungry in Sankhu’ is a common refrain. At the same time, patterns of sociality woven through *guthi* practices and other forms of social investment also lock people into particular social locations—the wife of a usurious merchant, the low-caste client of a Brahman priest. Tight webs of interdependency make it very difficult for individuals to shift that location, and especially to shift their status in an upward direction.

In addition to demanding an onerous regimen of social investments, then, the honor economy functions agentively to maintain and defend caste and gender hierarchies [13]. *Guthis* in particular are a most significant marker of difference in Newar society. Both mortuary and lineage *guthis* are strictly segregated by caste. Though most people view the caste system as ‘fixed,’ in practice considerable ambiguity surrounds the precise ranking of castes (and sub-castes), and households routinely attempt to devise strategies to claim higher status. Efforts to preserve caste purity against such encroachments are accomplished foremost by ensuring that lower castes are not able to ‘marry in,’ and here mortuary *guthis* play an important role [14]. In Sankhu, marriages are still primarily arranged by the parents of the betrothed through a paid matchmaker, although with a first generation of television-watching and college-going youth, so called ‘love marriages’ are on the rise (resulting in significant stress on the caste system). If a household in Sankhu wants to ensure a ‘pure’ caste marriage for their son, then a good place to start the search for a bride would be within the other lineages of one’s mortuary *guthi*. With its rigorous principles of excluding outsiders and regulating standards of social investment, the *guthi* system thus provides a means of coping with struggles over caste identification—and entrenching the principle of caste hierarchy.

*Guthi* practices also construct gender difference. Membership is organized by *households*: all households of a given lineage in the case of *digu dya guthis* and same-caste households of a neighborhood in the case of *si guthis*. Membership is inherited, except in the rare event of a household migrating to a different Newar town, in which case it must join a *si guthi* in the new location, but retains membership in the *digu dya guthi* from the place of origin. In mortuary *guthis* households are represented by the senior male household head, while in lineage *guthis* they are represented by all male members of participating households who have been initiated into adulthood. In both cases, direct membership is expressed by who from a given household attends feasts (and in the case of lineage *guthis*, who receives *si*, a designated organ of the head of a goat sacrificed for the feast). Women belong to *guthis* by virtue of their membership in households, but they participate in different ways. They do not enjoy full direct membership in lineage *guthis* because their ritual loyalty is considered more ambiguous, transferring as it does in marriage (along with residence) from the natal to marital household [15]. Likewise, because women’s regular bouts of impurity associated with menstruation and childbirth are considered incompatible with mortuary rituals, they are excluded from highly valued ritual obligations of mortuary *guthis*. Women’s participation occurs, rather, through the onerous labor associated with preparing ritual offerings and the associated *guthi* feasts.

Here we see how interdependency operates in a hierarchically structured social system: *guthi* feasting and ritual work marginalizes women from the male-dominated centers of ritual life—and attendant circles of political power—while at the same time depending concretely on women’s labor for their routine functioning. The honor economy expresses and produces Newar gender ideology in other ways that reveal how men’s *yjat* depends crucially on their relationships with women. While honor accrues to men largely by maintaining social investments, women acquire honor foremost by exhibiting qualities of moral, sexual and social propriety. The compulsion to do so derives from contradictory ideologies surrounding womanhood in Newar society [16]. On the one hand, in their role as sisters women are considered ‘sacred’ and are thus entrusted with ritually significant roles in their natal lineage even after marriage [17]. On the other hand, women are regarded as ‘dangerous,’ not only for the regular bouts of ritual pollution (through menstruation and childbearing), but also because they are located symbolically ‘in between’ the lineages of their father and their husband. For women, honor is associated with neutralizing this dangerous quality. It is primarily through sexuality and ritual pollution (as opposed to integrity in maintaining social investments) that a woman’s honor is gauged; if not properly managed women’s sexuality and regular episodes of ritual pollution can compromise the pedigree of an entire household or lineage.

Such management is accomplished foremost by control of women’s movement in space. As repositories of household honor, women’s actions require considerable collective surveillance in the public spaces of the household and beyond. Although practice varies by caste, the high-caste norm of restricting women’s movement outside the household to only limited occasions (visiting in-laws, meeting ritual obligations, working in the family shop or field) expresses the dominant ideology of women’s seclusion to which most households aspire [18]. Recent brides face the greatest restrictions since their sexuality is at once most crucial and most threatening to the patriline. Thus, they may not leave the house unaccompanied or without the permission of their husband and mother-in-law. The only legitimate destination is their natal home or the home of another relative, from which they can return only with an escort and only upon being sent for by their husband. Likewise, while anyone may fall prey to vicious and powerful gossip networks in Sankhu, women of any married status can assume themselves to be an automatic and special focus of public discussion when they are in the public domain—how do they look, what are they wearing, with whom are they walking, where are they going? Gossip operates so forcefully that even married women with children (who, theoretically at least, enjoy more freedom of movement) self-regulate their movement in public spaces—traveling only through back, narrow lanes instead of main thoroughfares, limiting conversation, walking briskly and purposefully, not sauntering. For high-caste women especially there are many quarters of town that they literally will not see in their lifetime.

Because honor is acquired as much through displays of wealth as through exhibitions of moral integrity, *yjat* also has a more material dimension bearing on the position of women in Newar society. A woman’s very appearance is considered to reflect on her household’s honor. Only a shameful household would allow their (married-in) women to walk around ‘bare,’ without jewelry or the appropriate standards of dress, or even accept a bride who does not meet certain standards of beauty. As discussed below, in lending ideological weight to the notion that women should be well adorned and dressed, the honor in wealth creates spaces for pleasure. But it can also be experienced as a burden, to the extent that it limits women’s freedom and exerts pressure to conform.

The sexual division of labor and restrictions on women's mobility are examples of cultural practices that defend dominant gender ideologies, represent them as natural and moral, and facilitate the accumulation of symbolic capital by men. They are not expressions of an essential Newar 'culture,' but, rather, the outcome of repeated social practices in a specific geographic and historical location. And, given men's and women's distinctive contributions to household honor, they express interdependency as much as hierarchy. At the same time, the *ijat* economy does serve as a particularly forceful deterrent to women's participation in kinds of market activities that require much social interaction or movement outside the household. Neither is it easy for women to independently make social investments, say, in the form of hospitality or religious patronage, that yield symbolic capital and enhance economic security. Through the honor economy, we can thus recognize a dialectical relationship between gender ideology and social opportunity: ideological constructions of gender influence women's ability to compete in the honor economy; and the disadvantages women face in the accumulation of symbolic capital in turn inform normative understandings of women's roles and responsibilities in society. These patterns and relationships are inscribed in the organization of space through the paths women (are authorized to) trace among public and private domains and through the networks of sociality that encompass Sankhu in relations of interdependence. Women also act consciously on space, however, variously complying with and resisting dominant gender ideologies.

### **Modes of Consciousness and Subjectivity**

Of course, ideology does not transpose directly onto consciousness—and it is the ethnographer's task to explore this realm of contradiction between the world as represented and the world as experienced. Women's practices do often suggest a convergence between gender constructions and women's perceptions. In everyday speech and action, for example, women often give expression to their ascribed low status—such as when they address their husbands honorifically, or the myriad ways in which they self-regulate their movement in space. Beyond these mundane manifestations of consent are practices and behaviors which bear more significant political and, indeed, material consequences. Consider, for example, common practices surrounding inheritance (*angsa*). In Nepal, women have legal and customary rights to inherit their father's property if they remain unmarried beyond the age of 35 [19]. Yet among Newars, social conventions dictate that landed property should pass exclusively to male heirs and that women should not enjoy the kind of autonomy from their kin that direct ownership of landed property would entail. Newar women meeting legal criteria for inheritance in fact often decline to exercise this right and prefer to remain a dependant in a brother's household.

In such circumstances, when women's practices are structured in accordance with the dominant world-view (Bourdieu's 'habitus'), the scope for progressive social change seems particularly narrow. If we probe the motivations of individual women in electing to place themselves in dependent positions vis-à-vis men, however, we find that women's choices reflect strategic concerns for their own security. As one middle-aged and single low-caste woman explained to me, if a woman rejects the dependent status associated with being female, she risks falling outside the networks of (especially kin and *guthi*) obligation that encircle Sankhu, constituting Newar society and providing the ultimate protection against poverty and ill health [20]:

Sure, I have a right to a share of my brother's inheritance. Still, I am not planning to take it. I'll just give my share to my brother. See, if I take my share,

he and his wife might not take care of me later. Then who knows what could happen.

Tales circulating in Sankhu of women who *did* pursue legal rights to inheritance offer a ready understanding of ‘what could happen’ to an economically autonomous woman. Take, for example, the case of a single woman who had recently died of physical complications related to malnutrition. Once she had become too old to cultivate her small (inherited) landholding, she no longer had the means to meet her basic subsistence requirements. Yet she also had no grounds to claim the assistance of her brothers, whose only obligations (in both legal and customary terms) lay with family members residing in their own households. She thus died alone—in a physical isolation that ultimately reflected the loss of social citizenship she had endured as an independent woman. When women choose to comply with normative gender beliefs, then, they are not necessarily unaware of the nets of power in which they are entangled and they do not necessarily accept those beliefs as legitimate and moral. Their actions suggest consent, not blindness; acquiescence, not total hegemony [21].

Women also take advantage of spaces *within* gender ideology that grant opportunity to possess and wield power as well as enhance material status. For example, although Newar women do not customarily inherit property, they do receive significant wealth in the form of a dowry (*kwasah*) presented to them on their betrothal just before moving from their natal to their marital home [22]. In the Newar context dowry is unequivocally valued as ‘women’s own property’ and thus it contradicts the ideology of women’s dependence embedded in patrilineal patterns of inheritance (*angsa*) [23]. The accumulation of a suitably large dowry is actively underwritten by the bride’s natal family through a feast held in her honor prior to betrothal. Invited guests must contribute to the bride’s dowry and the property transfers with the bride to her marital household. Once in her marital home, a woman’s dowry enjoys a special status as her exclusive private property. Here the *ijat* economy works to women’s advantage, since breaches to these norms would bring immediate shame upon a household: as one senior woman put it, ‘if we were to sell our daughter-in-law’s dowry, our honor would be lost. ... The neighbors would say, Oh, they don’t have enough to eat; they had to sell the dowry!’

In addition to being women’s exclusive property, dowry wealth is subject to a different set of customary rules regarding its provenance and custody than men’s inheritance. *Kwasah* affords Newar women some distinct benefits relative to the rights and obligations men accrue through the acquisition of *angsa*. A man can rarely exercise complete autonomy in the dispensation of his inherited property because in most cases there are other male heirs—his sons, brothers, and/or parents—who have some legal claim. But a woman has no legal or customary accountability with regard to her *kwasah*. The strength of a woman’s (otherwise dependent and subordinate) position lies precisely in the fact that she has no prescribed social debts or obligations to tie up her private property.

Women generally exercise careful vigilance to keep their dowry wealth out of circulation—if not hidden entirely from view—within their joint family marital households. They take full advantage of the ‘ideological space’ within customary ideas about dowry for the accumulation of certain kinds of private wealth. As one woman from a relatively poor household explained to me, ‘If you just keep your dowry packed up like a bank note in a picture frame, what good is that? You have to put it to some good use.’ To capitalize on their dowry, however, women must confront a fundamental (spatial) challenge: for norms of seclusion preclude any possibility of engaging in ventures

requiring travel outside the household. Nor can a woman undertake enterprises *within* her marital household that would detract from time spent on household labor and the endless requirements of subsistence farming [24]. One way women resolve this dilemma is by investing surplus dowry in money lending or leasing out livestock (a traditional form of dowry wealth). Even women from families that are not well off can give accounts of how they had tripled or quadrupled dowry investments. In any given locality, then, women's dowry investments can amount to a significant *source* of credit—a fact which is often overlooked by development planners seeking to formalize women's access to credit [25].

Although women often appear complicit in their own disadvantage to the extent that they assume postures, behaviors, and roles that mark their own subordination, the discussion here suggests that they comply not for moral, but for predominantly strategic and material reasons. And they do not comply without understanding the arbitrariness of the system as well as recognizing opportunities to accumulate wealth and power. Occasionally, too, such recognition can become the basis of critical consciousness—of explicit critiques of cultural ideology and musings about tactics for change. Thus, an educated high-caste woman, who generally speaks an explicitly feminist language of 'women's rights' and 'male domination,' shared her thoughts with me about gender change:

If women and men are really equally capable, how is it that only women are denied opportunities? Women should also do all kinds of work. ... One source of motivation for me [in questioning these things] was that reading, right? And on top of that, in my own experience, since I was young—well, my mother had only two daughters so there were no sons to dominate us. And my sister was not the type to resist, or protest, or fight, or go here and there. ... For that reason, I always thought that I should protect my parents, and defend their wealth.

From the very beginning, based on my reading and experience, I began to wonder how women could do any kind of independent work. As a woman, how should one take care of oneself and live a good life? What can women do to be strong? ... One must always be able to protect oneself. Women must be strong. They must be of good health. When women become sick or weak, everyone dominates them. Because I believed that I should be strong, since I was a kid, I used to play sports in school, play in the open fields, take part in games, even at home, \*exercise\* a lot [26]. Women must make themselves strong. If boys can make themselves strong, why can't women also? You should not just rely on the law. ... If you are strong, then you can take care of yourself. You have to be able to take care of yourself in a real, physical way.

Thus, for example, on the death of her father this woman fought off the aggressive 'offers' by her father's brother's sons to perform the requisite mortuary rights. Instead she defied custom by taking birth control pills to ensure she would not menstruate during the 45-day observances, was thus able to fulfill the male role of chief mourner, and thereby secured the right to her father's inheritance under customary laws. For planners and development practitioners, the point to emphasize here is that the *potential* for critical consciousness lies in the everyday experience of subaltern actors. The first step to facilitating collective projects for emancipatory social change is thus to recognize the basis for ideological critique within culture.

### Local–Global Articulations

Before considering such a role for planning in more programmatic terms, it is necessary to examine more systematically how local ideologies and practices are embedded in other scales of economic life. How, for example, has neoliberalism, and its programs of economic liberalization implemented since the early 1990s, articulated with the Newar economics of practice? Given what we know about the webs of sociality encompassing Sankhu, we can explore how caste and gender ideologies in particular might interact with the commoditization and emerging labor markets associated with Nepal's new economic orthodoxy. What new regimes of value and structuring ideologies emerge in these contexts, and what kinds of social relations and spatial practices result as cultural common sense assumes new parameters and new criteria? How do inter-scalar dynamics influence the way people in Sankhu construct place and conceive their world? In light of the concern here with progressive planning, what emancipatory and regressive political tendencies for women and low castes can be seen in these articulations of local cultural economies with macroeconomic processes?

New service-sector jobs in Kathmandu, many of which are considered below the rank and dignity of high castes, have provided an opportunity for some low castes not only to earn an income but also to challenge their low status within caste ideology. Untouchables from Sankhu have, for instance, found employment as janitors, office 'peons,' and septic tank cleaners [27]. The new opportunities for low castes manifest spatially in two respects. First, jobs in Kathmandu enable low-caste men to physically leave behind many of the stigmatizing dimensions of low-caste identity, especially patronage relationships with high castes [28]. Second, their earnings have financed transformations in the landscape of Sankhu itself. As low-caste migrant men 'repatriate' their earnings to ancestral homes in Sankhu, their extended family households have initiated something of a construction boom—replacing single-story, thatched-roof mud houses with multistory modern cement structures not affordable to many high-caste families. This transformation is particularly significant since low castes have long suffered the legacy of Newar customary laws (enforced until the 1950s) mandating their houses be constructed of mud and thatch, in contradistinction to the brick and tile of higher-caste homes. The new cement structures thus etch the narrowing (class) gap between high and low castes directly into the urban landscape (although the prescribed location of low-caste households at the town's periphery thus far remains unchallenged).

For women, the current macroeconomic conjuncture seems to present fewer possibilities. First, the recent proliferation of imported consumer goods articulates with gender ideology in ways that subvert the progressive dimensions of *kwasa* for women. Young women report spending more of their private wealth on ever-changing fashion as a means of pursuing and upholding the status of 'being modern' or 'being middle class' (on the relationship between social practice and Bollywood cultural trends, see Liechty, 1995). Because consumption of modern commodities figures so centrally in an emerging class-based regime of value, women, as bearers of household honor, simply cannot afford to ignore the latest trends in clothing, make-up, and hair style—whether they at times take pleasure in them, or experience them as oppressive or trivial [29]. And because consumer commodities lose their value at such a rapid pace, women must continually make these kinds of investments. Fashions change, clothes wear out, and electronic goods and accessories eventually break down: as Liechty (1995, p. 310) argues, 'their nature and meaning are perishable.' Using *kwasa* for purchases of consumer goods on a regular basis clearly leaves fewer resources for income-generating investments.

Second, the changing composition of dowry has important implications for the *meaning* surrounding *kasahi* within the new commoditized regime of value. For many joint families, marital gifts provide the first occasion for acquiring modern furniture and other consumer goods crucial for marking out claims to middle-class status. As a result, dowries these days are increasingly encompassing goods whose use is in wide demand by the husband's extended family: sofa sets, televisions, steel storage cabinets, and other commodities required for households to function at minimally accepted standards of modernity. In a society where the calculus of class and commodity consumption is gaining new currency, it is increasingly common to find such dowry items appropriated for collective use—and display—in the more public spaces of the household. One high-caste woman compared these trends in Newar towns to the coercive North Indian dowry system, in which the groom's family extorts dowry items from the bride's family [30]:

It is really an Indian custom for a woman's marital family to use her dowry or for dowry to even include items that are in demand by men. At first it was not like that in Nepal. There did not used to be a lot of \*pressure\* [on a bride's family] to give a lot of dowry. ... What is happening in Newar towns now is that dowry items more often come to belong to whoever uses them [instead of exclusively to the bride]. So even in Newar towns, the groom's family may demand dowry items: Bring a TV, bring one of those steel cabinets, bring this, bring that ...

As the basis for honor shifts from old forms of social investment to participation in a commodity-based regime of value, households find the surplus necessary to finance the requisite consumer goods in forms of finance capital normatively earmarked as women's property. Dowry itself is no longer gendered exclusively female—with significant implications for women's financial autonomy within marriage or beyond divorce.

Finally, women have not typically been able to take advantage of the new labor market opportunities in a manner that challenges the gender ideology. Among low castes, when men migrate to Kathmandu women often take over family enterprises in Sankhu (such as butchering services of the meatcutter, *nay*, caste), a practice which would seem to reject the ideology of the male household head; yet when male migrants return to Sankhu for extended periods, especially for ritual and festival occasions, patriarchal principles are quickly re-established and the continuity of gender ideology assured (for similar findings about the relationship between male migration and gender ideology in Indo-Guyanese communities, see Peake & Trotz,, 1999). Even though Sankhu households of all castes have begun to look more favorably on sending their daughters to school, upon marriage the customary concern with seclusion still prevails, especially among higher castes. Within the emerging class-based regime of value, 'educated women' in marriage are increasingly valued in Sankhu as icons of modernity. But education has not generally opened up new employment opportunities for women because of enduring expectations that women work primarily *within* the marital household (and its enterprises) (see also Shtrii Shakti, 1995). As Liechty (1995) argues with regard to Kathmandu middle-class culture more generally, Sankhu Newars have thus modernized the concepts of girl and daughter in accordance with the development discourse on 'girl child education,' but it is beyond marriage, in the context of the husband's family, where the new freedoms of economic liberalization and political democracy have the most difficulty challenging the deeply entrenched geography of social relations.

### **Gender and Socio-spatial Change**

This article contributes to ongoing debates animating geography today about the boundaries between ‘economy’ and ‘culture,’ and their implication for policy planning. The fine-grained ethnographic analysis presented here is intended specifically to challenge ‘best practice’ approaches accompanying the recent ‘discoveries’ within economic geography about the significance of culture in determining and promoting regional competitiveness and in presenting alternatives to capitalism. These approaches tend to reify culture and idealize non-capitalist spaces as inherently benign. I have drawn particularly on the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu to reveal how local ‘economies of practice’ in Nepal establish and maintain gendered ideologies that structure material opportunities differentially for men and women. Feminist geography, meanwhile, contributes a spatial dimension to practice theories, important for understanding the relationship between individual consciousness, action, and social change.

Much of this article has thus been concerned with documenting the role of space in mediating gender ideology and material opportunity. For the case of Sankhu we have seen how the ‘honor economy’ imposes considerable restrictions on women’s mobility even within their own neighborhood. Meanwhile, the organization of space—especially the distribution of land resulting from patrilineal patterns of inheritance and high-caste women’s physical confinement to the domestic spaces of the household, the family shop, and agricultural fields—produces and maintains ideological constructions of gender, embedding it in the physical landscape. Place-based organizations, such as the Newar *guthi* associations, also play a significant role in defending gender- (and caste-) based cultural hierarchies, with their patterns of in/exclusion, the onerous obligations they incur, the sexual division of labor they sustain, and the networks of interdependency they weave. But we have also seen that women use space strategically, even if they consent to systems of gender subordination. Women’s consent itself is often strategic; remaining embedded within the practices of sociality that encircle Sankhu ensures protection from the risks of social isolation, chaos and material deprivation. Women have also negotiated the constraints imposed by attendant expectations of restricted mobility in order to enhance their position in a hierarchically ordered society. They have, for example, invested their private dowry wealth in enterprises such as money- and livestock-lending that enable them to build capital without compromising ideologies of seclusion. And occasionally women articulate explicit critiques of ideology, deriving from practices that directly challenge the established geography of social relations.

The findings presented here also offer several conclusions about the cultural politics of social change. First, the deepening and expansion of markets do not ‘modernize’ or ‘develop’ social groups in unilateral or predictable ways; nor can fixed cultural traits determine development outcomes or serve as models for replication. Rather, local economies of practice articulate with macroeconomic trends in a dialectical process reflecting both the agency of local actors and the structuring force of wider-scale economic processes—here the emerging labor markets in Kathmandu and new patterns of commodification. ‘Market’ values do not merely replace ‘traditional’ values; rather, new regimes of value articulate with old ones, creating different opportunities and constraints for differently positioned social groups.

Several implications can be derived for development practice from this discussion. First, given the complex relationships between space, normative gender beliefs, and individual practice described here, it follows that access to markets generally and access to credit specifically does not in itself guarantee social opportunity (although, in certain

circumstances they may be a crucial ingredient for it). Rather, cultural ideologies, and the various ways they articulate with processes of macroeconomic change, play a particularly important role in structuring opportunity. Second, the findings here present development planners with some rather optimistic evidence about the scope for critical resources within culture to inform social change. The contradictory relationship between consciousness and ideology revealed in individual recognition of, sometimes resistance to, the established order as an arbitrary human construction provide a foundation for politically more potent, collective action against structures of oppression. Third, the discussion here of ideology as spatial praxis suggests that planners must have a tactical understanding of the role of space in challenging (or entrenching) dominant cultural ideologies: a recognition of the limits to undertaking change within fixed spatial boundaries of household or village (which will likely lead to diversifying experience, but not necessarily dismantling dominant ideologies), a caution against strengthening place-based institutions (local civil society) built on hierarchical premises, and an understanding of the transformative potential when people ‘get out of place’ or are able to directly reform the built environment. Collectively, these considerations point to a model for gender planning that focuses foremost on cultivating locally situated social criticism as the surest foundation for development—in contrast to dominant approaches that emphasize market deepening and capital access with little regard for the cultural politics of social change.

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### NOTES

- [1] No adequate terminology has been developed to characterize relations among countries with differing access to resources and power. Most have pejorative implications: developed/developing, First World/Third World, core/periphery. Some have outlived their relevance, or the historical conditions of their emergence: First World/Third World. More politically neutral geographic terminology—North/South, West/East—do not always accurately capture the global distribution of power and resources. Here I have settled on the terms ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ to capture relative positions within a fundamentally unsustainable and uneven capitalist world system. I put the quotation marks around ‘development’ to signal the political role of the development industry in maintaining hierarchical relations among nations, by defining the values and standards against which progress should be universally marked. In the absence of quotation marks, I use ‘development’ as a normative concept concerned with the transformation of oppressive cultural ideologies.
- [2] Economic geographers have, for example, chronicled the legacy of an ‘artisanal culture’ in shaping the economic success of Northern Italy, a ‘social model of innovation’ in Germany, and the ‘culture of cooperation’ which distinguishes firms in California’s Silicon Valley (Piore & Sabel, 1984; Gertler, 1995; Saxenian, 1994 respectively). Academic scholarship that has been most conducive to ‘best-practice’ policy interpretations includes Piore and Sabel (1984) and Putnam (1993). Gibson-Graham’s *The End of Capitalism as We Knew It* (1996) is a marvelous work of deconstruction, but fails to account for the modes of injustice operative within much-idealized non-capitalist contexts.
- [3] The ‘new cultural geography’ also takes a Gramscian approach to cultural politics, but tends to focus on how components of the ‘critical infrastructure’—e.g. fashion, educational institutions, the media—organize

- public discourse, rather how the narratives and practices of individuals ‘on the ground’ provide ‘texts’ with messages to impart (see Peake & Trotz [1999] and Ruddick [1996] for some notable exceptions). Cultural geographers have also tended to concentrate on macro-scales of cultural production, such as how suburban landscapes codify gender beliefs (McDowell, 1983) or how racism operates as a geographical system (Jackson, 1992), as well as on North American and European contexts.
- [4] Parbatiya literally means ‘hill people,’ and is used, by Newars at least, to refer to Hindu groups that South Asianists commonly call ‘Indo-Nepalese’ or ‘Indo-Aryan’—namely, Brahmins (Priests), Chetris (Warriors, including the Shah and Rana lineages), and their associated Untouchable artisan castes (Tailors, Leatherworkers, and Blacksmiths).
- [5] Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977) may be noted especially for drawing on Simmel for discussions of the cultural politics of value.
- [6] See also Jeffrey (2001) for a discussion of Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital in relation to caste society in South Asia.
- [7] For a discussion of these arguments in relation to common understandings of ‘social capital’ in development discourse, see Rankin (2002).
- [8] See, for example, Kandyoti (1991), Ong (1987) and Rankin (2001b); needless to say, this formulation applies with equal force to Anglo middle-class women negotiating patriarchal institutions in Western contexts.
- [9] Newari words are transliterated according to the conventions of Manandhar (1986). Diacritics have been omitted for ease of reading by non-specialist audiences.
- [10] First there are the life cycle rituals: depending on one’s caste, religious affiliation, and gender, up to seven rituals associated with birth; two initiation rituals; betrothal; marriage; three old-age initiations to the status of gods; and the 13–45 day intensive series of mortuary rites. The ancestors, too, must be worshipped—fed, clothed, housed and comforted as integral members of the social group. Upwards of 50 community and national festivals propitiate deities, ranging from the local patron goddess, Vajrayogini, to the gods of distinct lineage groups. Each of these occasions entails not only the requisite feast, but also elaborate, costly and time-consuming preparations for the rituals themselves, involving both the prescribed configuration of kin, community, and a full entourage of ritual specialists.
- [11] Indeed, the tendency toward such practices of hermetic cultural reproduction has characterized Newar society since nation-building efforts of the still-reigning Shah dynasts first threatened political and cultural colonization in the mid-eighteenth century.
- [12] The term ‘honor economy’ is drawn from Liechty (1995). For a similar discussion of the regulating function of honor among caste Hindus in Nepal and India, see Cameron (1998) and Raheja and Gold (1994) respectively.
- [13] The term ‘honor economy’ is drawn from Liechty (1995). For a similar discussion of the regulating function of honor among caste Hindus in Nepal and India, see Cameron (1998) and Raheja and Gold (1994) respectively.
- [14] On the history of Newars in relation to caste politics in Nepal, see Quigley (1993).
- [15] A few lineages formally induct newly married women into their lineage *guthis*, but even in these rare cases a woman is not often accorded the honor of representing her household at *guthi* functions (unless no adult male members are present).
- [16] Here there are close similarities to (but also important differences from) the dominant Parbatiya in Nepal whose contradictory gender ideologies have been described by Lynne Bennett (1983). On differences between Newar and Parbatiya pre-puberty initiation rites—and the relatively less contradictory gender beliefs in the Newar context—see Michael Allen (1990).
- [17] This status is also expressed in the generosity and respect with which women are treated when they visit their natal family and the series of ritual gifts from their brothers and brothers’ children to which they are entitled throughout their life.
- [18] See Cameron (1998) and Robson (2000) for similar arguments regarding low-caste society in Nepal and Hausa society in Nigeria respectively. And see Peake and Trotz (1999) for a discussion of mobility constraints for women of Indian descent in Guyana.
- [19] In the twentieth session (on 14 March 2002), the House of Representatives passed the Country Code (Eleventh Amendment) Bill, commonly known as the Women’s Property Rights Bill, establishing the concept that daughters as well as sons are entitled to have inheritance rights by birth to ancestral property. It will only become law once it is sent to the King for the Royal Seal, a process which has been delayed by ongoing political turmoil in Nepal.
- [20] For similar findings throughout the South Asian subcontinent, see Agarwal (1994).
- [21] See also Parish (1997) for a similar analysis of low-caste consciousness in Newar society.

- [22] Technically, *kwasaḥ* is translated as ‘women’s own property,’ including earned income. Since dowry usually comprises the bulk of women’s own property, however, the term is often used synonymously with dowry. For a similar account of Tamang women’s strategic use of personal property, see March (2002).
- [23] Here Newar dowries may be distinguished from those of Parbatiya women—and indeed from the dowry system that predominates throughout Northern India. Parbatiyas distinguish between dowry, *daaijo*, and women’s private property, *peva*, since only the latter enjoys the same protected status as Newar *kwasaḥ*. Dowry, *daaijo*, may, on the contrary, be considered the possession of the husband and even in some cases his co-resident joint family. See also Bennett (1983) and Raheja and Gold (1994).
- [24] Note that Newar women do conventionally assist in household commercial enterprise, such as a family store, a tea shop, or a liquor-brewing trade, and so it is not uncommon to see Newar women carrying out these businesses. But generally such enterprises are considered part of *household* income, not women’s *kwasaḥ*. See Bennett (1983) and Cameron (1998) for accounts of how women of other castes and ethnicities in Nepal accumulate private wealth with initial dowry investments.
- [25] Needless to say, such strategies for the accumulation of wealth by women did not ‘show up’ in my household survey on sources of credit and income; it is therefore virtually impossible to measure the scale of women’s money lending at an aggregate level.
- [26] Words set off by asterisks indicate that the speaker has used an English, as opposed to Newari or Nepali, word. I have followed Liechty (1998) in adopting this convention.
- [27] ‘Peon’ is a term, originating with the British in colonial India, for office servants who perform menial tasks ranging from cleaning to running errands. To say that new market forms present opportunities for low castes in Sankhu, however, is *not* to suggest that the terms of the emerging employment opportunities—of the janitors in five star hotels, for example—are in themselves ideal or just.
- [28] Of course, their occupation may identify them as low caste in their new place of work and residence, but they are unlikely to enter into a new set of patronage relationships here, which accord a particularly strong stigma to low-caste identity.
- [29] Linda Peake and Alissa Trotz (1999), drawing on the work of Appadurai (1996), have described such consumer expenditures as a potential source of pleasure that conveys agency, as ‘experiments with self-imagining as an everyday social project’ (Appadurai, 1996, p. 4, cited in Peake & Trotz, 1999, p. 118). In context of financial constraint, however, agency lies as much in the stress of ‘keeping up with the Jones’s’ as in the pleasure of self-indulgence. In one instance to which I was witness, for example, a young woman from a poor merchant-caste household had attempted to keep up to date with the fashions by working for days to design and sew herself a ‘modern’ wide-legged *surwaal kurtā* (the Indian dress for unmarried women); when she first wore the new outfit on the streets of Sankhu, however, she was ridiculed up and down town for having chosen a color not fit for the particular style and a fashion that had anyway gone out of fashion. The woman was visibly pained by the experience and in conversation with me after the incident vowed to avoid leaving her house at all except under the most urgent circumstances.
- [30] See Raheja and Gold (1994) on dowry in the North Indian context.

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