

# Ontology of technology

## Mobile technology in the Kathmandu valley

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# Introduction

In contemporary times, modern communication technologies connect enormous amounts of different people from different cultures together. Yet, for all these different people to be able to utilize these technologies requires that they also share some kind a common understanding of them. Consequently, the purpose of this thesis is to study how a shared understanding of a technology is constructed and maintained among people who might otherwise have very different worldviews. It answers to this question through an ethnographic fieldwork which focuses on how the culturally very heterogeneous people of the Kathmandu valley are unified through mobile technology into a connected communication network.

To analyse how the common understanding of mobile technology is achieved it conducts a comparison. It compares mobile technology to other different methods of establishing social unity in the Kathmandu valley described by anthropological studies of its cultural forms. By contrasting and comparing these different practices it elicits how the construction of a common understanding concerning mobile technology requires some ontological presuppositions concerning reality in general.

Yet, analysis of the presupposed truths that are used to establish technological unity raises a theoretical and methodological problem. This problem is that the ontological truths concerning reality that connect the users of mobile technology together are similar to those which are often used as the basis of social scientific research. To solve this problem this thesis utilizes a method of science and technology studies known as actor-network theory. Consequently, by utilizing actor-network theory it constructs a method which enables to give an ontological description of mobile technology.

## Method

My fieldwork research method consisted mostly of participant observation. The site where I conducted fieldwork was the Kathmandu valley in the nation state of Nepal during four months between the winter and spring of 2010. I lived with a Nepali family in Kathmandu city and had routine of doing most of my research in a shopping mall in central Kathmandu where I spent most of the working hours. At Sundays when the mall was closed I often went on road

trips around the Kathmandu valley and sometimes to destinations beyond its borders. I constantly recorded by taking notes and pictures different practices which were somehow related to mobile technology. My field notes consist mostly out of descriptions of the numerous different ways of how my informants utilized and talked about mobile technology. In addition, to gain a larger perspective of my subject I also bought daily, the three main English newspapers, the Kathmandu Post, the Himalayan Times and the Republica and collected all the articles and ads that concerned mobile technology. I also took notes of the different ways mobile technology appeared in other medias such as Television and Nepali internet sites. I also audio recorded six longer interviews concerning mobile technology, yet most of the interviews I conducted I recorded by taking notes. Most of my informants spoke English quite fluently and consequently I conducted most of the interviews myself, yet in some few cases I also utilized an interpreter. I also collected different digital data which consisted for example of pictures, music, diagrams and many kinds of different digital content my informants had in their mobile phones.

## **Ethnographic present**

My first touch with the unstable state of Nepalese society came in the winter of 2007, when I had planned to travel by land from Bihar, North-India to the Kathmandu valley through the southern border of Nepal. Yet I was forced to change my plans as a few days before my departure a series of bombs went off in the border area. It was reported in the news that the culprits were a group from southern Nepal who felt that Tarai, the southern lowlands of Nepal and its people were not taken into account in the peace process initiated after a decade long civil war and were left outside of parliamentary power sharing. Eventually I was able to reach Kathmandu by air from Calcutta. At the time of my visit the capital was in a state of paralysis because India had decided to cut of the supply of petrol, which resulted in demonstrations and several kilometres long queues at the gas stations. During this first visit I became acquainted with a family, who subsequently became my hosts during my fieldwork.

The family I lived with in the Kathmandu valley and the people in general with whom I conducted my fieldwork with were a part of a small elite minority among the people living in the confines of the nation-state of Nepal. Many of them had relatives all over the world and their families had been for a long time in contact with the world outside of Nepal. Some of my informants had married people from abroad and there were in some cases new generations of very mixed heritage already reaching maturity. Many of my primary informants spoke quite fluent English. Often the people I spent my time with were also financially from the upper

echelons of society. These qualities do not apply to the vast majority of Nepalese and especially to those living in the rural areas of the country. The differences between the rural and urban are quite enormous. Consequently I wish to emphasize from the start that the ethnographic examples deriving from my own fieldwork are not to be taken as encompassing statements about Nepalese culture. Instead I utilize my ethnographic narratives to think of how to describe technology as an ontological phenomenon.

My second trip in the winter and spring of 2010 during which I conducted my fieldwork, was as chaotic as the previous one. I witnessed numerous demonstrations and strikes, which paralyzed the city and my departure was made almost impossible by the Maoists who had come in masses to demonstrate in the capital. During my stay in Kathmandu the political parties were fighting for power in the parliament and during the four month period there was actually no government at all. The daily newspapers were counting days to a date which was supposed to be the final deadline for a new comprehensive constitution required by the peace deal. But as the date was approaching there did not seem to be any progress on any of the issues that the constitution would have to solve. (Three years later when finishing this thesis the situation is virtually the same.) One of the pressing issues was for example what to do with the huge amount of armed and trained Maoist combatants now without anything to do. Most of my informants had long ago given up hope for any good to come out of politics and had become quite cynical about the dysfunctional democracy. Instead of focusing on politics or on the state of the nation many of my informants tried to focus on other things in life and adjust to the continuous chaos as best as they could. Others were planning to leave the country, and during my stay some left to live abroad.

During my visits to Nepal and my fieldwork I had the privilege to enjoy the hospitality and to live with a family for whose friendship and support I will remain grateful. Among them the contemporary transformations of their society did not receive many positive valuations, and the past was often glorified. The common feeling was that things were changing too fast and nobody had any certainty on what would be the consequences of these changes.

*The father of the family I was living with is narrating me his childhood in the valley. He is emphasizing how Nepal has gone under tremendous changes since those times. He tells how in his youth there were no toilets. All the kids of his neighbourhood had to walk 15 minutes to an area in the outskirts of the city to defecate. For this they had separate areas for boys and girls. He also recounts*

*how during those times there was only a radio and no television. Electricity was scarce and there were no motorbikes, which the valley is now filled with. There were no proper roads, and there were very few cars. He is not at all certain that all these major changes of contemporary times are eventually for good.*

It is these uncertain conditions and the rapid pace of the transformation affecting my informants' lives which will be the background of my ethnographic narratives. Some informants declared that it might be better to be ruled by a sovereign king than to witness the chaos instigated by the establishment of democracy and the endless fighting of various political parties and groups. Yet, despite the fact that there was no authority that would have united the people of Kathmandu valley together, there were still some other phenomena that seemingly did. One of these was the mobile technology and in addition to it connecting most of my informants to each other it also connected them with me through some presupposed truths concerning reality. It is this unity and how it is maintained in an otherwise unstable environment that consists of huge multiplicities of cultural differences will then be the main subject my ethnographic narratives will consequently be investigating.

## **Ethics**

To retain my informants' anonymity I will not depict their names in any format. I will also not draw any connections between the persons appearing in different ethnographic narratives to avoid from singling out any particular informant. I will also retain in general from referring to my informants' ethnicity or political affiliations and only describe them to emphasize some theoretical point.

# Unity and ontology

For sociocultural anthropology mobile technology presents a peculiar case. If studied ethnographically, especially as its latest incarnation of smart phones, it enables people to perform, in a connected digital platform, all the cultural and social differences which have traditionally been the focus of the discipline. For instance anthropologists have shown how different functions of mobile phones such as transferring sound (Tenhunen 2009; Horst and Miller 2005) or writing text messages (McIntosh 2010; Kasesniemi and Rautiainen 2002) convey local cultural and social practices. Anthropologists have also discovered how mobile phones intermediate local cultural conceptions such as beliefs in the supernatural (Barendregt and Pertierra 2008; McIntosh 2010), understandings of modernity (Barendregt 2008) and local social roles and identities (Nafus and Tracey 2002). These studies have also witnessed that mobile phones are used effectively to further political aims (Tenhunen 2011) and economic goals (Horst and Miller 2005) dictated by the cultural backgrounds of the users.

But, in addition to mobile technology's ability to enable people to communicate and perform their social and cosmological differences it can be argued that technologies are, in a sense, cultures in their own:

*Technology, defined anthropologically, is not material culture but rather a total social phenomenon in the sense used by Mauss, a phenomenon that marries the material, the social and the symbolic in a complex web of associations. A technology is far more than the material object that appears under the sway of the Western penchant for fetishism, the tendency to unhinge human creations from the social relations that produce them. Every technology is a human world, a form of humanised nature that unifies virtually every aspect of human endeavour. To construct a technology is not merely to deploy materials and techniques; it is also to construct social and economic alliances, to invent new legal principles for social relations, and to provide powerful new vehicles for culturally-provided myths (Pfaffenberg 1988:249).*

Hence the universality of mobile technology is neither something to be taken for granted. For example, Mizuko Ito (2005) argues that the universality of mobile technology does not exist without effort.



*Technological universality, rather than being structurally given, is a contingent production of a wide range of actors, including governments, technologists, and scholars (Ito 2005: 7).*

Consequently Ito (2005:15) argues that mobile technology cannot be analysed as a relation between a national culture such as Japan and a universal technology because, both cultures and technologies, are internally variable and consist of heterogeneities. Technologies and how they are developed is contested and negotiated in processes into which various different parties such as media, authorities and scientific institutions participate and are thus in many ways connected to politics and power (e.g. Ito and Okabe 2005a:216; Tenhunen 2011). Yet, a stable technology requires that these heterogeneous actors participate in maintain this stability and are thus assembled together in some manner. For instance, Ito and Okabe Daisuke (2005a) describe how the norms concerning mobile technology use in public transport in Japan were established:

*The norms of keitai (mobile phone in Japanese) use in public transport emerged from a historically specific process of enlisting and disciplining a new social actor youth, in the meanings and practice of Keitai. This contingent social order was achieved through a complex interaction between various social actors: public transportation organizations, keitai - adopting youth, and adults in positions of power in relation to those youth - signage, announcements in public transportation, discourse in mass media, and changing keitai technology (Ito and Okabe 2005a:215).*

It is these processes of assembling and negotiating a huge array of different and heterogeneous actors together through presupposed ontological truths which will be my subject. To examine how such processes manifest in the Kathmandu valley I will utilize a theoretical shift known as the ontological turn.

## **Ontological turn**

In recent times, anthropologists from various fields of the discipline have started to examine the possibilities of shifting from an epistemological to an ontological theory of human collective action (Alberti et al. 2011; Bruun Jensen et al. 2011; Henare et al. 2007; Venkatesan et al. 2008; Viveiros de Castro 2003). This change in theoretical orientation is generally referred to

in the literature as the ontological turn (Henare et al. 2007:7-8; Alberti et al. 2011). Yet, what this shift means is under consideration, and currently there is not even a consensus on what ontology means in an anthropological context (Venkatesan et al. 2008). Despite the implications and significance of this shift are yet to be fully realized, I would suggest that it nevertheless opens up some interesting questions, especially concerning modern phenomena such as mobile technology. In the following I will examine some of the general outlines of the ontological turn and how they relate to mobile technology as an object of anthropological and ethnographic research.

The growing interest in ontology in social sciences can be traced to a critique hailing from science and technology studies (e.g. Latour 1993, Law 2004, Mol 2007) which questions some of the principal assumptions of modern thought. At the most abstract level, this critique is directed towards the dualistic nature of modern cosmology, or in other words its ontology. This modern ontology implicitly separates human subjectivity and objective material reality into different levels of existence. In a very simplified form the main theme of this critique is that modern thought separates subjective ideas from material objects into separate realities, when in practice the key institutions of modern societies such as sciences and technologies are based on processes where human ideas and material objects are symmetrical participants. In sum, the argument is that the subject-object divide is not a universal quality of the world, but a heuristic deriving from the modern cosmological understanding of reality. This critique has consequently opened up some novel ways to analyse how modern institutions are organized and how to interpret them in social sciences.

As mentioned, the debates surrounding the validity of such generalizing narratives and the meaning of ontological turn for anthropology in general are still taking shape during the writing of this thesis (Alberti et al. 2011; Bruun Jensen et al. 2011; Latour 2009; Strathern 2011; Venkatesan et al. 2008). For instance, Daniel Miller (2005) quite explicitly argues that even though questions concerning ontology can be debated and solved in theory, these debates do not have any practical implications.

*So in my current research project on poverty and communications in Jamaica, I Imagine I will commonly use terms such as social relations, subjects and objects. Partly because I want to reflect the way the people I work with think and talk, but also because I will want to find ways to convey my research both to the people I'm working among and very likely to policy-related institutions working on*

*issues of poverty and development... An essential part of anthropology, then is a commitment to betrayal – a promise to betray the philosophical understandings we strive for in gaining our intellectual purchase, as we return to the vulgarity of our relativism and our empathy with the world (Miller 2005:45).*

Consequently, Miller and Heather Horst (2006) do not analyse ontological presuppositions in their ethnographic monograph concerning mobile technology in Jamaica, at least, not by engaging to the literature concerning ontological turn. Contrary to Miller's view, this thesis will attempt to show that an ontological analysis can bring out productive new ways for social scientists to describe technologies and to engage in technological debates.

As the basis of my inquiry into ontology I will start from Eduardo Viveiros De Castro's conceptualisation of ontology described in his statement of anthropology's mission as a scientific discipline:

*Anthropology's mission, as a social science, is to describe the forms by which, and the conditions under which, truth and falsity are articulated according to the different ontologies that are presupposed by each culture (a culture here being taken as analogous to a scientific theory, which requires its own ontology – that is, its own field of objects and processes – in order for the theory to generate relevant truths) (2011:143).*

Thus, I take ontology to mean the presupposed logic through which the truth of a statement about reality is evaluated. Or in other words, I conceptualise ontology as the practices through which truth is ascertained in relation to some given practice. In my view, this is the subject anthropologists have always been studying under the framework of cultural difference. The objective of this thesis is then to extend this method of analysis to mobile technology by analysing the conditions through which it becomes real. To begin my exploration into ontology I will start by examining how ontology can be used to analyse historical forms of establishing unity in the Kathmandu valley.

## Patterns of historical change

To examine the historical forms of ontology in the Kathmandu valley I start from Marshall Sahlins (2008, 2010) conceptualisation of alterity. Sahlins (2004) posits that history is not a result of universal and natural tendencies or qualities of human kind, because the unfolding of historical events is always based on a cultural structure. To elicit this point Sahlins (2004:16-123) presents a detailed description of two major wars located in opposite corners of earth: one between Athens and Sparta in Greece and the other between Bau and Reva in Fiji. Sahlins (2004:69-82) argues that these wars and how they historically unfolded can only be understood by considering how the cultural forms of these two groups of people developed in opposition to each other and how these forms, in turn, structured historical events.

This conceptualisation of how people construct their culture in contrast to the “other” is a reoccurring theme in anthropological literature. For instance, a classical account of the relations between Sherpas, a Nepalese ethnic group, and western mountaineers by Sherry B. Ortner conceptualises how this encounter between different people has historically resulted in the redefinition of the both sides’ cultures:

*If the Sherpas have been defined by mountaineering, they have also defined it. And if they have been defined by their own cultural background, they have also redefined it. It has been my position throughout that the Sherpa's engagement with mountaineering was always at the same time an engagement with their own culture (Ortner 2001:250).*

In abstract terms, this conceptualisation can be summed up by the famous statement from Claude Levi-Strauss:

*We should not, therefore, be tempted to a piece-meal study of the diversity of human cultures, for that diversity depends less on the isolation of the various groups than on the relations between them (Levi-Strauss 1952:10).*

Yet even though this relational feature of cultural existence has been for long acknowledged in various forms, Sahlins (2010) argues that it has been mostly omitted in anthropological theory making, an exclusion which has resulted in a persistent theoretical contradiction.

*It is no exaggeration to say that anthropology, by virtue of its traditional concepts of societies and cultures as self-organized monads, has been implicated for centuries in a major theoretical scandal (Sahlins 2010: 102).*

According to Sahlins (2012: 102-104), because of historical contingencies, cultures have been conceptualised in anthropology as stable and sui-generis entities whose qualities can be uncovered through fieldwork. Analysing cultures as closed systems can then be seen as a defective conceptualisation because it conceals the inherent relationality of cultures.

*What seems truly internal about cultural existence is the necessity of incorporating the external (Sahlins 2010: 107).*

Sahlins (2010:107) points out that people must always rely on external conditions for their survival and because humans are mortal, their societies must also be socially related to some kind of outside to subsist in time. This outside of societies has then taken various forms in different societies and in different times.

*Ranging from beasts, spirits, and gods to ineffable forces, by the way of the generic dead or the ancestors and of other peoples with their remarkable gifts, the extraordinary agents that control the human fate live outside the space of human control (Sahlins 2010:107).*

One of the most classical forms through which this principle manifests is the so called stranger-kingships. Sahlins (2008, 2010) describes how in numerous societies all around the world the sovereign has been a stranger to the place and people he rules. In these societies charter myths tell of stranger-kings who, through their divine power, had the ability to transcend and cosmologically encompass their subjects. Sahlins argues that this power to rule was ascertained through cosmological means:

*More than political, however, the conjunction here is cosmological, which is what helps it endure. Perhaps it is only lately in human history that power became a purely social fact, as established by real-instrumental means of coercion – the way it seems to contemporary Social Science. In the instance at hand, the foreign rulers are to the native people in some such encompassing relation as the Celestial is to the Terrestrial, the Sea to the Land, the Wilderness to the Settled; or in abstract terms, as the Universal is to the Particular, a ratio that also holds for their respective gods (Sahlins 2010:111).*

In these societies political authority was the outcome of a reciprocal relationship in which the stranger-kings legitimized their sovereignty by enabling their divine power to become also the power of the society and its people (Sahlins 2010:110). Obviously all societies have not been ruled by divine stranger-kings, yet Sahlins argues that a structurally similar relation can be found universally:

*The same configuring of power, the same project of prospering the local society by incorporating potent foreign agencies, with the analogous effect of enhancing the social value of those who accomplish the feat, describes a variety of border-transcending exploits ranging from head-hunting, cannibalism, and other modes of predation, through raiding for foreign valuables, to vision quests, shamanism, and other such means of incorporating and domesticating the spiritual virtues of external subjects (Sahlins 2010:111).*

In Sahlins' (2008:185) view, the politics of human societies are principally based on authority that derives from realms beyond the self-governing of the society. An essential feature of social life is then, according to Sahlins, that the proximity to these exterior sources of power and the ability to handle them is often the source of political authority in the society (2008:187).

Sahlins (2008:194) adds that this principle of externality is not an absolute but always relative and contextual in the sense that it follows the principle of segmentary opposition. Hence, how the division between external and internal or universal and particular depends on who is making this distinction. What is external to a particular group of people, for example to an extended family, is different from what it is for more encompassing groups, like for the citizens of a nation-state. Sahlins (2008:196) describes how one of most basic manifestations of this phenomenon of acquisition of external power can be seen in the relation between the internal extended family and affinal outside relatives. For example, in South-Asian societies where the bride often comes to the ancestral house and lineage from outside, she is powerful in a sense that she gives birth to those who continue the lineage but she is also dangerous as she is not herself part of the lineage. In contrast, at the scale of empires and kingdoms, the relationality of cultural existence can be seen in how powerful empires and their rulers are imitated far outside their actual borders.

*Rather than the simple expression of an endogenous dynamic, the local system – in political, economic, and doctrinal dimensions – is to large extent a function of relations in a greater cultural-historical field. The peoples situated in a regional*

*network of center-periphery relations often engage in a kind of upward political mobility, insofar as their own rulers model their sovereignty on neighboring galactic superiors, and perhaps ultimately on distant legendary sources. "Galactic mimesis," one could call it (Sahlins 2010:121).*

According to Sahlins (2010:121), instead of trying to decipher what a particular culture or group is in essence, social sciences should focus more on how the internal constitution of societies is based on their relationality. Sahlins (2008:185-197) states that any particular manifestation of kinship, religion or politics is based on this same elementary form, which gives it a structural order.

Another classical anthropological model which makes a similar point is Louis Dumont (1980) concept of hierarchy. Hierarchy, according to Dumont (1980:239), is a relation that can be called as the encompassing of the contrary. In hierarchy complementariness or contradiction is contained in a unity of superior order. According to Dumont (1980:240-241), the individual actors of any social formation are always understood in a relation to some different and encompassing whole which defines and organizes them. For instance, the hierarchy of south-Asian caste system is often conceptualised in anthropology as a cosmology which organizes groups according to their ritual purity (e.g. Gellner and Quigley 1995).

If these classical anthropological theories of culture are seen in the light of Viveiros de Castro's (2011:143) conceptualisation of ontology as the presupposed conditions through which truth is ascertained, I would argue that Sahlin's concept of alterity and Dumont's hierarchy refer to the same subject. If simplified, Sahlin's argument is that the form of any social unit is established through some shared relation to an external power that encompasses and transcends its participants. Dumont's conceptualisation of hierarchy is comparable to Sahlin's notion of alterity; the relations between individual social actors are organized by a whole that is different and hence outside of them. For instance, in the context of stranger-kingships hierarchy can be seen as the principle through which stranger-king encompasses his subjects and consequently defines their positions vis-à-vis each other. Hence both conceptualizations point out that the organization of a social unit is dictated by a context which through its alterity encompasses its particular members. I take ontology to be a conceptualization of the same principle. The context or the whole that encompasses the participants of a social unit is the presupposed condition through which truth is ascertained. Utilizing this model of ontology I will

then in the subsequent chapters analyse the shifting ontological presuppositions which can be gathered from the history of the Kathmandu valley.

## **Ancient history of the Kathmandu valley**

During my visits to the Kathmandu valley, the highly complex mesh of various different groups, festivals, religions, languages and multitudes of different ancient structures highlighted how the valley had for a long time been a desirable place for different people from all around the Himalayas and beyond to migrate in; sometimes peacefully and sometimes through violent conquests. This influx of different groups and their traditions had apparently made the society of Kathmandu valley a very heterogeneous one.

The heterogeneity of Kathmandu valley's social forms was also accentuated by the very visible presence of numerous politically motivated ethnic and cultural groups that were competing for power, sometimes by quite violent means. There did not seem to be any encompassing political authority which would have unified all the inhabitants of the valley. The anthropological accounts (e.g. Gellner 1995:6-7; Rankin 2004:76; Levy 1990:35-39) of the Kathmandu valley's history also tell a story of a location which has drawn a constant influx of various different cultures and influences. Consequently, the constantly recurring process of incorporating various external influences has quite visibly been an important agent of change in the social and cultural life of the valley. In the subsequent part I will narrate how these processes of transformation unfolded before the contact with western civilization.

## **Sanskritization**

The first known organized society of the Kathmandu valley emerged when people known as Kirata became ruled by Sanskrit using Licchavis, who presumably had their origins in the North-Indian court of Vaiśali (Gellner 1995:7; Levy 1990:36-37). This was the beginning of a pattern in which the ruling class of the valley had their origins in North-India. The Licchavi dynasty is seen as the first monarchical state in the valley and a part of Indian high culture, as it had a caste system that was dominated by Brahman priests and their Ksatriya patron kings. Thus, the first process of cultural and social change known as Sanskritization is connected to the reign of Licchavis. This historical process of change was a result of the difference between the



ruled and the rulers. As Sanskrit users the Licchavis were different from the Tibeto-Burman speaking Kiratas who were of Mongoloid origin. In addition the first folk religion of the area was in all likelihood a mix of previous Himalayan customs and Buddhism. Thus Brahmanical Hinduism can be considered as an addition brought to the valley by the Licchavi courts. The religious and cultural differences between the elite and the common folk eventually blended together, but in a way that the ruling class followed more strict Sanskrit models and the common people retained more residues of ancient Himalayan customs (Levy 1990:37). In addition to institutionalising new forms of religion, the literature (Levy 1990:36-37; Gellner 1995:7) also describes how the Licchavis instigated linguistic and infrastructural reforms. Non-Sanskrit titles and place names were changed during these times to Sanskrit ones. Licchavis also constructed irrigation systems that enabled the production of agricultural surplus which in turn made it possible that an urban society emerged in the valley

After the Licchavis reign and a little known Thakuri period, began the historically significant Malla period (Levy 1990:41-45; Gellner 1995: 7-8). Social transformation in the Kathmandu valley during this period was again related to foreign influences deriving from North-India as the valley evolved in close relation with the North-Indian kingdom of Mithila. The beginnings of the Malla period were times of turmoil and fragmentation resulting from the invasions in the valley, first by the Maithilis and then by Muslims. These conquests and the consequent disarray in the valley facilitated Jayasthiti Malla's ascendance into power. Jayasthiti was a Maithili royal who established himself as a ruler and unifier of the valley through political manoeuvres and by marrying into a royal family. Many laws that established caste classifications and other reforms are considered to be of his legacy and the construction of numerous new temples and repairing of old ones are also accredited to him.

In the case of the Licchavis and Mallas there is a similar pattern of change in which foreign elite claims the sovereignty over the people of the valley and institutionalizes its authority through various means. Yet, in the Malla case the literature (Levy 1990:41; Gellner 1995:9) gives a more detailed description of the cosmological premises of the royal authority: the Mallas defined themselves as non-local, for their right to rule was derived from links to external courts and divinities. They were seen as descendants of the Vedic hero Rama (an incarnation of Viṣṇu) and traced their ancestry to powerful royal lineages from India. The Mallas also had their own lineage deity Taleju who conferred them their divine power.

Therefore, during these historical times changes in the form of the society of the Kathmandu valley were associated to various relations to other societies and their ontologies of transcendental agencies that foreign royal sovereigns brought with them. These processes of transformation seemed also to have begun during states of fragmentation to which they brought unity by means of reforming the society according to these new ontologies. Eventually the new forms of society emerging from these changes were constituted through the construction of institutions that consolidated the ontology and power relations of the society and secured its stability for a time.

Yet, despite that these relations to outside world brought new social forms to the Kathmandu valley, old traditions seem to have also persisted in many ways. Or in other words previous ontologies seem to have persisted in some form despite the prominence of new ones.

*... (Jayasthiti Malla) he built on pre-existing hierarchical structures of some kind and on pre-existing principles and forms of Hindu and Newar order. ...Jayasthiti Malla revived, extended, and codified an order that built on pre-existing forms and forced them into Hindu ideals of the proper form for a little kingdom, a city-state (Levy 1990:45).*

## **Newars**

After the periods of Sanskritization the second round of major transformations in the Kathmandu valley came after the Mallas' reign. During these times, the Malla kingdom had fragmented into three parts, each with a distinct and separate dialect and customs. These kingdoms in turn consisted of numerous different groups that had migrated into the valley during the history. During the end of Malla period these heterogeneous groups started to develop a distinct and more unified identity in opposition to another group, the Parbatiya (Toffin 2007:361-363). The Parbatiyas conquered the Kathmandu valley in 1768-9 which obviously meant a major upheaval for the previous inhabitants and bestowed them with a common name: the Newars (Toffin 2007:359-361). The name Newar was previously used to refer only to the high castes of the kingdoms ruled by the Malla dynasties. As the new regime took over, the name Newar became to be associated with all the people of these kingdoms who shared the same language. As a result of the Parbatiya conquest, the multiple different social forms operational in the valley were streamlined to fit into the caste system and the society of the conquerors (Rankin 2004:73-80).

Literature (Levy 1990:48-49; Gellner 1995:11-12) describes how the relation between the conqueror and the conquered shaped them both in many ways. The heterogeneous groups of the Kathmandu valley were now treated as one ethnic group amongst many others which were ruled by the Shahs. One example of these processes in which the conquerors subjugated the previous forms of society into their own is the Law Code (Muluki Ain) of 1854. Muluki Ain was an attempt to assign for the whole kingdom a single caste order negating pre-existing social forms.

*The rather more complex Newar system could only be forced into this scheme with some difficulty, and against the traditions of some of the participants... Shresthas were placed above the Buddhist sacerdotal caste of Varjacaryas and Sakyas, doing violence to the Newars' traditional system, but in accordance with the strongly Hindu Bias of the code's sponsor (Gellner 1995:12).*

The literature (Levy 1990:48-49; Gellner 1995:11-12) elicits how the Newars had also their own agency in these processes as they became very exclusive and started to establish their status among the other groups of the kingdom. As the Newars and sovereignty of the Shahs have been the subjects of ethnographic research in anthropology I will in the subsequent part examine in detail how my conceptualisation of ontology shows up in these studies.

## Historical ontology of the Kathmandu valley

In this part I will focus on cultural forms which can be traced to these historical times I previously narrated and examine through literature and my own fieldwork experiences the ontological presuppositions of these forms. I have included in this chapter two interrelated subjects of study. As most of the earlier ethnographic research on Kathmandu valley focuses on Newars as a distinct group or a society I will start with Newars. This is also because my initial connection to Nepalese society was through Newars, and during most of my fieldwork I lived with a Newar family. Consequently, my viewpoint is closely tied to theirs. Yet it is quite obvious that what is to be a Newar in the Kathmandu valley cannot be reduced from the more overarching context of being a citizen of the nation state of Nepal. Hence, I will subsequently also examine aspects that concern more generally all of the inhabitants of Kathmandu valley.

### The transcendence of divine kings and deities

The theme of stranger-kingship can already be found in the first ethnographic studies conducted in Nepal by Cristoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1956). In these pioneering studies Fürer-Haimendorf sets out some basic outlines and questions concerning Newar society. Fürer-Haimendorf (1956:21-23) describes how the Newar society consists of huge numbers of highly autonomous caste groups with very divergent customs and dialects which makes it hard to situate them in any coherent model. Fürer-Haimendorf sees this lack of coherence as a result of the Shah conquest, which shifted authority that would have organized caste relations outside the Newar society.

During my own fieldwork, I often came across practices and enunciations which emphasized the power of kingship to encompass and unify. For the Newars historical Malla kings were often an important source of unity and pride. One of the features that seemed to connect Newars together was the feeling of a shared historical origin as the native inhabitants and builders of the Kathmandu valley's cities.

*Me and a Newari informant are passing an artificial pond that is a part of a seemingly ancient water system. The informant points at to this structure and argues that the infrastructure that the Malla kings built is still functional, contrary to the inefficient and temporary constructions that have come after Malla times. He explains that the Malla kings were the last good kings that ruled in the valley and*

*during the Mallas the society of the valley flourished and attained its peak. The ensuing periods and dynasties have brought, in his view, a constantly worsening situation for the people of the valley.*

Despite their various incoherencies my Newari informants separated themselves as a distinct group in opposition to other groups of the Kathmandu valley. Consequently, most of the ethnographies which take Newars as the object of study focus on providing an answer to the question that can be derived already from the work of Fürer-Haimendorf: if the Malla kingship was the institution that organized Newar society and its caste system, what was now in its place that maintained the Newar unity? In the literature there are different answers to this question. Robert I. Levy (1990) describes how the Newar society of one of the three royal cities of the Kathmandu valley, Bhaktapur, is based on a normative symbolic system maintained by the religious elite. In a similar manner Bruce McCoy Owens (2000) asserts that the connecting feature of Newar culture is a relation between humans and deities. Some anthropologists argue (e.g. Quigley 1995; Rankin 2004:133) that the basis of Newar society is a structural principle of centralisation according to which all groups try to emulate the position of the divine kings. Yet, despite these differences, there is a certain connecting theme: the unity of Newars is seen to be based on a relation to some kind of external and transcendental power.

In Levy's (1990:151-197) conceptualisation a symbolic order delineates a boundary between Bhaktapur's internal order and the world outside. According to him the outside has special values related to power and fertility which are symbolized by fierce and dangerous tantric gods located outside the city walls (Levy 1990: 157). In Levy's (1990:197) view the symbolic representations of the outside as a source of power and danger ascertain the civic order and the caste divisions inside the city walls. Owens (2000:724) in turn describes how the Newar religious life is based on a general understanding of a meditation technique called Sadhana, in which through visualizing a deity one achieves a connection to it and thereby gains access to its powers. This can be seen in the religious festivals where deities are carried around the cities in pedestals. The organization of these festivals follows a principle of proximity: how close a certain caste group is with a deity through rituals and other practices crucial to the festival the more of its power the group possesses. Hence, according to Owens (2000:724) every group has a different relation to a deity, which asserts their status in relation to other groups.

During my fieldwork practices which draw their power and form from transcendental deities and the religious realm were ubiquitous and manifested in practices called *pujas*. In

general *puja* means giving something to deities and consequently receiving their blessing. The events where *puja* was conducted ranged from intimate get-togethers with strictly given roles among the closest family members to major festivals attended by thousands of people. There were unlimited reasons to do *puja* and during my stay in Kathmandu I participated in conducting *puja* for example in the occasion of my and my roommate's lunar birthday (which coincidentally was almost on the same date), we also had a *puja* for a relative who was moving from the country, and in various instances we conducted *puja* to remember and commemorate ancestors of the family. We also conducted *puja* in larger religious festivals connected to various cosmic events and activities of Hindu deities and Buddhist Bodhisattvas. I also often participated in Newar festivals called *jatras* which usually consisted of carrying some particular deity or deities through precisely marked paths and conducting *puja* for them. My informants explained that those who were positioned closest to the deity during festivals and conducted the necessary practices for it to be taken around the city had a very high status in Newar society. For example, in many occasions some person's prominence was qualified by stating how he was allowed to travel in the chariot of a certain deity during a *jatra*.

The principle of centralisation in its turn is ascertained to function by assigning the whole society the task of removing impure qualities from the hierarchically higher groups and eventually from the king (or the royal caste who has assumed the position of the king) (Quigley 1995; Rankin 2004:133). This principle ascertains the status of the king who, purified from human imperfections, can transcend and encompass the society and hence maintain its continuity (Quigley 1995:309, 319-320).

The daily routine of living in a Newar family was also filled with practices and events connected to purity and thus to caste divisions. For example, many everyday activities such as eating included various caste specific rules and regulations. I was required to wash my mouth and hands after a meal if I wished to enter other parts of the house. There were also various rules as to which hand to use to pick up various items during the meals, which hand to eat with, and which to pass food to others with.

*During dinner, the mother of the house, who usually serves everybody else before starting her own meal, had already sat down when I had finished and washed my hands. As I had nothing to do, the eldest son asked me to bring more egg-acchar to him. I picked up his acchar plate and stood up to go to the kitchen, when I got immediately reprimanded: "No, no, no, no! You cannot go to the kitchen if you*

*have touched the used food on the plates or the plates themselves!" I had to wash my hands and mouth again and then bring the acchar in its own pot and be careful not to touch his plate when giving it.*

In some cases, the strict way caste purity dictated possible marriage partners became also evident. For instance, I became acquainted with a married couple of which the wife was from a significantly higher Newar caste than the husband. Their marriage was conducted without the consent of the wife's lineage, and her family had consequently cut off almost all contact with the couple. The family had even taken their son to be raised without knowledge of his lower caste father. Members of my host family also explained that if a male member of the family would choose to marry significantly lower caste wife this would be possible but highly problematic. A major reason for this was that it was deemed very hard to conduct religious rituals with a wife from another caste, because the rituals important for the unity of a lineage differed quite drastically between castes. A lower caste wife would not know how to conduct herself in these events and would, in all likelihood, be ridiculed by the elders of the family.

If the ontological principles of hierarchy and alterity are applied to analyse these examples, one can detect a certain method of ascertaining truth that pertains to a transcendent and divine context. If one moves to ethnographies concerning the kingship of the Shahs' and the recent Maoist rebellion, one can find similar ontological contexts. In a similar way as it was for the Mallas, the power of the Shah kings to rule was also very much connected to relations that lead outside the kingdom. This becomes evident in Marie Lecomte-Tiloune's (2004) ethnographic study concerning the current political rivalry between the old royal order and the Maoist rebels. It would seem that even though the rise of the Maoists is in direct relation to the weakening royal power of the Shahs, it still is based on similar sources. According to Lecomte-Tiloune (2004:14-15) the rule of Parbatiya kings was based on the power of the kings to unify the whole of society by going to war. Hence for Parbatiyas the main function of the king was to be a warrior who unified his people against a common external enemy. Historically the king was required to regularly carry out blood sacrifice by engaging in holy warfare to regenerate his power to rule the kingdom (Lecomte-Tiloune 2004:14-15). Lecomte-Tiloune (2004:19) shows how even though the Maoists derive a majority of their imagery from the communist ideology, they still, to some extent, base their claim to authority to a revived model of the warrior king. Hence the Shah's and the Maoists' claims to authority were different from the Mallas, and yet they also draw from sources that transcend the society.

Even though many of my Newari informants often glorified the Malla dynasty as the golden times and saw that the ensuing dynasties had lead the valley to a constant decline, some of them also saw that the rule of a Shah King, despite being from the lineage of conquerors, would be better than the current situation. The king and his power to encompass the society and bring order were many times considered to be the only way out of the current political and social chaos.

*A Newari informant is explaining to me that the only solution to the current political stalemate and the chaos it has entailed is that the king should retake the power. The informant explains that it is only after the instalment of democracy that things have really gone downhill. He characterizes these thoughts with a narrative about traffic lights. He tells me how just after the establishing of democracy he was in a crossing with a motorbike waiting for the traffic lights to turn green. Suddenly a driver had overtaken the queue and started to cross even though the lights were still red. This action derived an angry response from the queue to which the driver responded by stating: "Who cares its democracy now!" My informant also narrates that before democracy garbage was picked up, which is not happening now. He thinks that because of democracy people just think about themselves and their personal needs and consequently there is nothing that would unify the people of Nepal for any common purpose. He thinks the only solution is to return to monarchy. He even goes as far as to proclaim that he would take up arms to accomplish the re-establishment of monarchy.*

In my view, the principles of hierarchy and alterity can be utilized to draw out the ontological presuppositions present in these practices. In all of these examples, an external and transcendent power ensures the continuity of society and also dictates its power relations through assigning people into some kind of hierarchy. From my fieldwork experiences it can also be perceived that the agency of the historical transcendental contexts can still be detected in contemporary Kathmandu valley. Yet, as I move in my historical review closer to the moment of the writing of this thesis, it becomes clear that numerous other practices that presuppose entirely different ontologies and sources of authority have become important. From this characterisation of historical forms of ascertaining truth I move to examine how the same principles would apply to more recent practices. As the histories of pre-western contact Kathmandu valley tell of the marginalization of Newars because of the expansion of the



Parbatiya kingdom, the next part narrates how the Parbatiya kingdom became marginalized as a result of the expansion of an even more powerful empire.

## **The outside expands**

The end of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century saw the colonial expansion of the British Empire throughout South-Asia, bringing radical changes to the people of the Kathmandu valley. In face of this new threat and as the ruler of the newly emergent kingdom of Nepal, Prithivi Narayan Shah secluded his kingdom from outsiders. Trading was made difficult by protective trade policies which eventually resulted in disruptions to the trade routes between Tibet and India. These policies eventually led to wars, first with Tibet and then eventually with the British Empire reigning in India. The Shah kingdom was able to defend its ground, to become in effect the only kingdom in the area not to fall under the direct rule of the British. Nevertheless, in the peace treaty of 1816 Nepal had to give away one third of its territories. Despite their victory the British were so impressed by the Nepali war efforts, that, as a part of the peace treaty, they acquired the possibility to recruit a special Gurkha regiment into the British and Indian armies, a custom that is still in existence. The Shahs managed to keep Nepal to some extent independent, but had to grant the British some concessions and allow a British resident to live in Kathmandu.

These relations with the British Empire marked the start of being connected to a world in which Nepal was now only a peripheral kingdom in the outskirts of a global empire. This transformation took a form which Mark Liechty (2008:41) describes with the term selective exclusion. Liechty (2008:40-44) characterizes selective exclusion as a process in which the elite of Kathmandu sought to harness the power of the regions new rulers and simultaneously tried to keep those powers away from the hands of their subordinates. The patronage of the British became a must for the rulers in Kathmandu, who were surrounded by a power hungry court. In effect, the ruling elites had to balance between harnessing the powers derived from the British and still maintain some degree of independence.

This process of selective exclusion eventually led the royal elite to adopt western commodities and ways of living (Liechty 2008:40-44). The royals started to wear British army uniforms and use foreign military rank designations to emphasize their power. This adoption of foreign attires led to designate a social hierarchy, in which the elite dressed according to European standards and their subordinates kept their traditional dresses. Eventually all kinds of western goods and gadgets were brought in to amuse the elites and their palaces and houses started to imitate western architecture.

These processes were amplified during the reign of Ranas, a royal lineage of the Shah dynasty, who took the power through a violent coup. Ranas assigned themselves as prime ministers who wielded the de facto power while the Shahs remained as ceremonial kings. During the Rana rule selective exclusion was codified into laws which denied the commoners adopting western styles of clothing, transportation or architecture (Liechty 2008:44-46). Thus, the legitimacy of the Ranas reign, unlike the Mallas or Shahs was not anymore derived strictly from traditional sources like transcendent deities but from western commodity consumption and the distinction this consumption ascertained between the rulers and the ruled (Rankin 2004:96-97). Examples of this are still very visible in the form of the enormous European style palaces Ranas built in the Kathmandu valley. Out of these palaces the grandest is the Singha Durbar in the centre of Kathmandu which, modelled after Versailles, stands in a very stark contrast with the adjoining temples that channel power from different sources of authority.

These mechanisms of power based on a simultaneous combination of exclusion and inclusion were not sustainable for very long as the Ranas could not maintain the exclusion of the valley (e.g. Rankin 2004:96-97). Eventually the British Empire constructed a railway that circumvented the trade route through the Kathmandu valley and enabled the British to trade directly with Tibet and China. The profits deriving from the control of trans-Himalayan trade gone, the Ranas started to tax heavily the nation to fund their lavish westernized lifestyles. Public resentment towards Rana rule intensified when the Gurkha regiment and other Nepalese who fought in the First World War returned home bringing with them new goods and ideas. These developments led to a more autocratic and paranoid reign with nightly curfews and other impositions. Yet, the Ranas could not control the flows that shaped the kingdom's future. Inspired by the independence movements of India local activists started to work toward a country independent of foreign political influences. As India managed to get free of the British rule, Ranas' authority also diminished and a new chapter of dispersal in Nepalese history began.

Once again we can derive the same pattern emerging from the history as change is again instigated through relations to the world outside. Yet, even though the British did not in a similar manner as the Mallas or Shahs assume direct control of the Kathmandu valley as they did in India their influence was felt in Nepal through a process what resembles Sahlins (2010:121) model of galactic mimesis. The power of the British Empire as a galactic superior was imitated by the Ranas. This harnessing of external power was established through laws and building palaces in western manner. Henceforth, it is evident that during these times new forms of power began to contest the older ones. For the Shahs and the Ranas the possession of western

commodities and imitating British practices became a source of power and consequently it was restricted strictly to Ranas and the elite. When Ranas started to lose control of Nepal's relations to the outside world the sources of power that were the basis of elite's supremacy became accessible for others. Consequently the previous order got challenged and a new round of major social changes and fragmentation was imminent.

## **The democracy and civil war**

If the ancient history of Nepal is described as a process of a constant alteration between unity and multiplicity driven by external influences, in contemporary times this process has been even more articulated. Now maybe more than ever the Kathmandu valley is in the crossing point of an enormous amount of multiple different flows of people and influences. Yet the current state of society in Kathmandu valley was seen as a constant source of dissatisfaction for my informants. The future of Nepal seemed bleak and the topmost feeling was one of uncertainty. Many of my informants wished to leave the country. If they had the means, they had already made plans to do so or actually left during my fieldwork. To contextualise the state of uncertainty and chaos that marked my fieldwork I move to describe the nation's experiments with democracy. Yet, to give account of this history presents a certain problem: the nearer I move to the accounts of the present moment, the more contested the historical issues under scrutiny become. As what has happened in the near past becomes more instrumental for contemporary issues, the more it also becomes a source of argument and a conflict. In other words, the truth has been a heavily contested issue in the recent history of Nepal.

To exemplify the disputes and conflicts that surround the developments that have led to the current disorder I will reference a book *Forget Kathmandu. An Elegy for democracy (2007)* by a Nepali writer Manjushree Thapa. This book is not an academic study but a personal journalistic account of the uncertainties concerning the events that have led to the current chaos. Instead of narrating the recent history of Nepal as a fact she emphasizes its ambiguous and disputed nature.

*The truth is this is a complicated country, its 26 million people an intricate social tangle. Best estimates have 90-odd caste and ethnic nationalities living in the country's 150,000 square kilometres (less than 20 per cent of which is arable), speaking 71 languages and dialects, and observing Hindu, Buddhist, animist, Muslim, Sikh or Christian rites, or more and more, eschewing god. There is no*

*such thing as typical Nepali. Each caste and ethnic nationality has its own class divides, hierarchies and patriarchies. Each has its own origin myths, its own history and its own particular relationship to the state power in Kathmandu. People's political affiliations swing from communist to Hindu fundamentalist. All this makes the country difficult to decipher (Thapa 2007:2).*

In the Kathmandu valley, this difficulty is emphasized because as it houses the capital, it also gathers all the differences the nation state of Nepal has to offer. The difficulties of finding any coherence between different accounts of recent historical events became quite familiar during my fieldwork. The answers to questions about what had happened in history varied enormously. This variance was even more emphasized by the common distrust in any official version of history. In other words, the recent history of Kathmandu valley is consequently still very much in the making.

The processes of change that are still in the background of current political events seem to have their origins in the ability of some Nepalese to travel outside of Nepal and bring with them new and progressive ideas (Thapa 2007:84-93). In the end of the Rana period the Ranas had become more and more unpopular because of their draconian attempts to suppress new ideas of a more open society by jailing and prosecuting intelligentsia. The Nepalese Gurkha regiments based in India acquired new democratic ideas and resented fighting along the British to suppress their Indian neighbours. The displeasure felt towards the Ranas led to the establishment of different groups with goals to overthrow them. But in a pattern that would become familiar in the future of Nepali politics these groups did not have any unifying feature. Some groups were more politically oriented and influenced by communist or democratic ideals and some were more religiously inclined. Eventually these groups became more organized and established themselves as political parties. In 1950, allied with the Shah King, they organized a rebellion forcing the Ranas to give up power to the Shah lineage and to the political parties.

Thapa (2007:93-103) emphasizes how the history after the establishment of democracy in 1950 is full of controversies. This decade witnessed nine different governments and a sometimes violent struggle between the political parties consisting mostly of the high Bahun<sup>1</sup> caste, various ethnic groups that were against the dominion of the higher castes and the king. These conflicts produced numerous conflicting accounts of what was happening and had happened in the country. Yet, in 1959 a quasi-democratic constitution was established, the first

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<sup>1</sup> The highest Parbatiya caste.

real nationwide election was conducted and a constitution which recognized some basic democratic rights was established. The elite reacted violently to these reforms and aided by the disarray of the factionalized parties, the monarchists conducted a coup which installed a Shah King as the sovereign of Nepal once again.

Consequently, the king Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah established the Panchayat system, a "one-party democracy", and launched a strong program to build a unified Nepalese identity. Thapa (2007: 52-53; 103-104) describes how this construction of a Nepalese national identity included a writing of the history of Nepal as the achievement of the Shahs and the establishment of a Nepali literary canon based on the language of the Parbatiyas. Yet, as I have emphasized, Nepal is very heterogeneous nation and the construction of one unified history based on the view of one group has resulted in a deep suspicion towards written history. This suspicion was still quite evident in discussions with Nepalese about official representations of history.

In 1972 King Mahendra died and was followed by his son Birendra Bikram Shah. The authoritarian rule was reinforced and the banned political parties carried out various armed attacks, which led the king to tighten his grip of power. Thapa characterizes how during these times Nepal divided into different realities:

*In this closed atmosphere, Kathmandu grew schizophrenic. The old and the new, the agrarian and the urban, the low-tech and the high-tech, the local and the global began to press together at jagged angles. Yet, though everyone lived in great proximity to each other and knew something about everyone else, nobody could stand back and see the whole picture, nobody could ascertain the truth. All of our facts were partial, and so our judgments were suspect. What convictions we held, we held tentatively. We could not fully trust ourselves (Thapa 2007:109).*

By the 1970s the rioting and public strikes become commonplace and in the end of the 1980s the constantly fighting and splitting political parties somehow managed to merge into a comprehensive people's movement (Jana Andolan). The leaders of this movement were quickly jailed, which incited large riots and demonstrations in Kathmandu and around the urban centres of Nepal. The state responded brutally by killing scores of people in an unprecedented show of violence. Thapa (2007:114-120) describes how during the 1980's the bourgeoisie of Kathmandu grew substantially in numbers and become a political force. The brutal violence of the state finally got the emergent middle class to support the movement and in the 1990 the king gave in and democracy was again established in Nepal (Thapa 2007:119-120).

The 1990s saw the same pattern all over again as the factionalised political parties failed to instigate any meaningful change, which led to more violence. Yet, Kathmandu was booming as the free market policies installed with democracy profited the capital which also received enormous amounts of money from western development projects. Yet, this economic boom in the capital was in stark contradiction with the poorness of the rural areas, which led to the birth of a group that would play a major role in the future of Nepal. In February of 1996 the Communist Party of Nepal (maoist) launched a people's war, which eventually developed into a full-fledged civil war. To add to this chaos, Kathmandu witnessed in 2001 a royal massacre which exemplifies the controversial nature of Nepal's recent history.

### **The Royal massacre of 2001**

The happenings of the 1<sup>st</sup> of June of 2001 are a good example of the shroud of mystery over Nepalese history. When interviewed about the subject most of my informants argued that the official version is a cover up and the massacre was a conspiracy initiated by king Birendra's brother Gyanendra. Gyanendra was the only one of the royal family who did not attend the family dinner during which the massacre took place and subsequently the one who ascended the throne. The happenings of that day and its aftermath are in way a condensation of the uncertainties which exemplify the relation the common Nepalese have with their rulers and history. There are various versions of what had happened during that night, but in general the theories can be divided into two opposing ones. Either the royal massacre was a family tragedy enacted by a mad crown prince or it was a deliberate assassination and a coup effected by the king's brother.

The official channels reported that an inebriated and hashish induced crown prince had gunned down the royal family in a state of delirium. Thapa (2007:27-47) recounts how this narrative was received with suspicion boosted by the imminent royal funeral conducted on the next day. No evidence of what had happened was collected, as no thorough autopsies or forensic investigations were conducted. The media reported that it was a Hindu custom to cremate the dead immediately, which was according to Thapa (2007:16,26,45) not true in criminal incidents and surely not what the general public in Thapa's view wished for. In her view, the numerous funeral rituals which climaxed to the crowning of Gyanendra as the new king, were a political spectacle and aroused deep suspicions of what had really happened (Thapa 2007:32-33). Thapa (2007:33) argues that the Nepalese people did not want royal spectacles or Hindu rituals but scientific evidences on what had happened. These wishes of the public were in major

contradiction to the way media portrayed the happenings through the royal rituals and painted an orientalist picture of the country as an archaic Hindu kingdom with deeply religious people (Thapa 2007:33). Thus, Thapa's narrative can be seen as an explicit expression of how an ontology which separated the scientific truth from stories and myths was gaining ground in Nepal.

*When trying to take a position-a reasonable position, one that we can defend in our most dispassionate moments-most Nepalese will conclude that we just don't know what happened on the night of 1 June 2001. We lost the truth; we lost our history. We are left to recount anecdotes and stories, to content ourselves with myth (Thapa 2007: 47.)*

The chaos instigated by the civil war and amplified by the royal massacre continued well into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many of the political parties rallied behind Gyanendra. In opposition to this the Maoists intensified their attacks and kept closing in the capital. The growing pressure of the Maoist war efforts forced the government to negotiate with them which lead to occasional cease fires and periods of growing hostilities in between. The history once again repeated itself, when in 2002, King Gyanendra announced that he would assume the role as a full sovereign of Nepal. During the brief reign of Gyanendra the alternation between cease fires and atrocities on both sides continued, but the military could not hinder the advance of the Maoists in the countryside. The chaos escalated until once more the political parties now allied with the Maoists organized another people's movement, Jana Andolan II, in 2006, and millions of Nepalese took to the streets to overthrow Gyanendra. The military retaliated, but after scores of people got killed the military was eventually unwilling to instigate more bloodshed. In April of 2006 Gyanendra announced the re-instalment of parliamentary power, which in its wake produced UN brokered peace process with the Maoists that has lasted until the writing of this thesis.

## **Modernization of Kathmandu**

In addition to the political turmoil and civil war, the various relations that have connected the Kathmandu valley to the outside world have brought other kinds of changes as well. Liechty (2008:47-58) posits these transformations as a part of the global process of modernization. He describes how the processes of modernization are in a direct continuum to the Kathmandu valley's historical role as a place in which various flows of people and ideas have



been intersecting (Liechty 2008:40). After 1951 Nepali state has had a policy of relatively unregulated commodity imports, and during the 1950s Nepal established relations with other countries and allowed them to establish diplomatic missions in Kathmandu. After the rules and regulations concerning relations to outside world were lifted, all kinds of changes started to take place in the valley. These connections to the external world enabled a rapid growth of Kathmandu's economy and an influx of foreign goods and tourists.

An important aspect of this change is, according to Liechty (2008:47-48), that it is restricted mostly to the Kathmandu valley. Liechty (2008:49-52) describes how four sources of money: foreign aid, tourism, handicraft business and remittances have made the Kathmandu valley a place rich in wealth compared to the rest of the country. Liechty (2008:52) also describes how the Kathmandu valley has emerged also as a major transportation and communications hub for the entire subcontinent. This has been quite a radical change as in the last century Kathmandu was only accessible by walking along narrow mountain paths. Now an intersection of various major traffic routes it sees a constantly growing number of vehicles. Kathmandu has also grown to be a major airway hub receiving flights from all around the world and, as a considerable part of the foreign aid is directed to the communication infrastructure the valley boasts also a very advanced telecommunication system (Liechty 2007:53-54).

The Kathmandu valley has also seen a major building spree as the people from the countryside flock to the capital in search for opportunities. This constant influx of people from all around Nepal and beyond has added a yet one more layer of heterogeneity to the society.

*"In 1950, alongside the small but powerful Hindu Brahman and Chetri communities (The parbatiya castes), the large majority of Kathmandu's residents were Newars, the ethnic/linguistic community that has occupied the valley for millennia. By the 1990's, however, this Newar majority had been significantly diminished by the arrival of immigrants from across Nepal and beyond. Hill Brahmans and Chetris, groups associated with Tibetan Buddhist culture (Sherpas, Manangis, Tibetan refugees, etc.), ethnic groups from the hill regions (Gurungs, Rais, Magars, Tamangs, and many others,) more culturally "Indic" peoples from the Nepal Tarai and Northern India-all of these new residents have made the Kathmandu valley much more socially diverse in terms of ethnic, religious, and caste affiliations." (Liechty 2008, 54.)*

Liechty (2008:54) describes how these processes of change are a combined result of its incorporation into global economic and cultural processes and its position in the global periphery.

According to Liechty (2008:151), the mass media and the modern communication technologies have also been crucial agents in the modernization of the Kathmandu valley and consequently something that has had profound effect on the social forms. For instance, before the modernization, going to movies was a primary attraction to travel to India as cinema was banned from the public because of the Ranas attempts to seclude Nepal from foreign influences which could have harmed their reign (Liechty 2008:154). Yet in 1949 the first movie theatre was opened in Kathmandu in which the Ranas allowed for pious religious films to be shown to the public. As the Rana regiment fell, Nepal opened up to almost unregulated flow of people and goods and consequently several cinema halls opened in the valley. Liechty (2008:155-156) narrates how during these times movie-going was a major social event which designated social hierarchies as higher castes were seated on the upper levels and lower castes on the lower levels of the cinema halls.

In 1978 government lifted trade regulations that had prevented people from importing private video technology, an act which instigated major changes in the media environment (Liechty 2008:156-158). This process can also be seen as an instance of selective exclusion because the rights to import VCR technologies were first given to the Royals who made substantial profits before the rights were given to the common citizens. When the regulations were shifted, VCR technology became immediately popular and numerous video parlours were opened up. This consequently opened up the world of cinema to the ordinary Nepalese and films from all around the world were being shown in the Kathmandu valley.

Thus from these accounts of the recent past one can gather that in contemporary times the opening of the borders after the Rana regime has resulted in all kinds of processes of transformation, some of which have been peaceful and some violent. During my fieldwork I had the feeling that I was witnessing a period of transition that was still very much in the process and had not, at least during the writing of this thesis, led to any stable outcomes.

## Contemporary transformations in the Kathmandu valley

My fieldwork experiences also witnessed how the Kathmandu valley was in state of a major flux and instability. The most general example of this might be the attempts to establish a parliamentary democracy and the resulting conflicts between the political parties.

*I'm having a discussion with a prominent film maker and his journalist friend about the current political situation and the upcoming Maoist mass demonstration supposed to take place in a few days in the capital. The film maker is arguing that the problems with Nepalese politics will solve themselves. He posits that the universal human rights are a value that will eventually unify the Nepalese and a better society will emerge from the chaos. He thinks that the Maoists should not be given any power because they do not respect such values. The journalist is opposed to these views. She thinks that the Maoists' attempts to empower the rural population are justified even though she does not agree with all their means. She thinks that the poor of Nepal have been repressed too long for them to stay silent and wait for democratic reforms. She thinks that the rural poor have the all the right to forcefully oppose oppressing social forms such as the caste system.*

Heated discussions concerning politics were filled with foreign derived concepts such as democracy, communism, universal human rights and progress. The three leading political parties carried foreign derived names like *the Nepali congress* and even the names of long dead dictators and social scientists in the cases of CPN-UML, the *Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist)* or UCPN(M) the *Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)*. Often the political discourse also focused on the influence foreign powers especially India, but also China and USA, had in Nepal's internal politics. In media, India was often ascertained to be behind various events in Nepal, and not in a positive way. I often heard the claim that many Nepalese politicians bowed down to Indian influence to gain more power for themselves.

Another field which was evidently in a state of transformation was eating. For instance, eating outside in restaurants was something that elder people saw as a breach of traditional purity norms, unhealthy and morally suspicious activity. Nevertheless, my younger informants often ate and spend time in restaurants. In commercial culinary world of the Kathmandu valley eating was not regulated by any purity norms. The restaurants of Kathmandu catered food from kitchens all around the world, and it was made and served by people from all the different castes and ethnic groups. Many of my informants also described that the basically vegetarian based

diet of previous times was slowly being replaced by meat. One informant pointed out how meat was actually becoming something with a positive value as a luxury, whereas it was previously deemed as immoral. Western fast food chains were also major attractions and I witnessed how the opening up of the first Pizza Hut in Nepal attracted enormous queues. Some of my older informants deemed this enthusiasm towards fast food as an attempt to show off and thought that the food was actually not that good.

Caste was also a seemingly controversial issue. In the beginning of my fieldwork I tried hard to find out how to place the family I lived with on the anthropological models of Newar caste hierarchy. Yet this task proved not to be an easy one. There were various kinds of answers to my inquiries. Sometimes the whole idea of a caste was seen as either a thing of the past or as a mistaken western way to view Asian society. Often the younger people assured that caste did not really mean anything anymore and claimed often that they did not know which caste their friends were from. For example, teenagers who spent their time in the shopping mall, in which I conducted a large portion of my fieldwork, were from a very diverse set of caste and ethnic backgrounds. Caste was also used often quite synonymously with the term ethnic group and more than defining a person's position in some static and encompassing hierarchical system it delineated one's general affiliation to a certain group which more or less contended for political power.

Eventually, I found the family's surname mentioned in anthropological literature as an upper sub-group of Shrestha caste. Yet, if I asked if the family were Shresthas, they responded negatively. They implied that they could be married with certain Shresthas but were not themselves ones. Few men of the family had also married European women consequently resulting in a general relaxing on these issues for this particular lineage. I was told that in the past unions with westerners were highly problematic, as they often ate beef which is considered a major violation of Hindu tradition. Yet, this was not seen as a problem anymore and was usually solved by arguing that cows from elsewhere were not sacred and hence it was acceptable to eat them if one restricted to doing it outside Nepal. The members of the family often pointed out that they might not be the best example of traditional Newars and that the long standing connections of the family to foreign people and countries had very much altered and relaxed the way they followed tradition.

In general the possibility of the people to move away from the traditional dwelling of their lineage was seen as a major factor in the changes currently taking place. At the start of my

fieldwork I often pestered my roommate and my main informant with various questions concerning some Newar cultural or social feature I had read about in the anthropological literature. He regularly answered that the customs I was questioning about were things of the past and not so important anymore. One aspect of this transformation was that the place of residence seemed to be closely tied to the importance of some customs: if one had moved away from the original place of residence of one's lineage, some customs consequently started to lose their importance. For example, most of the anthropological literature emphasizes how one of the most important elements of Newar society and one which in practice maintains caste barriers is socio-religious organizations called *guthi* (e.g. Gellner 1995b; Toffin 2007). When I asked about the *guthi* associations of the family, their importance was downplayed and I was explained that a family belonged to a certain *guthi* through the eldest male of the family and that *guthis* were related to the place of one's residence. As the father of family had moved from another city to Kathmandu because of business reasons and established his home there, he was not often able to participate in his native *guthi*. They also explained that participating in a *guthi* was a major economic burden. The family was not totally cut out of *guthi* affiliations but it seemed that belonging and participating was not considered a priority, at least not among the younger members.

The religious orientation of some of my informants was also in transformation. For example, one Newar family was quite considerably leaning towards Buddhist practices and especially towards brand of Tibetan Buddhism. They explained to me that in the past they had been more oriented towards Hindu practices, but thought that Buddhist practices were more suitable way to practice religion in contemporary times. They proclaimed that some of the Hindu rituals which had to do with animal sacrifice were objectionable and claimed that they could not conduct them anymore.

It was also clear that the Kathmandu was quite fully integrated to the global world and to processes of change that did not follow any national or cultural borders. The place where this aspect became most tangible was Bishal Bazar, a three story shopping mall in which a major part of my fieldwork was conducted. Bishal Bazar is located in central Kathmandu in an upscale shopping area called the New Road and was the first ever shopping mall opened in Kathmandu. The mall is filled with shops that provide endless amounts of foreign commodities: movies, videogames, mobile phones, various genres of fashion from high class suits tailored in Italian style to branded teenager outfits and all sorts of fan paraphernalia of music groups and sports teams from all over the world. The mall saw a constant flow of well off Nepalese and tourists

from all around the world, but mostly from India. The names of the shops were almost all in English. For example, one shop owner told that his shop was named after a place he had visited during his studies in the United Kingdom. Some of the more affluent shop owners constantly went on to shopping trips mainly to China and Thailand, where most of the merchandise sold in the mall originated from.

Yet, despite its business oriented and cosmopolitan atmosphere Bishal Bazar had also aspects that were connected to the transcendent world. In one of the corners of the mall was a temple of the Hindu monkey god Hanuman and an attending priest who daily visited every shop and conducted a small puja with each shopkeeper. The daily routines of the mall included also various ritual practices some of which were closely tied to business practices.

*Every morning a Newar shopkeeper informant conducts a ritual in which he lights an incense, swirls it around a mandala, recites mantras and then swirls the incense around his shop and especially inside the box where he keeps the store money. He explains that his morning rituals in the shop are a prayer for good business and the mandala on the wall is especially for shopkeepers. He tells that the Newar god Bhimsen is the god of those who do business.*

## **Modern technologies**

I also witnessed how ICT technologies were an integral part of many different practices. For example, in many cases technological devices were utilized in practices related to the worship of deities.

*I'm watching the processions of a Newar jatra in which various deities are taken from their temples around Kathmandu to a central parade ground of Thundikel. I am following the chariot of one of the deities. In the beginning the deity is kept hidden behind a curtain, but after we have reached Thundikel she is revealed to onlookers. Most of the people rush to the chariot to be among the first not just to see it but also to take pictures of it. I notice that most of this picture-taking is done with mobile phones. The same happens during the finale of the jatra, which consists of an enactment of a battle between deities. The performance is visually very impressive as the huge chariots are lighted up by torches and taken in a very chaotic manner around each other. In addition to the torches, the otherwise pitch*

*black night is illuminated by the blinking of numerous of Lcd lights of mobile phones and digital cameras.*

In some practices connected to transcendental powers ICT technologies had an instrumental role.

*I'm at the family's astrologer to procure a tithi for myself. Tithi is a sort of written prophecy or estimation of how one's life will unfold and contains some important information concerning for example a suitable wife. Conventionally Tithi is done right after one's birth, as it is based on the positions of stars and planets, but it can also be done afterwards by knowing the exact date and time of birth. The astrologer feeds my time of birth into a computer and manually scribbles some formulas and diagrams on a paper. After a while of going back and forth between the computer and his notes, he prints a 20 page long document which contains various statements relating to my life and how it will possibly unfold. He then proceeds to elaborate its various meanings and the possible futures I might encounter according to it.*

New communication technologies seemed to be quite fully integrated into the lives of my informants. Especially my ethnographic subject, the mobile technology, seemed to be quite ubiquitous part of the everyday life in the Kathmandu valley. In almost every interview I conducted my informants remarked that everybody now carried a mobile phone, as these interview excerpts elicit:

*People... everybody has a mobile now, even simple persons.*

*...everybody has mobile nowadays. Even coolies have mobiles.*

All of my informants acknowledged that the popularity of the mobile phones had made them a social necessity and consequently omnipresent in their lives. In fact, so ubiquitous were mobile phones in the lives of those who used them that they were practically enmeshed in all the normal routines and practices of my informants. Those who had mobile phones carried them everywhere and utilized their functions at regular intervals. Rarely in my fieldwork even an hour passed, during which somebody would not have somehow utilized a mobile phone. It seemed that considerable part of my informants' communications was executed by utilizing mobile technology and consequently it was connected to most areas of my informants' lives.

To outline this ubiquitous nature of mobile technology I will in the subsequent part exemplify the myriads of different connections mobile technology consisted by reviewing anthropological literature concerning mobile technology and my own fieldwork experiences in the Kathmandu valley.

## **Multiple functions of mobile technology**

Even though mobile technology has for some time now ceased to perform solely the function of a portable telephone, the ability to transfer voice over distance is arguably still one of its more prominent features. Many anthropological studies of mobile technology have witnessed how utilizing the calling function often draws from past cultural forms for instance from social networks (Horst and Miller 2005) and kinship relations (Tenhunen 2008:523-525). I also witnessed how ability to transfer sound was often used to perform social relations which draw from cultural forms of my informants. For instance, mobile phone user's personal kinship relations were sometimes the most prominent feature of a call.

*An informant is working in his shop in Bishal Bazar. He receives a call from his Mama (maternal uncle). In comparison to the way he speaks to his friends and peers on the phone, this call is much more formal. He uses many honorific terms when addressing his Mama and refrains from using slang terms. The tone and style of his speech are also different. He speaks much more slowly and articulately, as compared to the fast paced slur he is known of and to which I'm used to because of spending time in his shop. After the call he explains that his Mama wants him to fetch some photos that were being developed in a nearby photo shop. He immediately closes the shop, even though it is the middle of day, and proceeds to fulfill the request.*

How a certain person generally utilized the phone function was very much contingent to her social relations. For example, when interviewed about their habits of using mobile technology, my younger informants, who were still in school, described that they would mostly talk to their friends about everyday matters, but also that their parents often call them to find out their whereabouts.

*Yeah it used to be late night, seven o'clock, six o'clock, they used to call any time. When I came to New Road (Shopping district in the middle of Kathmandu and a*



*popular area for the young to spend their after school time and in many cases the actual school time). They used to call me every time. Did you reach there safe or not? When are you coming home? Where are you?*

Those who were working mentioned that a large part of their talking was related to work.

*It's good that I have a mobile phone, but now, because of my workload, even on holidays I 'm responsible like I'm available. They can call me at the night time when I'm sleeping. There's a problem at the office can you come at the office. So its kind of irritating sometimes*

Yet, the calling function can also be used to circumvent traditions that prohibit some certain kinds of social relations. For instance, Sirpa Tenhunen (2008:527) describes how in rural India the talking function enables daughters to keep in contact with their mothers and natal relatives after marrying and moving out of the natal home. Traditionally the mothers are not supposed to visit the daughter for one year after marriage and keeping too much contact with the natal home during the beginning of a marriage is deemed improper. Mobile technology's ability to connect in ways that were not possible in the past was also something that some of my informants noted about. For example, an informant, who was working as a journalist in the countryside, explained that the calling function was important for women in the rural areas as they were often restricted to leave their homes for various purity related reasons. I also witnessed examples of how the talking function can be used to maintain social relations that are strictly prohibited by cultural norms. One informant for example used the calling function to overcome caste divisions.

*An informant is dating a girl from a lower caste, a situation not deemed proper by his family. I notice that this informant very often retreats to speak on the phone to places where no one can listen. He tells me that talking in secret through a mobile phone is almost the only method he can keep in contact with his partner as publicly having some kind of contact with her would be deemed improper and would incite a negative reaction from his family.*

In addition to social relations the calling function is also used to mediate spatial locations and movement. Florian Stammler (2009:73) describes, for example, how the ability to convey sound over distance alters Russian reindeer herders' relation and ways to move in their living environment, the tundra. In the Kathmandu valley communicating spatial locations and

movement in the urban infrastructure was also a very prominent practice which was mediated through the calling function.

*We are driving on motorcycles through the overcrowded streets of Kathmandu on the way to the surrounding hills. One bike in our group gets into a minor accident and we slow down to assess the situation. It seems that nothing serious took place and we continue to drive. In a short while we notice that the bike that had the accident is nowhere to be seen. The driver of the bike I'm riding on stops and calls the driver of the missing bike. The missing driver reports that he had a talk with the driver who he had gotten into accident with and consequently lost sight of us. We inform him of our current location and wait for him.*

These types of events occurred quite often during my fieldwork. As we often drove around the city in groups of bikes and as the very dangerous and chaotic traffic of Kathmandu often produced situations in which some of our group got separated, the ability to verbally communicate one's location was a commonly utilized function of mobile technology. This ability to inform spatial locations got also often utilized during festivals.

*We are attending Bisket Jatra, a Newar festival in which a huge chariot of the god Bhairava is pulled around the city of Bhaktapur. The form of the festival entails dividing the people of Bhaktapur into two halves, which attempt to pull the chariot, with huge hemp ropes attached to its both ends, into their side of the city space. In general the proceedings of this festival are quite chaotic as the competition momentarily gets violent and the opposing sides throw rocks to obstruct the other side. In some moments, the chariot also gets stuck to the narrow streets and occasionally parts of the buildings collapse as the chariot rams into them. Obviously many people get hurt, and it is not uncommon for fatal accidents to happen. I am told that it is actually a norm that somebody gets killed during the festival. Thus many of the attendants are content to watch the proceeding in the balconies and rooftops, but we decide to follow the chariot on foot. As the festival progresses and we move around the city, an informant guiding us utilizes a mobile phone to call various contacts of his who are watching the festival from above and are consequently able to locate the position of the chariot and to provide information about the possible violent and dangerous eruptions and incidents to us.*

*These bits of information then assist us in navigating the dark, narrow and crowded corridors of Bhaktapur.*

The calling function is also utilized to connect to the transcendental world. Bert Barendregt and Raul Pertierra (2008) have described how in the Philippines it is utilized to connect to entities such as dead ancestors. In the Kathmandu valley, connections with the transcendent world got also mediated through mobile phone calls. For example, *jhakaris* (ritual healers) sometimes provided services in which healing mantras were incanted through mobile phones to those in need of healing.

Mobile technology's ability to store and produce sound presented also numerous occasions to discover what kind of music my informants preferred. Especially among my younger informants the facility to play and store music was a very much utilized feature.

*We are spending time at a store in Bishal Bazar. A female informant connects her mobile phone to the sound system of the store and starts to play a popular hit song by Rihanna. As she focuses on talking with her friends a male informant changes the tune to Snoop Dogg and tells me that he finds Rihanna cheesy.*

In contrast to my younger informants' preference for western mainstream music, those older people who utilized such features seemed to prefer old Bollywood songs. Yet, there were no absolute divisions in this matter and sometimes younger people also played Hindi or Nepali songs. The music was transferred via Bluetooth from phone to phone or bought from video stores which sold all kinds of digital media by transferring them to memory cards. In interviews the younger people often emphasized that the music player was a very important function. Consequently many pointed out that sound quality was a crucial factor in choosing a handset model. One phenomenon, which an informant mentioned in this context was that as rural women used to sing traditional songs on their way to pick firewood from the hills, a job that often took many hours to fulfil, they now played Bollywood hits from their mobile phones. I also witnessed often how rural women were listening to music while working.

SMS-messaging also mediates myriads of different relations and in the process also creates new ways to write. For instance, Eija-Liisa Kasesniemi, and Pirjo Rautiainen (2002) describe how Finnish teenagers in many ways express contingencies of their lives through SMS messaging and in the process constantly develop the language they message with. Janet McIntosh (2010) describes a similar phenomenon among the Giriama of Kenya, who through

different ways to write perform different social relations and in the process also create new ways to write. Barendregt (2008) also characterized how SMS messaging is used in Indonesia to perform numerous different purposes ranging from consolidating social relations during Islamic holidays to terrorising people. In Indonesia SMS messaging has also resulted in new ways of writing and even given birth to a new literary genre (Barendregt 2008:166-167). In Kathmandu valley SMS-messaging was also used to perform all kinds of contingent relations. Locations and times and all kinds information related to social logistics (see Tenhunen 2008) were often handled through them. In interviews my informants mentioned that they used messages to all kinds of purposes similar to those they used to talk about on the phone. The younger interviewees often mentioned that a large amount of messaging was between would-be or actual boy- and girlfriends. The interviewees also told about SMS books sold in newspaper shops which included collections of various messages suited for various situations. In addition to personal relations SMS-messaging was also a way for media to interact with their audience.

*A female friend of one of my informants comes to meet us in at Bishal Bazar. She has brought a friend with her. They tell us that she is going to participate in a beauty contest arranged by a newspaper, in which the winner is decided by a voting system which utilizes SMS-messages. A few days later we are reading the newspaper and spot the competition. We decide to vote for our new acquaintance and send an SMS vote following the instructions in the paper.*

I also often watched a television talk show, in which the audience could vote about some prominent daily issue, and the result was announced in the next day's show.

Mobile technology's functions related to visual material connect it also to numerous different practices. Stammeler (2009:63-64) characterizes how the Russian reindeer herders, for instance, utilize the picture taking functions to monitor the environmental impacts of oil industry. Barendregt (2008:167-168) instead notes how visual pornographic material is often disseminated through mobile technology. My informants also utilized these features to the fullest by taking pictures and videos, swapping them with friends, downloading them from the internet or from video stores, and generally viewing them with a friend or a group of friends. Most of my informants had a collection of various types of pictures and videos stored in their mobile phones which were utilized for various purposes.

*We are discussing our plans for next Sunday's trip. On every Sunday when Bishal Bazar was closed, a group of my informants gathered and went on a bike trip*

*usually somewhere in the hills surrounding the Kathmandu Valley. An informant shows from his mobile phone a picture of a green and lush valley between the hills and asks: "Do you like places of natural beauty like this?" He explains that the place he took the picture in is not far away and we should go there next Sunday.*

This pattern repeated itself often: an informant showed pictures of places he or she had travelled in Nepal and asked what I thought about what I saw. Often these presentations were accompanied with the offer to take me to the place shown in the pictures. In addition to showing pictures of travels around Nepal and beyond my informants had taken pictures of all types of activities. For example, one shopkeeper in Bishal Bazar, in whose shop I spend a lot of time in, often showed me videos of him golfing followed by a commentary on his swing and what was wrong about it. Sometimes my informants also wanted to take a picture of me with them on their phone, and once an informant put the picture on his Facebook page.

In addition to the pictures and videos which my informants had taken themselves, a large amount of the visual material stored on their phones was coming from other sources such as the internet and video stores. Video stores had huge collections of pictures and videos stored on computers. Visual material was also often copied from friends' and acquaintances' phones. The material itself consisted of all kinds of visual representations ranging from pictures of Korean boy bands to religious imagery and videos of all kinds.

*It is a particularly quiet moment in Bishal Bazar. A bunch of shopkeepers and youngsters hanging in the mall have gathered around a mobile phone from which we are watching video clips. These video clips consist mainly of different stunts and accidents with motorbikes, but also few dance videos.*

In the case of male informants pornographic visual material was hugely popular.

*To get a view on what kind of visual material people normally had on their phones I ask a video store keeper to download one memory stick full with pictures of what he thought his customers mostly requested. He jokingly asked that did I want the memory stick full of porn.*

Pornography was seemingly a morally suspicious issue. A few times my male informants argued that the function of hiding pornographic material into a mobile phone was a very welcome development as it was deemed immoral, at least by the elder generations, and hence something

that should be hidden. They explained that as people rarely had any private space and especially as younger males often shared their room with others there were no places where they could have stored pornographic material. But with mobile phones this was possible. One informant noted that this was especially convenient with Nokia handsets as they allowed one to store visual material behind a password.

Mobile phones were on many occasions also utilized to play all kinds of games. In Bishal Bazar it was a common sight that a shopkeeper with an empty shop was playing some type of game in his phone. During a dull moment my informants often started to play on their phones. Yet sometimes the gaming itself became a central activity.

*Our neighbor has bought an iPhone. As our windows are very close to his my roommate borrows the neighbor's iPhone through the window to play on it. Eventually the neighbor starts to complain that my roommate uses up all the battery, which annoys him.*

Connecting to the internet with a mobile phone was not very popular during my fieldwork, but it was clear that it was gaining interest and one of my informants spend a lot of time calculating if he could afford to have an internet connection on his phone. Afterwards I have started to interact with many of my informants through the Facebook, which most of them utilize by means of their mobile phones. For instance, during the writing of this thesis I have followed how one of my informants constantly keeps updating his Facebook page through his Iphone with newsfeed from a group called "WE WANT NEPAL TO BE RULED BY KING AGAIN.....SAVE NEPAL..". Consequently as internet has become a standard feature in mobile phones even greater amounts of different social relations are mediated through it.

When studying the different ways the functions of mobile phones were utilized, multitudes of various relations contingent to the Kathmandu valley and to the lives of its inhabitants presented themselves. The use of mobile phones was related to an endless list of different aspects of my informants' lives and their environment. Kinship relations, caste, religious practices, gender relations, sexuality, aesthetic taste and politics were all performed in some manner through mobile technology. Other kind of relations related to the environment of the Kathmandu valley and its infrastructure were also mediated through the functions of mobile phones. In some cases it enabled connections which were connected to past social forms which, as we have seen, rely on ontological premises of a transcendent world of deities. Yet in some cases it seemingly made possible new ways of being related that my informants saw as breaches

of tradition. Nevertheless in addition to the different ways to utilize the functions of mobile phones, mobile technology was entangled in numerous other ways into my informants' society for example through the mobile technology markets.

### **Mobile phone markets**

Choosing which mobile handset to use is a process which is quite evidently connected to the construction of identity. For example, Dawn Nafus and Tracey Karina (2002) have shown that the consumption of mobile phones is a part of the processes through which identity is constructed in UK. Barendregt (2006:164-166) also describes how choosing the right kind of phone model is an important way to construct particular Indonesian way of being modern.

The huge variance of different handsets to choose from was quite prominently visible in the central Kathmandu. A very central area in the New Road consisted exclusively of mobile phone vendors. Interviews often revealed how the process of choosing a certain model was contingent to the person's role in society. For instance, a younger male informant who still went to school declared that he will buy an iPhone because it is cool and because everybody wishes to have one. In contrast, another older informant who travelled a lot around Nepal on his bike was more utilitarian on his approach. He was contemplating on buying a phone which would be sturdy and waterproof enough to last on his travels.

Another related method of constructing identity was related to mobile phone accessories. Through accessories one could alter the outlook of a handset and display one's preference for example of some certain football team. These accessories varied from the paraphernalia of football clubs to shiny trinkets and Korean boy band stickers. A shopkeeper that sold them told that they were especially popular among teenage girls. Yet even though these accessories promoted companies, bands and brands from all over the world, my informants told that they all were pirate products and came from China. Piracy was in general prominent feature of mobile phone markets in the Kathmandu valley.

Barendregt (2008:164-165) describes how in Indonesia economic inequality produces black markets through which the poorer part of society can acquire pirated mobile technology much cheaper than through official channels. In Nepal a very similar process was evident, yet the pirated products were quite an integral part of the markets and they were not concealed in any way. The selections of handset models in the shops made evident how in Nepal copyright

laws were not enforced in any seeming manner as there was an abundance of various pirated products available. In addition to direct copies of various branded phones, there were also numerous pirated models which did not resemble any branded models. According to the sales persons the hardware of these models was quite directly copied out of popular brands. These pirated phones, which my informants designated as *Chinese phones*, were often the focus of discussion when talking about mobile phones. Even though they were quite a recent arrival to the market they had rapidly got very popular.

*My main informant is displaying to me his mobile handset, which is a model that does not resemble anything I have seen before. He tells me that it is a Chinese pirate phone. We go through the various functions of the phone and I notice that the operating system is very different from any of those in the major manufacturers' phones. He explains that the Chinese phones are becoming very popular as they are decidedly cheaper than any of the branded ones. He also describes that the Chinese phones have all the same functions and sometimes even some extra ones that the normal branded models do not have. He tells me that even though the Chinese phones are cheap they are also often of dubious quality and consequently do not last long in use.*

One informant who participated in mobile phone import business claimed that even the prices were lower for the Chinese phones they were still much more profitable. Consequently, he had switched from importing Nokia to importing Chinese models.

When talking about the Chinese phones it was clear that their popularity and cheap price was contingent to the fact that there were no serious efforts to administer any copyright laws. Informants working with mobile technology told that it was not clear for them if such laws even existed. The political chaos and uncertainty had made Nepal quite lawless. Many of my informants who sold pirated products alleged that even if some official would try to enforce copyrights in some manner, these attempts could be always negated by paying some sort of fee. It was mentioned that the only reason some official would bother to intervene in the sales of pirate technology would be to gain profit. Thus pirate handsets were openly sold in all of the mobile shops I visited.

Another piracy related practice was that of unlocking or hacking mobile phones. Almost every mobile shop I visited provided also a service for overriding copyright protection of any mobile phone model. In addition all the shops provided also various unofficial and pirated



versions of the software for all the operating systems, obviously for a much lower price than if one bought software from official sources. These services were also openly advertised in every shop that provided them with the words unlocking and hacking printed in big letters.

Similar features were also apparent in the way mobile phone repairing was conducted. Many of the shops that sold mobile phones and offered various hacking and unlocking services also repaired mobile phones. As these repair shops were unofficial they did not have direct access to any blueprints of the technology they were repairing. Yet the internet provided a solution to this problem. One could download from the internet detailed schematics for most of the popular models. As new parts were hard to come by and also very expensive, many of the shops bought broken phones and utilized the functioning parts in repairing.

Official shops for certain brands existed, but as utilizing their services was too expensive for many, the unofficial mobile shops received a steady flow of customers. When interviewed many of my informants chose the shop they visited by having some kind of relation to it. Hence the customers usually knew the personnel or knew somebody that knew them and consequently had established a customer relation. An owner of a shop I visited often told me that most of his customers were regulars who came back because they had been satisfied with his services.

In my view, the popularity of pirated products was in addition to the lack of legal oversight contingent also to the general level of income in the Kathmandu valley. Even though my more well off informants argued that everybody had a mobile phone there were apparently still many Nepalese who did not have the economic resources to utilize mobile technology but were very eager to do so.

*I arrive at a scene in Bishal Bazar, in which a bunch of shop keepers are in angry discussion and seemingly upset about something. They tell me that one of them had bought a mobile phone for his assistant so that he could keep in touch with him. Yet almost immediately after buying the phone the assistant had disappeared and had not shown up at work anymore. One informant scolds the one who bought the phone for trusting his staff too much.*

In Bishal Bazar many of the shop keepers had a staff of assistants consisting of rural youths who had come to Kathmandu to make a living. These youths came from substantially poorer economic conditions and received a salary that enabled them to survive in Kathmandu but left a

little for anything else. Hence many of the shop assistants I interviewed told me that they did not have enough money to buy a mobile phone but wished very much to do so.

## **Network operators**

One essential aspect of mobile technology is the network operators. For instance, Horst and Miller (2006:19-36 describe how network operators and their differing strategies have had a crucial agency in how mobile technology has been established and what it has become in Jamaica (see also Tenhunen 2008:519-521 and Barendregt 2008:162-163). In the Kathmandu valley the agency of network operators become visible in the competition between the two of the most prominent ones, the mostly government owned Nepal Telecom (NTL) and the multinational Mero-Mobile (which during my fieldwork got re-branded as Ncell). Most of my informants subscribed to NTL even though they often reprimanded that as a government institution it was corrupt, inefficient and its network facilities were bad. The reason usually given for subscribing to NTL was that most of the people had a NTL subscription as it had been the first operator in Nepal. It was cheaper to call from NTL to NTL than to other operators and consequently many of my informants were wary of changing to other operators. Yet, some of my more technology savvy informants had also a Mero-Mobile subscription, proclaiming that it gave them better internet facilities than the NTL ones. Another informant noted that Mero-Mobile had also cheaper roaming prices, and because he was travelling a lot around the country, he had SIM-cards of both of the operators, which he switched according to which was cheaper at his current location. Some of my informants also proclaimed that criminals and prostitutes were utilizing Mero-mobile network because it was much easier to obtain an anonymous connection to its network.

An important part of mobile networks is the actual techniques used to facilitate them. In the Kathmandu valley these techniques were also contingent to local factors such as the large altitude differences. For example, I was explained that higher up in the hills and mountains networks were often based on a different technology (CDMA) than the ones in the valley (GSM) as the former functioned better in high altitudes. The inaccessibility of some of the more remote areas of high altitude Nepal also meant that even the network could reach some areas, other related facilities could not. I was told how in some areas the users of mobile phones ran constantly out of credit on their network subscription as the nearest places to recharge their balances was hard to access and took too long a time to reach. One informant working in the

field described how a portable recharge machine was taken around the remote areas to help people to keep their mobile connections functional.

The functionality of these networks was also contingent to various local factors. It was for example very hard to call to anybody during festivals, as everybody else was calling simultaneously and thus the networks got jammed. Mobile phones are also dependent on another network, the power grid, as they need to be constantly recharged. This ability to hold charge for a while was an important feature for many in Kathmandu. One of the reasons I was given for the popularity for mobile technology was the ability to use the various functions of mobile phones even though there was no direct access to electricity. For most of my stay in Kathmandu there were roughly 12 hours of blackout daily which were divided according to a practice called load shedding. Load shedding meant that different parts of the city received electricity in different times. Usually this was divided into a few hours blackout followed by a few hours of electricity. Consequently the ability to use mobile phones for example to play games, watch videos or listen to music was highly appreciated during the blackout phases.

### **Mobile technology in media**

The overabundance of media representations concerning mobile technology also emphasizes its multiple relations to local practices and social forms. For instance, a broadcast from Kumbha Mela<sup>2</sup> had a special feature on Saddhus<sup>3</sup>, one which was called Mobile Baba as he had associated himself to mobile phones. The report showed how Mobile Baba possessed multiple handsets and evoked religious incantations through the phones.

Advertising related to mobile technology was also entangled in multiple ways into the world of the Kathmandu valley.

*We are walking through Thamel, the tourist district of Kathmandu, during the celebrations of Nepalese New Year. We notice that there is some kind of happening going on. As we approach a stage set on the main entrance street of Thamel we come to realize that the event is about Nokia. The street is filled with Nokia flags which state that we are in the middle of a Nokia street festival. We stop*

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<sup>2</sup> The most prominent Hindu festival. Celebrated every four years, with every 12<sup>th</sup> year being even more prominent. Kumbha Mela takes place in North-India but is also very important for Nepalese Hindus.

<sup>3</sup> Hindu holy men

*for a while to see that the program consists of local bands and a DJ performing on the stage as well as some important looking Nepalese giving speeches in between. There is also a variety of Nokia paraphernalia being given out by festival workers.*

In visual advertisements mobile phones were often also portrayed in relation to some local feature. For instance, one of the mobile phone shops in Bishal Bazar was called Om mobile phone repairing center. Consequently, the ads of this shop displayed the Hindu symbol of Om next to a picture of a mobile phone. During my fieldwork Mero Mobile underwent also a massive rebranding campaign into NCell, an event which I will investigate in detail in a subsequent part.

### **Mobile technology as a source of controversy**

As mobile technology brings together so large number of different actors and as it is connected to the society in so many ways it also produces all kinds of negotiations and conflicts. For instance, McIntosh (2010) describes how some Giriyaamas, mostly elder people, argue that mobile technology is a form of witchcraft which is used by the whites to subordinate them. In contrast, most of the younger Giriyaamas think of mobile technology as symbol of a modern person. In the Kathmandu valley one controversial aspect of mobile technology is radiation. For example, a Nepalese newspaper Republica published as an editorial an article by an Indian member of parliament Milind Deora (2012) in which he calls for urgent actions concerning the possible health effects of the radiation emitted by mobile phones. In this article Deora first reviews various evidences that point out that mobile phones can cause severe health effects such as brain tumours and then calls for a serious and open discussion between parliament, public and private industries to tackle this problem. In some interviews my informants also raised concerns that the new technologies might not be good for one's health and that there might be long-term effects that people are not aware of yet.

There are also multiple interests to control mobile technology as it can be used quite effectively in politics. For instance, Tenhunen (2011) has elicited how mobile technology is used as a powerful political instrument in Bengal which has resulted in new political forms, yet in a manner that draws from previous understandings of politics. In the Kathmandu valley mobile technology had been historically used effectively against the status quo. It was often reminisced that during the second people's movement the king had closed down all the communication

systems including all the mobile networks for a few months. This was because mobile phones were utilized to organize the mass demonstrations and strikes which eventually overthrew him. Consequently, during my fieldwork the current government sought to control the mobile technology through legislative means. The most visible example of this was that its users were required to be registered. Thus, acquiring a network connection required that one filled an official legal form with information like fingerprints and one's father's and grandfather's names as those were important designators of identity in the Kathmandu valley.

Yet, this need to register was also contested. During my fieldwork there were often discussions about the prevalence of black market SIM cards which were used to commit various kinds of crimes. These SIM cards, which could not be traced to any specific person, were used for instance to illegally channel incoming international calls and to gather profit from them. In addition they were also used in extortion and making threats. This had then lead to investigating the SIM-card distribution channels and some personnel of network providers were found guilty of selling SIM-cards besides the official channels.

As mobile technology is also related to huge economic resources, the right to implement it is also in the intersection of various interests. For example in 2012 it was reported by many Nepalese news agencies that a minister of state had allegedly asked for substantial bribes from Ncell (the former Mero-Mobile) to import microwave frequency equipment used for network infrastructure.

*KATHMANDU, APR 25 - Minister of State for Information and Communications Surita Kumari Shah has allegedly demanded Rs 50 million from Ncell, the country's leading GSM mobile operator, in return for a permission to import microwave frequency equipment to expand its services, a source at the telecom said (Humagain 2012).*

Such conflicts of interest relate mobile technology to international politics.

*KATHMANDU, APR 27 - The Finnish Embassy in Nepal has expressed serious concern over Minister of State for Information and Communications Surita Kumari Sah 's alleged involvement in corrupt practice, demanding Rs 50 million from Ncell .*

*Finnish Ambassador Asko Luukkainen told the Post that he was disappointed over reports that the state minister has asked for money from Ncell . Ncell 's*

*parent company TeliaSonera, is partly owned by Finland. "If this incident is true, it could jeopardize future trade potential between Nepal and Finland," he said (Ekantipur 2012).*

Thus, in the way Pfaffenberg (1988) argues mobile technology as a total social phenomenon quite evidently connects together all kinds of different aspects of society. In addition to the various ways it relates through its functions it is also connects together much more heterogeneous actors. Hence in in addition to the different aspects of my informants' lives mobile technology weaves together also much more heterogeneous entities and agencies like laws, geographical formations, national and international politics, identities of its individual users and health risks. This encompassing nature of the mobile technology was also apparent in the way different visual and literal representations of mobile technology were associated to a huge variety of different entities and persons ranging from Sadhus and Om to street festivals.

It is also clear that mobile technology is not a very static phenomenon as it is a subject of numerous arguments and conflicts of power which are driven mobile technology's ability to empower and contest status quo, by the multinational companies' claims of ownership and profit and also by the unknown results of how mobile technology reacts with the human body in the long run.

Yet even though mobile technology consists of infinite amounts of multiple relations and actors it also somehow connects them together. To examine how this unity is achieved I will return to the subject of ontology.

## **The shifting contexts**

I would argue that the ontological principles can be quite plausibly applied to explain unity in all of the historical narratives of the Kathmandu valley I examined in the beginning of this thesis: the early Kirata people assembled into a unified kingdom when they became ruled by the Licchavi courts, the Newars became unified society under the Malla rule and the various different groups of Nepal became a unified kingdom in because of the Parbatiya conquest. Similarly, in more recent times, a particular Nepalese nationality and a common history was constructed because the Shah kingdom got connected and opposed with the British Empire. In other words the transformative relations to the external world instigated new hierarchies which

defined a superior order or context that came to encompass the inhabitants of Kathmandu valley and constructed in new ways their particular positions in relation to other people and societies.

In the more recent anthropological literature there is an abundance of characterizations of how the relations to the world outside have instigated processes through which the inhabitants have come to re-define society. In fact, almost all of the ethnographies I could amass point out that the people of the Kathmandu valley are witnessing major upheavals because of new ways of contextualising. Gerard Toffin makes this point clear concerning Newars:

*They (Newars) are progressively subjected more and more to new, modern ideas. Shrestras, the dominant high-caste group, for instance, now look more frequently to western models to conform and increasingly speak Nepali and English instead of Newar, even within home. These trends have also affected religion, with the rise of new, egalitarian ideas such as those advocated by Theravada Buddhism... These changes... are changing Newar society radically: Rituals and festivals are dissociated from social life. Religion legitimates less and less the prevailing hierarchies. Inter caste cooperation and interdependence in relation to domestic and collective ceremonies are in the process of collapse. The lower castes are no longer willing to fulfill their old religious obligations towards high castes, embodied by landowners and powerful groups. Many traditional values are losing out (Toffin 2007:19-20).*

The current chaotic state of Nepal's parliamentary politics abounds with examples of how the establishment of parliamentary democracy as the political context has instigated the caste groups to negotiate their traditional roles and hierarchies (e.g. Gellner 1997a; 1997b). The contemporary transformations have also paved the way for an emergence of various new groups. This ethnicisation and politicization of caste groups is accorded to be in a direct relation to how group identities have been dramatically changing because of new religious currents, democratic ideals of equality and new economic possibilities (Gellner 1995b; Quigley 1995).

These new contexts have also altered gender relations. For instance, Toffin (2007: 386-407) has shown how notions of equality are shifting gender relations in many ways. Laura Kunreuther (2009) also describes how new laws following democratic ideals of equality have started to affect traditional kinship models by giving inheritance rights to women consequently causing major conflicts with older models. In the religious sphere modern ideas about religion and Buddhism have, according to Gellner (2005), caused religious rifts and divisions between

Buddhism and Hinduism to appear where there were none before. The traditional religious festivals and their power structures are also consequently changing as new groups have risen to power because of political alterations and the collapsing of the royal power (Owens 2000). The city space and its organization are also under constant alteration as modern ideas of statehood and ecological values affect the way the urban Kathmandu valley is constructed and renovated (Rademacher 2008, 2009).

The new economic context is also often seen as a particularly powerful cause of overall change in society. Quigley (1985) describes how already in the 1980s previous forms of co-operation were being eroded by the advance of cash-economy and the individualism it entailed. Liechty (2005) has focused on this phenomenon and characterizes how the capitalist commodification of food and sex are taking their toll on older values and the social relations they represent. Liechty (2008) and Katharine Rankin (2004) have both studied in general how modernity and global markets are causing shifts and ruptures in Nepalese society and how the old order based on caste hierarchy is giving away to notions of middle class.

Liechty (2008) emphasizes that these changes are related to the narrative forces of modernity which have had profound implications for how the inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley and especially its young have started to interpret their context in the contemporary world.

*In young people's lives, state promoted narratives of material progress, development and achievement fuse with commercially driven narratives of consumer desire and fulfilments to create powerfully compelling stories of value. By creating new standards with which to gage progress-standards that are both explicitly material and comparative (with "the West," or "the industrialized world")- these stories quite literally retell the Nepali past and present (as backward and deficient) even while they claim the future (by defining the deferred goals of "development"). At the same time, these stories of material progress and desire implicitly undermine local narratives of value and meaning kept in cultural circulation by members of earlier generations, rendering them less and less likely to maintain the narrative momentum needed to carry these Nepali cultural practices from the past into the everyday lives of young people in the present, let alone into their imaginings of the future (Liechty 2008:232-233).*



## The ontology of modern society

To posit these transformations and my ethnographic subject, the mobile technology, in a continuum with the historical narratives I started with, I will follow the same method I used to examine the ontological presuppositions concerning the transcendent world of deities and divine kings. In other words I will again apply the principles concerning ontology to distinguish the presuppositions on which these new ways to contextualize were based. I will start by investigating Thapa's notion that the people of the valley were demanding scientific truth instead of Hindu myths.

If one looks into what Sahlins (1996) calls the native western cosmology, scientific truth as a method to contextualise is not completely different from those used in stranger-kingships as there are numerous structural similarities between the western forms of transcendence and modern scientific objectivity. For instance, according to Sahlins there is a quite direct genealogical link between Christian God and modern scientific notion of nature:

*It is often noted that the Christian Providence is a transformation of the Aristotelian teleology of nature. Just so, from Galileo and Kepler through Newton and Einstein, early modern physicists were convinced that God could not have made the universe as disorderly as it might seem in everyday experience. Indeed, Newton held that the fixed laws of nature were edicts promulgated by God... For a long time despised nature nonetheless manifested God's handiwork, and now it appropriated His powers—in ways that are still with us, such as the virtues for human health of whatever can be called "natural." But then, the great medieval symbolics of nature and its providential sciences had been constructed from the same cosmic premises (Sahlins 1996:408 see also Viveiros de Castro 2012).*

If you continue with this line of thought all kinds of similarities appear when comparing Sahlins (2010) model of alterity, Dumont's (1980) concept of hierarchy and modern thought described by science and technology scholars such as Annemarie Mol (e.g. 2002), Bruno Latour (e.g. 1993), and John Law (2004). Yet, in modern ontology the universal transcendent is different, for it is not the divine outside of any particular kingdom but the outside of humanity in singular and as a secular subject. For instance, if in the royal Newar city of Bhaktapur authority was historically tied to the ability to control the dangerous but yet eminently powerful deities that lived beyond the borders of the city (Levy 1990:151-197), in a similar manner the aforementioned scholars of science and technology have posited that the modern authority is

based on the objective nature that transcends the subjective viewpoints and beliefs of humans (Law 2004:149-151; Latour 2004:10-18; Mol 2002:166-184).

Another structural similarity is in the way purity is connected to transcendence and authority or in other words to politics. If the hierarchy of the caste system is based on a process of purification in which people positioned by their relative purity, it can be argued that a very similar principle is the corner stone of the modern ontology, yet in a different form. One of the key features of modern ontology is that after a fact is constituted, all the work done to make it is purified from subjective values (e.g. Latour 2006; Mol 2007:29-51). Dumont (1980:244-245) also points out that modern hierarchy is achieved and in a sense concealed through the separation of facts from values. In the words of John Law:

*To make an unqualified statement all the qualifying modalities must be deleted. When the modalities disappear all the processes also disappear. First the subjective. There is a reversal the reality is the one giving the trace not the process. More reality in the object, not in the process (Law 2004:36-37).*

In the modern ontology the scientific facts just exist as an a priori context and consequently do not possess any value in such. Or in abstract terms, it is presumed that the *out-there-ness* of objective reality is the cause and not the outcome of sciences and, as the truth exists without its human makers, it does not have any values as such (Law 2004:29). Hence, in the modern ontology the external Sahlins refers to is the universal objective truth. Or if put into Dumont's conceptualisation of hierarchy the objective reality is the encompassing whole that organizes and defines particularities of the world.

The most obvious manifestation of how this modern ontology is connected to status in a similar manner as caste purity can be found in the field of neo-liberal economics in which authority is discernibly connected to an idea of pure and independent markets and the laws that govern them (Rankin 2004: 15-70). Sahlins (1996) also notes that the western vision of universal reality is thoroughly entangled with modern economics through the genealogical link between the biblical narrative of the universal material needs of man, the story of Adam's fall, and the neo-liberal economic theory that naturalizes the need of man to maximize his profits:

*In sum. The historical-cum-logical presupposition of empirical understanding is the lapsed Adam, the limited and suffering individual in need of the object, who thus comes to know it sensually, by the obstacles or advantages it offers to his*

*happiness. Perception and satisfaction are recurrent aspects of an embodied theory of knowledge that seems the appropriate philosophical corollary of the transfer of enchantment from nature to capital (Sahlins 1996:415).*

For instance, practices through which multinational companies claim independence from political authorities by referring to the objective superiority of independent and free markets are well documented in studies concerning the globalisation of neo-liberal market ideologues (e.g. Rankin 2004:25).

The way modern ontology separates between politics and business applies quite well also to describing how the authority in the Nepalese society was being re-organized. Even though the whole political system of Nepal was in total chaos during my fieldwork and there were no unified political authority, there were powerful foreign institutions such as multinational companies which were allowed to construct huge infrastructural projects such as cellular networks required to establish mobile technology. Yet allowing multinational technology companies to do such massive projects was not in Nepal a major political question, at least not among my informants or in the media. I would claim that the relations peripheral nation states have with multinational institutions can be explained quite well with Sahlins's conceptualisation of galactic mimesis in which the peripheral elites imitate their galactic superiors to gain similar powers.

Another instance of a purification in which values and politics are made to disappear occurs in the marketing discourses of mobile technology. If one looks at the forms of narrative that technology companies employ to market their services, all kinds of purifications or reductions are discernible. For instance, William Mazzarella (2003:149-184) describes how a marketing campaign of an Indian cell phone service provider was based on the premise to evoke mobile technology as a universal: first as a universal foundation of enlightened communication and secondly as a scientific universal and hence a neutral non-ideological and value-free engine of a historical change<sup>4</sup>. The way technological companies market their products is quite comparable with how in the stranger-kinghip type of cosmologies the divine and universal power of the king becomes the power of the people, a reciprocation which legitimizes his

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly Mazzarella (2003:154) notes that Gandhi made an argument against Nehru's positivism towards western social models that technology was not at all value free and could not be taken to be a mere "tool". In similar way as the science studies argue, Gandhi thought that sciences were not separate from the social conditions of their implementations.

sovereignty (Sahlins 2010:110). To examine these notions I will next exhibit a narrative concerning a re-branding of a multinational network provider in the Kathmandu valley.

### **NCell re-branding campaign**

*My usual commuting route to central Kathmandu had transformed quite overwhelmingly. A massive amount of new billboards and smaller ads had been installed overnight. These ads mostly consisted of a purple background and a text that said "NCell here for Nepal". Some of the biggest billboards had pictures of persons of various ages who were attired in traditional costumes of different Nepalese ethnic/cultural groups.*

A local newspaper article gives a picture of the scale of the campaign:

*KATHMANDU, March 23: Kathmandu Valley and other major cities in the country were virtually painted purple these past weeks with the re-branding of Mero Mobile into Ncell.*

*The anticipation of this change was created by all purple hoarding boards on major thoroughfares of the country and then print ad with purple cover appeared in almost all the newspapers on the day of the big launch. The re-branding is indeed one of the largest the country has ever seen (Lama 2010).*

In addition to the scale of this campaign, the feature I wish mainly to accentuate is how its narrative form draws heavily from a specific way of conceptualising the relation between the Nepalese and the multinational service provider. Sanju Koirala, corporate communications manager of Ncell, presents a detailed figuration of this relation in a newspaper article and how it manifests in the name Ncell itself.

*"Although TeliaSonera (a multinational company Ncell being its local brand) exercises a global strategy, it acts as a local operator in every market where it is present. Ncell is a local operator for Nepal, abiding by local rules and regulations, and respecting local traditions and values. We will be bringing to Nepal the latest technologies and introduce new, effective and easy-to-use services of international quality with a local touch," Koirala informed.*

*This local touch is depicted in the brand name 'Ncell' and the slogan 'Here for Nepal'. The 'cell' in Ncell is common in all the countries and 'N' stands for Nepal. For example: in Georgia it is Geocell and in Uzbekistan it is Ucell.*

*"The brand color 'purple' reflects creativity, passion and reliability with which Ncell will continue to serve its customers," Koirala said, "The stone logo symbolizes strength, reliability and integrity, like the mountains in Nepal, and the lines on the stone represent connectivity and networking."*

*"This indicates the start of a new conversation, a link between all people in Nepal, the history and tradition of this land being enriched with modern technologies," she added (Lama 2010).*

In contrast to this appreciation of Nepal, the universality of mobile technologies and their inevitable progress are emphasized in the campaign: The CEO of Spice Nepal (the official name of Mero Mobile, before the rebranding.) states the following in a newspaper interview:

*We use the most advanced technologies from the world class vendors in our networks. This ensures the readiness for a smooth evolution path from GSM to 3G and beyond, which in turn allows us to continue to offer high quality and innovative services to our customers (Karki 2010).*

Koistinen ascertains how this empowers the local people:

*We are committed to continue investing in the development of telecommunication infrastructure and services in Nepal and contribute to the prosperity of the country and its people.*

*People, who previously did not have access to telecommunication services, will inevitably gain from increased possibilities to connect to others and access information. Therefore in 2010, we will continue expanding the coverage of our network, with the aim of doubling the network capacity compared to what we had in 2009.*

*Our success will be based on being able to provide high quality networks and services to our customers in the future (Karki 2010).*

These representations are quite evidently based on a dichotomy which posits global and modern technologies as the encompassing context in relation to the particular and local Nepal. The relationship between these two is conceptualised as a one in which TeliaSonera respects and takes into account particular nature of Nepal and empowers its people. This dichotomy repeats itself throughout the re-branding campaign.

In addition to the way the Ncell campaign portrays mobile technology as a universal, it also represents the local Nepalese in a particular way. According to Mazzarella:

*Telecommunications signify ambiguously: they suggest, at once, a technological transcendence of concrete locality and a means for reconstituting locality through the intimacy of human communication (2003:184).*

In his ethnographic narrative Mazzarella (2003:157-183) describes how the advertisement company translated these two requirements of cellular phone marketing into an advertisement campaign. Hence in Mazzarella's view:

*These examples illustrate the important fact that consumerist globalization is as much about the cultural politics of producing the local as it is about contesting homogenization (Mazzarella 2003:149).*

The Ncell campaign also produced its own version of the Kathmandu valley people. For instance, a campaign video that was played constantly in the national television during the re-branding starts from depicting a Hindu Sadhu conducting a puja and then cuts to Buddhist monks circling a gompa and rolling Buddhist prayer wheels. The rest of the video presents various traditional Nepalese festivals with people attired in traditional costumes mixed with some Nepalese in modern costumes flying a kite. The connecting theme is the Ncell's purple colour which is present in every scene. This is how the clip is characterised by Koirala.

*The television commercial (TVC), created by Max L 'agence, is itself a marvel. The 60 seconds advertisement executed in eight days, the shortest time taken to fully complete a TVC, has set a standard for Nepalese TVCs. The TVC portrays a connection to Nepali heritage through the use of the purple color and the interaction between people of all ages (Lama 2010).*

Thus, these practices were contributing to the way people of the Kathmandu valley positioned themselves as particular people in the context of universal mobile technology. These practices

were not restricted just to commercials or to newspaper articles. NCell for instance has established an annual festival:

*KATHMANDU, APR 21 - Durbar Marg—in many ways, the heart of the Kathmandu—is supposed to be one of most happening hubs in Kathmandu.*

*The pavements of this sprawling street of cafes and clothing stores wore a rather 'purple' look on April 21. The clean wide road which is usually filled with vehicles was replaced by a horde of people. Kathmanduites from various walks of the life could be observed enjoying Durbar Marg's ninth street festival Purple Saturday, the third annual event to be organised by Ncell.*

*From the entry point at Durbar Marg's Narayanhiti Palace Museum to the statue of King Mahindra, the road was filled with various eatery stalls, gaming zones (for both children and other age groups), face painting stalls and drawing stalls. There were also a number of live cultural shows—including acts that featured the Panchai Baja, Lakhe Dance and Jhankri Dance—which were moving along the crowded streets. While some people were gleefully enjoying the view, others could be seen getting busy posing alongside a clown who was roaming about Durbar Marg.*

*Among the various stalls, there stood Ncell's own which offered heavy discounts on its SIM and recharge cards, as well as other gift hampers. "I couldn't decide what to get my mother for Mother's Day so when I came to know about this festival, I brought her here along with me. I have bought two SIM cards for my mother and myself. I am also treating her to some delicious food from one of these stalls," shared Shrijana Tuladhar, a twelfth grader who was one among the many queuing up on Ncell's gift hamper line.*

*"There is no open place for families to celebrate in Kathmandu. Ncell has been organising these Purple Saturdays for the past three years to let families enjoy with delicious food and live music," says Sanju Koirala, Corporate Communications Manager at Ncell.*

*The main attraction of Saturday's festival—which, compared to past years, saw an increased number of visitors—was the live concert featuring Nepali artists Sugam Pokharel, Deepak Bajracharya, Shreeya Sotang, Axe Band and Saptak*

*Fusion Band. In addition, the Everest B-Boying Crew's performance at the street fest was one of its major highlights. "We had not performed before such a great mass before. The crew members are really happy to be appreciated by thousands of people," shared Nishanta Gauchan, front man of the Everest Crew.*

*Rajbabu Ghimire, a visitor from Palpa who is on his second trip to the capital shared, "I had never seen such a huge crowd gather for a street festival before. I was on my way to the Teaching Hospital to meet my uncle, but am simply spell-bound by the mass of people, the colourful music and the ambience." Pointing towards the huge purple and white balloons that had been strung along the road, Ghimire added, "The colourful balloons blowing in the air are what lured me the most."*

*The gala began at 11am and ended with a 'Laser Light Show' at 8pm (Ohja 2012).*

In the past, representational practices connected to the technical infrastructure have also been contingent to how the people of the Kathmandu valley position themselves as particular groups. All over the Kathmandu valley one can find ancient artificial stone ponds called Hitis which are still to this day used to distribute water. These ponds are often skilfully decorated with various deities and symbols that relate the water system to the cosmologies and the caste system prevalent during the reigns of the divine kings (Slusser and Vajrācārya 1973). Consequently the use of these ponds has been historically dictated by the caste and guthi formations and their boundaries which were contingent to the ontology elicited by the representations engraved to these water systems (Spodek 2002:66). In other words, the water infrastructures of the Kathmandu valley and the representations they carried ascertained the caste based politics of the society and delineated the boundaries by means of which people understood their position in these kingdoms.

The modern ontology has also its own way of delineating group formations and their relative positions. Sahlins (1996:410 see also Viveiros de Castro 2004:482) points out that the transcendence of the Christian god was, in addition to the objective reality, conveyed also to the concept of society. Society as something that transcends its individual members became consequently also the subject of social sciences:



*If "Durkheim" concluded that "God was another name for society, was this not because it was already true-that is, of his particular society? It is not that god was society deified but that society was god socialized (Sahlins 1996:411).*

Sahlins (2010:104) further argues that in anthropology this conceptualisation formalized into a method in which differences in human ways of living can be explained by independent and sui generis wholes known as cultures. Lauren Leve (2011) describes through the term identity machine how this modern way of contextualising has a role in how Nepalese have increasingly become to understand themselves:

*Materialized in the heavily promoted values, discourses, and institutions associated with neoliberal democracy and development, the identity machine produces not only the classes and categories of social personhood that structure public recognition of social collectivities but, indeed, the very ontology of "identity" itself. When scholars take identity as a universal object or essential aspect of human existence... we also help to naturalize neoliberal power and cosmology (Leve 2011:514-515).*

In sum, the argument is that the modern thought does not just assert the universal objective reality but also simultaneously constructs how the people understand their particular position in this modernist cosmos through concepts such as culture and identity.

For instance, Toffin (2007) describes how the changing identity of the caste groups instigates them now to compete for stratified power in a clear break from the hierarchical coherence of the caste system. He presents a detailed ethnographic example on how the identity and history of an agricultural Newar caste group called Jyapus is being constructed in opposition to the dominating higher castes (Toffin 2007:359-382). The Jyapus have attempted to distance themselves from an encompassing Newar order by designating their caste as the indigenous Buddhist inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley. In opposition to their indigenesness Jyapus depict the hierarchically higher Newar castes as later Hindu migrants who have introduced the repressing caste hierarchy into the Kathmandu valley (Toffin 2007:327). To assert these notions Jyapus have constructed an ethnographic museum to promote their own distinct culture (Toffin 2007:375). In other words the Jyapus were redefining their unity as a particular indigenous culture and not as a part of the Newar caste system.

Various anthropological accounts of the Kathmandu valley have also described how new technologies participate in delineating how the inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley position themselves in the modern context. Liechty for instance argues that television and video technology have had an important role in constructing the identities of the new class oriented social groups and establishing commodity consumption as the primary logic of these identities in the Kathmandu valley:

*In the case of the VCR (and its companion the television), the arrival of this single commodity into the home guarantees a continuous flow of other commodities, both in the form of video films, and eventually, as in Kathmandu, televised commercial images and messages. This consumer strategy at once allows the middle class to distinguish itself from the mass; begins to transform the middle class into a group of free individuated. Isolated consumers; transforms the middle-class home into a consumer space; and eventually reproduces itself, as young people are socialized in a class ethos in which the work of class production is consumer consumption. In a very real sense commodity consumption is about class production, the production of a class of "free" and individuated consumers (Liechty 2008:166).*

Hence technological mediums instigate, according to Liechty, new understandings of what is true and plausible.

*...Yet it is important to recognize how cinematic representations privilege certain constructions of plausibility over others. As a visual enterprise, media realism privileges the eye, privileges the material as real, and privileges the communication of meaning and value in the visual domain. In the visual/material mode, objects are made to bear a heavy burden of representation. Commercial films typically deploy an array of objects (fashions, vehicles, and other consumer goods) to index character traits and lifestyles... Arguably, what film realism helps to make plausible is less some new concrete image of reality than a set of new understandings in the realms of being and knowing. What middle-class media consumers in Kathmandu identify as realistic in films, and the lessons they consciously seek to learn and affirm from those film, have to do with these new epistemic understandings...they have begun to experiment with new understandings of themselves and their social lives (Liechty 2008:181).*

Liechty states that by the agency of these technologies the reality becomes to be seen through the idiom of the representation and naturalizes a certain set of values and cultural practices and logics such as consumerism, democracy, freedom and individual achievement (Liechty 2008: 182).

Kunreuther (2006) has also focused on technology in the Kathmandu valley. She describes similarly how radio and telephone technologies do not just produce representations about the reality of the people of Kathmandu and the Nepali diaspora but effectually participate in constructing them. Hence for her communication technologies do not mediate but construct subjectivities and temporalities through which people understand themselves and others (Kunreuther 2006:325).

### **The west and culture**

During my own fieldwork my informants in many ways emphasized their particular way of living and unity by contrasting it with an outside. For example, a vague notion of “west” was in many ways used to contrast what my informant ascertained to be internal to their own way of living. In fact, the English word “culture” was the exact term my informants themselves used, sometimes even when talking in Nepali. In general many of my younger informants often expressed desire to move to some western country where in their view life was in general better and free of the limitations imbued by their culture. Many times these fantasies of freedom took from my perspective quite an absurd form. For example, I was approached by an aspiring engineering student who wished to study in the Scandinavian countries and inquired me if it was true that in Europe sex is freely available for anybody. These kinds of statements were quite common among younger males. My older, more travelled informants often ridiculed such statements and pointed out that it was the combination of western movies and restrictions of their culture that produced them. One informant proclaimed that the youngsters did not understand that such freedoms were only available in west if one had money. In his view this was also the case in Nepal; if you had the money you could also be free of culture to fulfil your fantasies.

One could also be seemingly free of culture if one's relatives were not present. For example one informant's family had gone abroad leaving him to live alone in Kathmandu. This person was deemed as very lucky and free by his friends because there was nobody to force him to participate in cultural practices. For instance it was deemed proper to go home to eat and

spend time with family after work or school. I witnessed how my informant took full advantage of his freedoms and was often partying and drinking in the tourist district.

But it was not in all cases that west was used to denote positive values and something to be desired. For example, western viewpoint was also something that was often used as a rhetorical device to emphasize my informants own particular history and society.

*We are at Budhanilkantha, a temple area with a statue of Visnu reclining on a giant snake in the middle of a pond. I'm with a Nepalese family, a Tibetan Lama<sup>5</sup> who works as the family's priest and, his assistant. We are there to do puja on the occasion of the full moon and to give presents to ancestors and to appease a Naga (a mystical snakelike creature) that lives inside every family's house. The puja consists of listening to Tibetan mantras incanted by the Lama and a variety of different offerings, which are burned inside a bowl. The eldest son of the family explains to me that if the ancestors are not remembered, the Naga might get angry and cause misfortune. I ask about the combination of having a Tibetan Lama performing a Buddhist puja in an obviously Hindu temple. He answers that Buddhism and Hinduism are not really separate religions and points out that Siddhartha Gautama was a Hindu himself. He thinks that separating them is a western way of categorizing, and a result of not knowing the Nepalese history. According to him this division had nothing to do with historical reality.*

It was often the case that western practices were conceptualized as immoral because they were directed towards the fulfilment of personal and individual desires and were consequently not seen as good for the society at large. Modern medical practices were for instance in some situations contrasted with the moral superiority of traditional healing methods.

*An informant has had for a long time a serious rash on his arm. He tells me that he went to see a doctor, who prescribed medicines that initially removed the rash. But now after he has stopped using the medicines the rash has come back. He purports that this is not how a medicine should work. Consequently he is now utilizing a form of traditional Tibetan medicine in which a llama blows air to the inflicted body part and through various mantras and offerings to deities, attempts to cure the disease. He thinks that western medicine is faulty as it is geared*

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<sup>5</sup> A Buddhist priest

*towards initial healing and disregards long-time wellbeing and common good. In his view it keeps alive people that should be dead and consequently produces all kinds of problems for the society at large. Yet he admits that when it comes to personal decisions, people, himself included, will obviously resort to any means that will cure them. This does not, however in his view mean that western medicine is good for people in general.*

The delineation of culture through contrast was not just verbal, and in some cases it literally clashed with other practices. These instances gave my informants also the chance to express moral values.

*We are watching from a window the processions of a jatra which, in a common manner, consists of carrying a deity on a very heavy pedestal around a precisely marked path through central Kathmandu. Suddenly a taxi appears and attempts to overtake the procession. The crowd gets angry, and some of the attendants become hostile. Some rocks are thrown, and the taxi driver decides to back out from the scene. An informant remarks that people should not interfere with cultural happenings as it might incite quite aggressive reactions. He thinks that even though the taxi driver was just trying to do his job he should still have understood to give prominence and respect to cultural practices.*

The most vivid example of how my informants delineated their unity through a contrast was how the family I was living with reacted to my role as a cultural anthropologist and my subject of mobile technology.

*I'm spending time with a crowd of younger Nepalese at Bishal Bazar. One of my sisters is scolding me for hanging around too much at the mall. I remark that she is also doing the same and wonder why it is bad to hang around the mall. She states that if I want to study their culture the mall is not the place to do it. She jokingly claims that the people hanging in the mall, including her, are bad natured and not a proper example of their culture.*

Bishal Bazar and the world it belonged to were obviously seen as something that did not belong to the culture of my informants. As my informant knew that I was a cultural anthropologist she thought that I should also be conducting my study in different settings. She was also clearly making a moral statement: for her "hanging" at the mall was something that people with bad

nature were doing, as opposed to those who dutifully conducted cultural practices and stayed home.

Similar statements were often presented to me as I spent my time in the mall or around activities that from my family's viewpoint were not good examples of their culture. As the focus of my research was mobile technology, I tried to accordingly spend most of my time with people who mostly utilized it and in places where it was most tangible. For these reasons a big part of my fieldwork was conducted in Bishal Bazar, as it was filled with mobile phone shops and young people who were interested in new technologies. This presented a contradiction especially to those who knew that I was a cultural anthropologist and had some preconception of what such a person was. As the family I lived with had some previous experiences with cultural anthropologists they also had a certain view on what such persons were supposed to do. Yet the condemnation of not participating in cultural practices was not just about my role as a cultural anthropologist, as it was clear that there was also a moral dimension. In other words, practices that were categorized as culture were good and what was outside of them was, if not directly immoral at least, a bit suspicious.

Consequently my family tried constantly to get me to participate in events and happenings such as Newar Jatras and Buddhist pujas and seemed to be a bit puzzled when I instead spent my time recording, in their view, mundane events and wasted my time doing everyday activities. To decide in which events to participate, I chose to follow the lead of one of my main informants (a male in his early thirties) and his friends. This meant that we often skipped the events the older members of my family wished us to participate, as my main informant did not have much interest towards them. When we accompanied the older folk or attended for example some Newar Jatra on our own, they seemed happy and content that I did not just participate in morally suspicious activities such as hanging at the mall or riding motorcycles around the countryside.

Culture was thus often contrasted with activities like work. Obsession to make money and work too much was a quality often ascribed to western people and seen stemming from a lack of morale.

*I'm interviewing an informant about a certain ritual he conducts daily. He does not have an answer to my more intricate questions about the ritual and purports that he often leaves religious thinking to others and just follows the tradition. He doesn't know if the prayer really has any effect. Prayer is for him always a good*

*thing because his ancestors have done it. He contemplates that if one is always busy work there is no time for culture. He sees this in western people, who are in his view always occupied with making money. Nevertheless he thinks that western people go to church when they become old and have time. He argues that when people get old and start to lose their health, they will surely resort to gods.*

These contrasts which were used to separate culture from other aspects of the society applied also to technologies. My ethnographic subject, the mobile technology, was also explicitly contrasted with culture.

*It's the first day of my fieldwork in Kathmandu. It also coincides with the first anniversary of the passing of a good friend from the previous visit. An informant picks me up at the airport and explains that it is a common Nepalese custom to have a party for the deceased after a year has passed from the death. This is done to make the spirit of the deceased feel remembered and to make sure he will not bother the living. For the first anniversary of a death it is customary to invite all the friends and acquaintances of the deceased, and so I am also invited.*

*The celebrations are held in the family house and on its large balcony. For my part this event consists mainly of eating together with the other guests and wondering about the meaning of a variety of ritual proceedings conducted inside the house by the closest family members.*

*At some point I have a conversation with the husband of one of the sisters of the deceased about the purpose of my stay in Kathmandu. Not yet certain about how to explain my research to informants I reply that I am there to conduct fieldwork on the relation between mobile phones and cultural change. After a while of pondering this he argues that technologies do not have any consequential relationship with their culture. He refers to the surrounding ceremonies and notes that this is their culture and it does not change as it is passed from generation to generation. New technologies do not in his mind alter these proceedings. What he thinks mobile phones affect is the lifestyle of the Nepalese. He points out that it is weird to even consider that new technologies would have some relationship with their culture and suggest me to consider the aim of my research. I get the*

*impression that he found my research question slightly offending, as it implied that technological innovations would have impact on their ancestral traditions.*

In another case an informant presented an elaborate characterization of how western technologies are a part of a more general moral opposition between east and west.

*We are having a long conversation about the west and its technological supremacy. My informant is arguing that the western sciences cannot explain everything and gives numerous examples ranging from UFO sightings, mermaids stranded during the tsunami to haunted houses in Bhaktapur. He argues that western science cannot solve all the world's problems such as climate change and the swine flu which are in his view actually the result of the western way of living. He also proclaims that many scientific truths were known in the east long before the ascendancy of western sciences. He for example purports that the eastern astrologers had knowledge about the planet Pluto long before it was discovered in the west. In the end he argues that the western supremacy will come to an end eventually. He characterizes how in the Hindu mythology the current period is known as Kali Yuga, the dark age, during which people turn away from gods and spirituality which results in a loss of morality. He depicts how this period is characterized in the myths as a time when the machine makes the water turn in the wrong direction and the lights go down when they should go up. These he sees as direct references to modern plumbing systems and electric lights. He argues that Kali Yuga does not last forever, and western civilization will eventually see its demise as different periods will follow.*

My informant's narrative quite explicitly dichotomizes western sciences and technologies with the moral nature of eastern spirituality. In other words, this informant saw the contemporary times as immoral because they systematically ignore the universality of any spiritual or divine values which he saw as representative of his own particular background. Hence even though it is obvious that this narrative stems from my informant's cultural background, it also exhibits, albeit in quite an ironical way, the diffusion of the modern context of a reality without any values. It displays how the modern objective-subjective dichotomy also has effect in how people designate their own particularity, for instance in this case with spiritual and moral values in opposition to the valueless west and its technologies. I would claim that all of the narratives I presented previously rely on a similar method of contextualising.



Contrary to the view presented above there are also Nepalese who argue for the opposite but in a similar manner presented what was Nepalese through an opposition to what was external to it. Yet in this case the eastern Nepalese truth was seen as a fraudulent method to control people.

*I'm in a park in Helsinki, Finland, having a conversation about the current state of Nepali politics with a member of the family I was living with during my fieldwork. He has lived in Finland for a number of years and has made his home here. He purports that for any good to come out of Nepal all the politicians should be killed and somebody with proper vision should just take control for any progress to happen. He thinks the biggest problem in Nepal is that people rely too much on authority and not on the truth. He compares the differences between Nepalese and Finnish education systems and posits that in Finnish school one has to write about the truth and not what the authority tells you to write. He thinks that the biggest problem and obstacle for progress is that in Nepal the authority is the truth.*

As in the historical narrative concerned with group formation, my informants also defined their unity through a contrast with an outside. This outside world was for my informants something that was simultaneously desirable, as it was fantasized as a site of freedom from various issues that my informants saw as suppressing in their own society. Yet at the same time west was also used to criticize what my informants saw as the erosion of morality and lack of values.

This method of contextualising which designated people as independent cultures in opposition to value free objective truth was quite apparent in all of the narratives I have presented. Thus, based on my this I would claim that many of the transformations taking place in the Kathmandu valley were organized according to a method of contextualising or ontology that presupposed a division between factual objective reality, and value based cultures and societies. Hence I would claim that these ontological presuppositions that divide reality into objective facts and subjective values can also be used to describe how the unity of mobile technology is achieved. Yet, before I utilize this ontology to explain how technological unity is established requires that I first take a side step and elicit how such an analysis poses some considerations concerning anthropological theory. This is because this ontology is the same that has been the basis of anthropological theory itself. Consequently to use it as an explanation requires a new method to describe social and cultural phenomena.

# Ontology as an ethnographic subject

Viveiros De Castro (2004:481) argues that the current anthropological notions of social are inevitably polarized by various oppositions such as representation-reality, culture-nature, human-nonhuman and mind-body, which have restrained anthropologists from focusing on ontology. In his view all these dichotomies stem ultimately from the modernist ontology, in which the nature in singular is always the encompassing term to societies in plural. Amiria Hennare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell also posit how this epistemic nature of anthropology stems from modern ontological presuppositions:

*It is because in our Cartesian-Kantian bind, we assume that the manifold of the universe cannot but consist at most of mind and matter (representation or reality, culture or nature, meaning or thing) that we also cannot but assume that anthropology and its object are epistemic in character. If we are all living in the same world -one best described and apprehended by science- then the task left to social scientists is to elucidate the various systematic formulations of knowledge (epistemologies) that offer different accounts of that one world. (Henare et al. 2007: 9 see also Viveiros de Castro 2004a: 483; 2004b: 6).*

According to Henare, Holbraad and Wastell this particular ontology is the premise through which anthropological theory conceptualises alterity:

*Things of the world may appear different, but the point is that they are different in similar –universal – ways; nature in this sense is 'one'. Culture on the other hand, is 'many'. After all, while matter (nature) just is what it is indifferently, mind (culture) can represent it in different ways (Henare et al. 2007: 9).*

In other words, according to this view the modern ontology and its universals examined in the previous parts have often been taken for granted in anthropological theory. Maybe one of the most classical exemplifications of this duality as the methodological basis of anthropology can be found in the opening paragraphs of the Elemental structures of Kinship by Levi-Strauss (1949).

*Above all, it is beginning to emerge that this distinction between nature and society, while of no historical significance, does contain logic, fully justifying its use by modern sociology as a methodological tool. Man is a both a biological*

*being and a social individual. Among his responses to external or internal stimuli, some are wholly dependent upon his nature, others upon his social environment. (Levi-Strauss 1949: 3).*

Another classical example of this division between cultural representations and universal reality can be found in the anthropological study of how an natural object, sugar, unifies many cultures, by Sydney Mintz (1985). In his study Mintz (1985: 153) explicitly divides the meaning of sugar into two spheres: inside which is symbolical and external which is universal. In addition his conceptualisation exemplifies how the symbolic meanings are seen as particular and the external biological and economical phenomena as all-encompassing universals.

*Inside kind of meanings are culture specific, arbitrary, don't possess universal meaning. They mean because they occur in specific cultural and historic context where their relevant meanings are already known to the participants. They are symbols... The other meaning is what something means for the society as a whole and especially for those who rule it economically... Birth and death are universal and so is our capability to endow anything with meaning. We make biological events like birth and death into social events, because we are human. We give them culturally specific meanings (Mintz 1985: 153-155).*

Hence in Mintz's conceptualisation sugar is same for all cultures who can then give it different meanings and uses.

According to Viveiros de Castro (2003), using the modern ontology as the basis of analysis is problematic because it posits anthropologists in an epistemological advantage over their informants. In other words, if anthropology is taken to be a discipline that studies different epistemologies, it implies that the anthropologist knows what the reality truly is because she can study her informants' different understanding of it and can compare these different ways of knowing. In Viveiros de Castro's (2004b:16) view this results in an ethnocentric description as it always presupposes that other ways of contextualising are beliefs or views to the one true objective reality.

## Symmetrical anthropology

If dividing the world into unified objective material reality and subjective or symbolical cultural viewpoints is a feature of modern ontology, one cannot analyse modern ontology itself as a cultural worldview without making a circulatory argument. In simple terms, if the idea that the world consists of a singular reality and multiple viewpoints is relativized, it cannot itself be taken as one of those viewpoints. Thus, it is clear that the shift to ontological theory cannot be accomplished by taking the modern ontology itself to be a yet another constructed viewpoint to an external reality. Consequently, I would see that ontologies themselves cannot be analysed as encompassing wholes which would explain how a particular group of people understand the world. Anne Salmond (2012) refers to this dilemma when analysing the relationship between the ontology of Maoris of New Zealand and that of modern law making:

*Likewise, in a modernist cosmos where the world is taken to be a basic particular, it is easy to assume that 'an ontology' must be a bounded object, similar to or perhaps isomorphic with a 'culture' or 'ethnicity', exclusively aligned with a particular bounded group, each with its own fixed, characteristic essence (which is why, instead, I speak of 'ontological styles'). 'Maori' and 'modernist' ontologies, or 'relational' and 'objective' styles are likely to be treated as mutually exclusive and in opposition to each other. As Mauss indicated, however, ontologies based on reciprocity are not the exclusive preserve of particular groups of people, and 'Westerners' also operate relationally, at least some of the time. Similarly, many 'Maori' proceed on the basis of modernist assumptions, although not necessarily all of the time (Salmond 2012:125).*

I would also see that this is the core of the theoretical scandal Sahlins (2010:102) refers to.

Consequently the examination of the modern ontology should not be yet another exercise in post-modern deconstruction and iconoclasm. Instead it can be seen as an opening:

*In sum, what changes when anthropology is taken as a meaning-producing practice in epistemological continuity with the practices on which it discourses — as their equivalent? In other words, when we apply the Latourian notion of 'symmetrical anthropology' to anthropology itself, not to lambaste it as*

*colonialist, exorcize its exoticism, or mine its intellectual field, but to induce it to say something completely different (Viveiros de Castro 2003).*

In Viveiros de Castro's view, the ontological turn compels to choose between two conceptualisations of anthropology:

*What I'm suggesting in a nutshell is the need to choose between two conceptions of anthropology. On one side, we have an image of anthropological knowledge as the outcome of applying concepts extrinsic to its object: we know before what social relations are, or cognition, kinship, religion, politics and so on, and our aim is to see how these entities take shape in this or that ethnographic context — how they take shape unbeknown to the interested parties, needless to say. On the other side (and this is the game I'm proposing), is an idea of anthropological knowledge which starts out from the premise that the procedures characterizing the investigation are conceptually of the same kind as those to be investigated (Viveiros de Castro 2003).*

Yet, taking the modern ontology to be symmetrical with other ones requires a completely new theory of anthropology (Viveiros de Castro 2003). This new theory also requires a new methodology which enables to take the ontologies of others seriously and not as beliefs or worldviews, and also reciprocally rejects the modern ontology as the framework on which all analysis must be based (Viveiros de Castro 2011:133).

Consequently, I will examine what would a description of mobile technology be like if it followed these guidelines of symmetrical anthropology set by Viveiros De Castro. In other words, I will explore how to describe mobile technology's unity without conceptualising it as a stable comparison point for different uses or worldviews. To construct such a description I will draw inspiration from Actor Network Theory which is an attempt to solve the question of how to methodologically implement these quite abstract notions concerning ontological symmetry.

## **Actor-network theory**

As the basis of my attempt of giving a symmetrical description of mobile technology's unity I will utilize Bruno Latour's conceptualization of ANT in his book *Re-assembling the social* (2007a), which in my view can be aligned with anthropological concerns (e.g. Oppenheim 2007). Yet, there has been criticism that ANT ignores the anthropological interest towards what Anna

Tsing (2010) calls worlding. Worlding is the process through which informants contextualise the world and their actions in it by asserting a relation between whole and parts (Tsing 2010:58). In Tsing's (2010:49,64) view ANT does not allow the analysis of such world making exercises. Yet, contrary to Tsing's criticism, I will subsequently try to show that Latour's conceptualisation of ANT can also be read in a way that enables the inclusion of such world making claims by actually making them central to the analysis and also conceptualises them in a way that avoids the theoretical pitfalls of modern ontology that Viveros de Castro criticizes.

This reading of ANT stems from the fact that it is quite open for interpretation (e.g. Bruun Jensen and Gad 2010). This is a point which I think needs to be emphasized when ANT is utilized in a multidisciplinary setting. ANT is not a theory in a sense that it would say anything substantive about how the world is. Instead it is a means to reveal something new about the subject of ethnographic research. This is for example how Annemarie Mol describes ANT

*ANT is not a theory. It offers no causal explanations and no consistent method. It rather takes the form of a repertoire. If you link up with it you learn sensitising terms, ways of asking questions and techniques for turning issues inside out or upside down. With these you may go out and walk new roads. But beware: as you walk nobody will hold your hand, there are no assurances. In "linking up with ANT" the art is not to repeat and confirm, but to seek out cases that contrast with those that came earlier. A contribution to ANT gently shifts the existing theoretical repertoire. And then, as the theoretical repertoire shifts, it becomes possible to describe further, different cases, and to articulate so far untold events (relations, phenomena, situations). These, in their turn, will help to add to and shift the theoretical repertoire ... and so on. The point is not to fight until a single pattern holds, but to add on ever more layers, and enrich the repertoire (Mol 2012:261).*

The name actor- network theory is misleading in a sense that ANT is not a theory that posits that the world consists of some objective networks but instead a method to describe without a priori scaling the world through ontological divisions, such as for example culture as subjective beliefs and technology as material objects. The network term does not in ANT denote material networks like power grids but is a method to exclude the analysis from moving suddenly to any hierarchically encompassing whole or a context which would explain away how the informants

themselves do the contextualising. In methodological terms ANT is a negative statement rather than an explanatory framework. According to Latour:

*With ANT we push theory one step further into abstraction: it is a negative, empty relativistic grid that allows us not to synthesize the ingredients of the social in the actor's place. Since it is never substantive, it never possesses the power of the other types of accounts (Latour 2007a:221).*

Consequently, this negation and how it shifts the focus away from analysing phenomena through pre-set contexts or totalizing wholes is the reason I have chosen to draw inspiration from ANT to examine how explain the unity of mobile technology's unity.

### **Actor-network theory as a conceptual reversal**

According to Latour (2007a:1), the most general feature of ANT is a negative principle which prevents from using *social* as an analytical category that would designate some specific aspect of a phenomenon. Latour (2007a:3-4) argues that there exists no empirical reason to analyse through a separate domain as opposed to other domains such as material, economical or political which could be designated as the social aspect of phenomena. I would see that this conceptualisation is analogous to how Viveiros de Castro argues that in symmetrical anthropology social should not be taken as an independent category that could be separated from other aspects of a phenomenon:

*This means taking all relations as social. Not though from a viewpoint completely dominated by the western doctrine of social relations, but from one ready and willing to admit that treating all relations as social may entail a radical reconceptualization of what 'the social' may be (Viveiros de Castro 2003).*

In Latour's (2007a:5) view, it is the processes of connecting and attaching all kinds of heterogeneous entities, human and non-human, that should be emphasized and taken as the starting point in studying any collective interaction. Social is in ANT (Latour 2007a:5) not something that holds things together itself, but *a trail of associations between all kinds of heterogeneous entities* which are not social themselves. In sum, social in ANT means associating. In very general terms Latour's (2007a:13) methodology reverses the causality of social theory by changing the cause for the effect. In ANT the relations out of which society and its transformation consist of cannot be explained by some encompassing context but, instead it is

connections and forming of new attachments which explain the form of society and its change. In sum, according to this conceptual reversal, the relations social scientists study should not be dictated by a pre-set dichotomy that affirms some of them as non-social and hence excludes them from the scope of social scientific research.

As I see it, Latour's conceptualisation of ANT as a reversal of social theory is also structurally equivalent with Sahlins' model of the relationality of cultural existence and Dumont's hierarchy. Sahlins (2010:102) argues, in the context of anthropology, that cultures should not be taken as coherent and stable wholes which can be used to explain the differences between collective actions of humans. Instead these wholes should be analysed through the relations they consist of. Thus, the focus should be on how cultural wholes form out of processes of incorporating the external (Sahlins 2010:107). Dumont's (1980:239-245) conceptualisation of hierarchy points out to similar directions: if the modern division between facts and values is one particular method of establishing hierarchical relations it should be studied as a method to construct social relations in a symmetrical way those found in South-Asian caste systems. In a very similar manner as Sahlins and Dumont, Latour suggests that collective human action should be studied by focusing on practices of associating or relating. As ANT gives a model to how to implement this theoretical shift, it is in my view a suitable inspiration for my attempt to describe mobile technology's unity through ontology. In my view, Latour's conceptualisation of ANT as a conceptual reversal can be utilized in anthropological context by changing the word social in the previous paragraph for any analytic category such as culture or identity which have been used to designate the subjects anthropologists study. Thus, even though Latour's conceptualisation of ANT is generally aimed to sociologists I will experiment in utilizing its insights in the context of anthropology.

### **Modern objects as social actors**

One of the most radical shifts resulting from this redefinition of what is meant by social as an analytical category pertains to the conceptualisation of material objects. This re-conceptualisation of material objects' role in society differs quite radically from how they are analysed by social scientific theories that start from the modern dichotomy between mind and matter. For instance, Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007:17-18) use the famous example of taonga and hau in Marcell Mauss' seminal work *The Gift* to emphasize how the modern ontological division excludes from analysing material objects as social actors. In *The Gift* Mauss analyses Maori objects called taonga by explaining how the act of giving a taonga to another



person obligates the receiver to reciprocate in some manner. This is because, according to a Maori account, taonga always includes a bit of the giver in a form of hau “the spirit of the gift”. Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007:17) argue that in the common epistemological framework of anthropology the agency to make the receiver of the gift to reciprocate is in the Maori culture not in the objects themselves. The category of culture is used to explain how Maoris can think that material things can possess social agency, and there is nothing in the non-human object of Taonga itself that would contribute to such relations as it is just a marker for these cultural projections. Or, in other sense, dividing world into material and symbolical entails that the material objects and their qualities become meaningless and valueless, as their social and cultural role derives solely from human mind. According the modern ontology the objective material reality is socially and culturally meaningless and valueless and does not have agency in social relations. Yet, the ontological turn makes it explicit that the analytical act of separating taonga and hau from the actual material object is the result of a particular method of contextualising. It is thus a particular way of making unity and constructing societies.

ANT starts from the idea that social sciences should take the modern material objects also as social actors. In other words, in ANT the modern material objects and the taonga with hau are symmetrically analysed as social actors. Latour (2007a:65-66) argues that if the concept of social or in anthropology culture is not used to explain the stability and the form of a society, the focus shifts on to how people maintain the relations which stabilize their coexistence. Consequently material objects become actors that are necessary to explain modern societies. In other words if no encompassing whole like society cannot be taken to implicitly maintain the stability of the collective actions of humans, the continuity of a society must be explained by other means. In Latour’s (2007a:70) view this continuity is achieved and stabilized through various entities. Latour (2007a:71) argues that the difficulty in registering the agency of material objects in culturally oriented social sciences stems from the incommensurability modern ontology ascribes between the material causality of objects and the intentionality of humans. Consequently, in many social scientific theories the agency over the form of a society or in anthropology culture, is appointed as something that only intentional humans can possess.

This incommensurability between the intentional social and causal natural agencies ascertained by the modern ontology is the source for the long-going dispute between sociobiological/material and cultural explanations which in the context of technology manifest as a division between technological and social determinisms. According to Viveiros de Castro:

*In our naturalist ontology, the nature/society interface is natural: humans are organisms like all the rest—we are body-objects in ecological interaction with other bodies and forces, all of them ruled by the necessary laws of biology and physics. Productive forces harness, and thereby express, natural forces. Social relations—that is, contractual or instituted relations between subjects—can only exist internal to human society (there is no such thing as “relations of production” linking humans to animals or plants, let alone political relations). But how alien to nature—this is the problem of naturalism—are these social relations? Given the universality of nature, the status of the human and social world is unstable. Thus, Western thought oscillates, historically, between a naturalistic monism (sociobiology and evolutionary psychology being two of its current avatars) and an ontological dualism of nature and culture (“culturalism” and symbolic anthropology being two of its recent expressions)... The tug of war goes endlessly on: one side reduces reality to representation (culturalism, relativism, textualism), the other reduces representation to reality (cognitivism, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology) (Viveiros de Castro 2004:481-482, 484).*

Yet, ANT is not to be confused with either forms of determinisms or with dialectical explanations in which both ontological sides take turns in affecting each other. ANT is method to disregard the a priori status of the modern ontological division and as a methodological principle take all such contextualising efforts as subjects of research. This is because, according to Latour (2007a:74-75), in practice any course of action will go through many modes of existence that are brought together exactly because of their differences. Taking the material objects as social actors is a method to study all forms of society symmetrically and ignore the assumption that there is an inherent ontological division between intentional human action and the causal relations of material world. Any society always requires external mediators for its existence. ANT rejects the need for social scientists to argue about which ontological side of reality determines the other because in ANT this act of asserting a dichotomy is itself a method to organize society and not an inherent quality of reality. According to Latour (2007:75) it is pointless to a priori distinguish material and social ties and then produce complex theories concerning how they are related, because all collective action between humans is inherently coordinated through some kind of a mediator. Because the completely abstract nature of this argument I will in the next part present a summary on how various scholars of science and technology have ethnographically validated this position.

## Modern objects in ethnography

Latour's conceptualisation of the social agency of the modern objects comes from ethnographic studies of natural sciences. By focusing ethnographically on laboratory practices Latour and Steve Woolgar (1979) conceptualised how the facts produced by modern sciences are always constructed through various practices. Yet, their theorisation does not refer to construction in a sense of social construction (e.g. Latour 2007a:89-93). Latour (2007a:91-92) and other ANT affiliated scholars (e.g. Law 2004, Mol 2007) argue that when studied ethnographically, objective facts are an outcome of processes that symmetrically include the agency of the human scientists and various material entities such as laboratory equipment and texts. In these processes inscription devices which translate properties of the external reality into representations have a crucial role (Law 2004:19-33). Scientists analyse these representations, produce all kinds of negotiations and arguments about them and in some cases assemble and translate them into complex theories. Sometimes there is a strong consensus on an issue which then becomes a fact and a stable part of scientific practices. Eventually facts can be constructed to be parts of the instruments and inscription devices, which scientists then use to continue these processes. For instance when new ways of measuring are invented these measures are constructed into the inscription devices which are then used to produce new facts about a certain phenomenon. This is in science studies called black boxing because it delegates part of the process of science making into the hands material objects.

Consequently these ethnographic insights have led the science scholars to consider how agencies of both the humans and the material entities could be symmetrically included in theories of scientific processes of making reality. ANT is then one solution to this question. To describe such processes ANT oriented scholars have presented the negative argument that one cannot rely analytically on a stable objective reality, or in other words on material objects that could be used to compare different viewpoints of the scientists (e.g. Latour 2007b). This is because when analysing scientific practices it is not useful to ask what kind of views the scientists have about some independent reality because their ideas and theories and how they are represented, participate, in practice, in the construction of how this reality becomes the context of societies. Yet, symmetrically it is evident, that this reality does not originate from the subjective minds of the scientists as its construction requires the participation of all kinds of material objects like the inscription devices. Scientists cannot just imagine this reality into being because it is resistant to the ideas of the scientists as laboratory experiments can and often do fail.

Thus, if studied ethnographically, laboratory practices and natural sciences do not produce a reality, which could be stable, exist independently or precede the practices through which it is constructed (Law 2004: 28-33). All sciences constantly construct new theories and devices, which alters the scientific reality and adds new objects. The discovery of Higgs Boson is a recent influential example of how scientists add a new material object into the context of modern society. Thus, closures are always partial. Facts can be discredited in the future through some new method or a shift in paradigm and black boxes may be opened up and re-adjusted and new ones constructed. In other words, the scientific reality changes constantly.

Hence in general the argument is that modern ontology is a method to organize modern institutions such as laboratories. This method constantly creates new ways to include objects into the society. Consequently reality is always an outcome of a method not the consequence (Law 2004:2). This then entails that if there is no reality that would precede practice or exist independently of the different entities which participate in its making. Objects of reality can always be made differently even in sciences.

For instance, Annemarie Mol (2007) has applied these notions to an ethnographic study which focuses on how a singular scientific object in medicine, a condition called atherosclerosis, which means thickening of the artery walls, is in practice a multiplicity. Mol's (2007: 5) study is based on a premise that objects should not be taken as stable central points of different visual perspectives, but as entities that always exist as parts of a particular practice. Like Latour, she argues that objects of reality and reality itself do not precede action, as they are always contingent to the event and the relations it consists of (Mol 2007:6). Consequently, if an object is studied in this way through the practices it takes part in, it multiplies. According to Mol (2007:5) reality of an object is then always multiple.

Mol (2007:33) describes how atherosclerosis as an object differs depending on the method it is attended with. To conceptualise this multiplicity resulting from different practices of attending to an object Mol (2007:33) uses the term enact. Hence an object is enacted in many different ways depending on the contingencies of a given situation. For example different methods of diagnosis result in different objects: an atherosclerosis enacted in a clinic through speaking and manual examination is different from an atherosclerosis enacted through microscope in the pathology department (Mol 2007:31-51). Mol (2007:35) points out that this is not a play of words because these two objects cannot exist simultaneously. You cannot produce a diagnosis of a living patient in a clinic and simultaneously cut his vein out to look at it through a

microscope in the pathology department. Furthermore, Mol (2007:103-108, 127-150) describes how both of these enactments differ in turn from atherosclerosis enacted in the department of internal medicine as a temporal process formed through years of certain life choices, and from atherosclerosis as a condition that affects populations enacted in the epidemiology department. Thus, objects are always contingent to the event, the method and other objects they are attended with. An atherosclerosis does not exist before it is done. Mol's ethnography describes how the reality of a scientific object is always constructed through practices. The deeper you focus on these practices the more different objects you get.

Consequently in Mol's (2007:151) study the unity of atherosclerosis is also an achievement, as it is the result of various acts of coordination and coexistence, which Mol divides into addition, translation, distribution and inclusion. Thus, even though the different methods of diagnostic produce different atheroscleroses, these different enactments are coordinated together (Mol 2007:55). She describes how for instance different diagnostic results of a single patient are added up together in a file of that patient and connected through the name atherosclerosis (Mol 2007:56.) Then because the doctors often need to make a decision of treatment they must sometimes translate these different enactments into a commensurable form so that they may be compared and decision, for example to do a surgery, can be made (Mol 2007:73). Mol (2007:87-88) also notes that in some cases it is not even necessary to translate different enactments into a coherent singularity, and conflicts between different enactments of atherosclerosis may be avoided. For instance, by distributing different enactments into different departments of the hospital prevents incoherence and conflicts. So for instance the clinical object of atherosclerosis differs quite drastically and is actually incompatible with the enactment of atherosclerosis in the department of internal diseases, but as the staffs of these two departments rarely meet or discuss the issue, there is no conflict (Mol 2007:103-108).

The different enactments of a scientific object can also be in a reciprocal relation. Mol (2007:128) describes how in the epidemiology department of a hospital, all different instances of atherosclerosis are compiled together as a disease that affects populations. This work of compiling consists of adding up all those who have been admitted with an atherosclerosis, but leave out everything else that might be relevant for the patients (Mol 2007:129). Hence it reduces a huge complexity into simple statistical numbers. Consequently Mol (2008:129) posits that the atherosclerosis of populations is not of a "bigger" scale, which would encompass the individuals that it is composed of. According to her, how the epidemiologists affirm what the atherosclerosis of population is, is very much related to the diagnostic technology and what it

diagnoses as an atherosclerosis (Mol 2007:129). Thus how the atherosclerosis of populations is enacted depends on how individual atheroscleroses are enacted. Mol (2007:131) also points out that in a similar manner, the practices and technologies that are used to diagnose individual patients are also contingent to the atherosclerosis of the populations, because it sets through statistics the standard of what is normal. When diagnosing individual atheroscleroses the outcomes are judged by criteria that are derived from population studies (Mol 2007:131). Hence the atherosclerosis of populations and the individual enactments of atherosclerosis are different objects as they are constructed through different methods, but they are mutually inclusive as these methods are related and depend on each other.

This argument of the multiplicity of reality may be summed by Latour's (2004) proposed shift from treating entities as a matter of fact to investigating them always as matters of concern, because their agency in a society may suddenly shift. Latour (2007:118) claims that social scientists that study modern phenomena should take into account that the modern objects of reality are often controversial, and that it is not the task of the social scientists to solve these controversies. There is no universally and absolutely stable external reality that would intermediate the agency of humans in the same way till infinity. According to Latour (2007a:90-120) all entities must be taken as mediators that always transform action that goes through them in some specific manner which explains the particular way they are associated to society. Even among the natural scientists reality is multiple because it is contingent to the method it is attended with. As these methods are always particular, there is always room for controversies as reality can be made differently. Matters of concern may always produce unintended consequences. The health effects of the radiation emitted by mobile technology is a good example how mobile technology is a matter of concern, as exemplified by the newspaper article presented previously. Mobile technology is not stable object of reality as there is a possibility that in the future it can become a worldwide health hazard which would also mean radical changes to how it participates in society. Hence there is no plausible reason compare how matter is imbued with cultural values, because even in the natural sciences there is no consensus on what this matter is.

In sum, in ANT subjects of social scientific research are not ideas in minds of humans or material objects but practices or relations in which all kinds of heterogeneous actors are present and have their own agencies. The agency in any given situation is distributed to all the participants of an event and not delegated to encompassing wholes or contexts such as material

reality or cultural viewpoint. According to Latour technology should consequently not be analytically distinguished from culture.

*There exists no situation in which it would make sense to distinguish two coherent homogeneous aggregates like culture and technology. (Latour 2007a: 75).*

Thus, ANT removes the need to consider or analyse the relationship between the material and cultural aspects of mobile technology. To emphasize ANT's difference to theories that ascertain that all human collective actions gets its form only through human intentionality Latour uses the term collective instead of society. Collectives are in Latour's view always the outcome of assembling numerous heterogeneous entities into some kind of relation.

In my view this model of analysing scientific objects is very similar to the principles of alterity and hierarchy which Sahlins and Dumont have used as their method of analysis, yet extending these principles to be applicable to the modern scientific practices. Sahlins points out that to last in time, societies are in some way linked to something external that transcends the finite and mortal humans, in other words poses a relation between universal and particular (Sahlins 2008: 185). Dumont argues in a very similar manner that societies are organized by posing a hierarchical relation between whole and parts. Latour argues in a similar manner that the modern societies are organized through the construction of universal and objective material entities. Henceforth, ANT extends the method anthropologists have traditionally studied entities that transcend the society as universals such as deities or stranger-kingships to the objects of modern scientific cosmology such as mobile technology.

In sum, all ontologies and the entities they produce can be analysed as particular relations between universal and particular that the humans have constructed to organize their coexistence. Thus, as we saw from the narratives concerning the stranger-kingships of the Kathmandu valley the form of these collectives was made solid by constructing a particular relation to the transcendent world for instance through construction of water infrastructures and practices related to caste purity. In a similar way the collective that unifies the modern world is made stable through a particular relation between universal and particular of which manifestation mobile technology is. In the next part, I will investigate how these insights could be applied to explain the unity of mobile technology.

## From wholes to relations

*The medium is the message (Mcluhan 1964.)*

In sum, the key insight I draw from ANT oriented studies is that any ontology or in other words the relation between particular and universal does not exist a priori and is never inherently stable and coherent. Instead, stability and coherence of any ontology must be achieved and maintained through various practices of coordination and construction, which enables it to last in time. In ANT there is no larger-scale a priori context or reality which could be used to explain away the associations of a collective.

Hence, the primary methodological focus of ANT is how attachments and relations are established and maintained, and how distinct entities emerge from these relations. If some entity is stable, this stability must be accounted by the attachments that keep it stable (Latour 2007a:213-218). In ANT it is exactly these attachments and their particular nature that enables the unity of any given collective or a whole and formats it as a distinctive reality. In his study of the construction of an automated transportation system called Aramis, Latour (1996) emphasizes the complexity of the processes of constructing and establishing a new technology. According to Latour (1996:34-48), for a technological project to become real, multiplicities of heterogeneous actors must be associated together. For instance those working with the Aramis project had to assemble together a wide scale of heterogeneous agencies for the project to gain reality: technological entities such as computer systems, physical qualities such as friction, calculations of investors and banks, legal instructions given by the government, models of possible customers and many others (Latour 1996:42-43). For all these to be aligned and assembled together required that they were associated with the project in some manner. These associations were achieved through various representative means such as reports, contracts, endorsements, diagrams, calculations and all kinds of representations that translated and associated the agency of these entities in some form to the project (Latour 1996:43-44).

Hence in Latour's (Latour 1996:43-44) conceptualisation technologies consist of processes in which all kinds of actors are related and assembled together through complex chains of translation which enable their agency to be part of the technology. These acts of translation always consist of symbolic practices such as speaking, writing, calculating and



negotiating contracts. For instance, various business actors are associated through negotiations and by legal contracts. In a similar manner friction is associated to the project through calculations and by testing prototypes. Consequently to assemble the numerous different actors required to make a technological project real requires that the agency of these actors is translated into a form that enables to connect all them together: if the relation between particular and universal can be constructed in infinitely different ways, to have some kind of unity and to coordinate action this multiplicity needs to be reduced by the construction and circulation of various standards and scales which allow the comparison and coordination between heterogeneous actors (Latour 2007a:226-232).

A good example of such processes in modern societies is the practices of creating statistics. For instance, the Nepal Telecommunication authority provides a yearly Management Information Systems (MIS) report which presents numerous different statistics concerning the usage and prevalence of mobile technology and how it differs around Nepal (Nepal Telecommunication Authority 2013). In Latour's (2007a:159-189.) conceptualisation contexts such as the statistics of mobile technology are not in encompassing relation to the particular interactions they consists of. As in Mol's conceptualisation of inclusion, Latour's (2007a: 175-181) point is that contexts are never larger sites or wholes in which particular interactions or localities are embedded, but instead contexts are made in some local and particular site, which through some method creates this context. Thus, context-making places such as the Nepal Telecommunication Authority are particular sites among others, which through some particular method produces a certain context. Thus, every MIS report also has on its first page an address to a specific location where these contexts are made.

As Mol (200:128-131) shows in her study of atherosclerosis, statistical context making is always a partial act, because compiling large amount of local interactions together always requires that a lot has to be left out. To make a context one always needs to reduce. What is reduced depends on the method used to construct the context. Hence, in ANT the modern statistical methods of contextualising are not neutral but performative acts which participate in organizing certain kinds of collectives with certain kinds of consequences. A vivid instance of the performative nature of such processes is for example how the colonial accounting of various ethnic and religious features of the population had a major agency in how the nation of India got its particular form and how political power was divided among the different groups (Appadurai 1996:115-135). In a similar manner, representing the mobile technology users of Nepal as

numbers can then be seen as a particular method to perform in practice mobile technology as a relation, because it participates in constructing its factual context.

To exemplify how such acts of measuring contribute to the construction of a collective Latour (2007a:228) compares these processes of contextualising with metrology. Metrology sets the scales through which a particular phenomenon is measured. In a similar manner collective action is organized and made comparable by creating standards and measures which enable cooperation and shifting from one frame of reference to another (Latour 2007a,229). To make everybody use the same measures and standards demands work. These measures are never implicit qualities of reality as they must be constructed through some particular metrologies. This construction Latour calls the practical conditions of universality (Latour 2007a:228).

According to Latour (2007a: 222-226), the unity of any kind of collective is then achieved through the circulation of various kinds of connectors, which format the relations between all kinds of heterogeneous entities compatible and enable the transportation of agency from one site to another. The production of a collective out of the infinite complexity and multiplicity of the world is in Latour's (2007a:222-232), view achieved through producing universals and standards, circulating them and maintaining this circulation.

Yet, if analysing mobile technology as relation dissolves contexts as pre-set analytical categories, it also does the same to any notions of particular. According to Latour (2007a:199-202; see also Appadurai 1996:182-199) local or particular are also always relational concepts which makes it senseless to use them as pre-set analytical categories. As I have emphasized the modern ontology sets the objective facts as the context for modern societies and this process also simultaneously constructs the particular positions in this context. Thus, mobile technology taken as relation constructs also its own particularities out of which we have already seen examples of in the narratives concerning NCell and the methods through which my informants assigned their unity through the concept of culture.

Thus, subjectivity such as modern individuality should in ANT also be studied as a relational construction. This view of subjectivity (Latour 2007a:204-218) is very similar to Marilyn Strathern's (1988) conceptualisation of Melanesians as partible persons. Strathern for instance states that in Melanesia:

*Far from being regarded as unique entities, Melanesian persons are as dividually as they are individually conceived. They contain generalized sociality within.*

*Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite sites of the relationships that produced them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm (Strathern 1988, 13).*

Latour (2007a:207) posits that any individual human being is a result of construction of various multiple layers in a similar manner as Strathern (2004) argues that an individual person always consists of numerous partial connections. For Latour (2007a:208) a whole and unified person should not be the starting point of analysis, because according to him subjectivity is a provisional achievement of a composite assemblage. Hence in ANT humans are also incoherent multiplicities. Consequently, modern individuality is in relational analysis constructed by practices which black box the various relations that enable the existence of a modern individual possible into objects such as commodities. According to this view subjectivity does not reside solely inside humans but is instead also a result of associations.

According to Latour (2007a:211) for any human actor to interpret and utilize the settings in which they are located they must be taught to do it and they must also possess the necessary tools. The competence to act in some circumstances is then something that is achieved and must be also maintained, as subjectivity has to be made it does not exist a priori. To elicit how a person is formatted to be actor in some event Latour (2007a:215) borrows a concept from the internet: for a human person to be able to function in a certain setting one must have the competence to do so by subscribing to the correct plug-in, which in time can get out-dated and useless. Thus the term subscribing refers to the way that a competence in something does not reside solely inside a person but must be maintained through some means or otherwise it will not last.

*Cognitive abilities do not reside in 'you' but are distributed throughout the formatted setting, which is not only made of localizers but also of many competence building propositions, of many small intellectual technologies. (Latour 2007a, 211.)*

Thus, analyzed as a relation, mobile technology also contributes to the subjectivity and cognitive abilities of those who participate in its construction and maintenance. In the following I will examine how these implications of the methodological shift to relations can be utilized in analyzing how the unity of mobile technology is achieved.

## Mobile technology enounced

If mobile technology is analysed as relation that is achieved through the circulation of some standardised forms and measures, one of the first features that became visible when I analysed my field notes was that of the use of uniform terminology and the prevalence of English language in the representations of mobile technology. For instance, the English words *mobile phone* and (less frequently) *cell phone* were present in all conversations concerning mobile technology and they were implicitly understood by all of my informants. Liechty has also taken notice of how technology subjectifies people to use certain languages, like this interview excerpt concerning video technology from Liechty's study illuminates:

*Usually now, in this modern age, we need English. To improve our English, we try to watch as many English films as we possibly can. And ... The thing is that we Nepalis want to learn English. We have that desire (Rahar). By the influence of this desire, it seems to me that every time we watch an English film, we can learn at least two or four new words! And in our Nepali society, we are bending toward the European civilization; I mean the willingness to do this is increasing. By this I mean if a man sees, rather than just hearing or reading, it's much more effective. There's more change that comes from seeing. So I like to see English films often (Liechty 2008:175).*

Consequently, when I asked my informants questions using the words *mobile phone* I always got somewhat comprehensible answers because even though all of my informants were not very fluent in English, the English words "mobile phone" or its shorthand "mobile" were ones my informants themselves used. Consequently my interviews and discussions about mobile technology often included sentences like this:

*...when the mobile entered our country it was damn expensive.*

At least, during my fieldwork I did not come across any indigenous words in Nepali or Newari that my informants would have used to refer to mobile technology, and when listening to conversations in Nepali or Newari I often noticed the word mobile phone spoken in between utterances of indigenous languages.

On a general note, talking about mobile technology with a specific terminology was among my informants and especially among the males a quite common form of discourse. A

terminology that unified various discussions related to mobile technology included the names of various brands of mobile phone manufacturers. Speech about mobile technology was often filled with references to names of multinational mobile phone companies such as Nokia, Sony Ericson and Apple. Different brands were often talked about and their qualities were compared:

*The most popular brand its Nokia because its pretty much stronger comparing the other mobiles. For example... if you drop Sony Ericson it is gone, but if you drop an Nokia one it works. That's I guess why Nokia is a little bit popular comparing the other one*

Another category of words that was common to conversations about mobile technology was those that referred to different functions and qualities of different handset models. As in this interview excerpt about the development of mobile technology:

*The first thing when there was a mobile for the first time it was only just for talk. Later on mobile was developed like they have the camera, they have the mp3 functions and all...*

Hence terms, like *camera* and *MP3* which were used to talk about and measure the functions and qualities of certain models were often spoken in connection with mobile phone brands. For instance an informant described how his first mobile phone had the first two megapixel camera:

*Yeah. It was that Nokia. That time it was kind of latest and it had video camera. That time... two megapixel there was not established I think in any one (it was the only phone with two megapixel camera).*

Often people also conversed about the different network providers and about the services they provided. Discussions about such topics had also their own vocabulary concerning the various services and functions of network providers.

*When I bought SIM card first that was very costly. About 14500 rupees and that time there was not available prepaid cards. Nowadays prepaid cards are available 1100 something rupees... It was in the middle period when I bought. When first GSM mobile was launched in Nepal it was very costly. I think it was approximately 15000 around when you bought SIM card and mobile phone.*

Terms like SIM card and prepaid were used in connection with network services. Sometimes also the technical terms of various network solutions like CDMA and GSM came up in these conversations.

*CDMA Im not sure what does that particular CDMA means and I dont know GSM means but I know there two different kind of frequencies one is CDMA one is GSM*

Those who worked with mobile technology had a better knowledge about such terms.

*CDMA phones have very good network on the hilly regions cause they are divided in codes CDMA that is code divisional multiple access they are differed by the code. But in GSM theyre customers are divided by the frequency. So that it working very good in the hilly regions mountaneous region CDMD is working very good.*

Like we can see from these narratives, many of my informants shared an understanding of a specific terminology or language that enabled them to co-operate and form associations in a specific manner.

## **Mobile technology as a written and visual representation**

Another field in which the standards and measures concerning mobile technology circulated was the news media. In the daily newspapers available in the Kathmandu valley mobile technology was a constant subject as almost daily some of the newspapers had an article or an advertisement concerning some new handset model. For instance a new handset model by Nokia called X6 was strikingly announced in a local newspapers article:

### *Style and Substance of X6*

*KATHMANDU: The latest Nokia handset vying for attention in Nepali market is Nokia X6 (16GB). Mobile phones are not just about features but also about how it looks and Nokia X6 scores in both the aspects.*

*In terms of looks the biggest highlight is the numerous colour variants this set comes in. Consumers get to choose from vibrant range of hues like black, white, blue and pink. Now let's come to the main part – features.*

*This model boasts 3.2 inches TFT capacitive touch screen of 360x640 pixels resolution. The screen is scratch resistant and includes accelerometer sensor for auto rotate and proximity sensor for auto turn off.*

*The best highlight of Nokia X6 is its camera. One can take images with its 5-megapixel camera with Carl Zeiss optics and dual LED flash, auto focus, and video light. Geo tagging feature is also integrated in the camera. Video recording is done VGA@30fps and there is a secondary camera-QCIF@15fps. The presence of TV-out function makes taking videos even more fun as you can watch it on big screen.*

*Its entertainment features are also top notch with music player capable of different formats like WMA, WAV, RA, AAC, AAC+ and MP3. Available at Paramount Electronics, Sherpa Mall, Durbar Marg at Rs. 36,150.-*

*Specs:*

*3.2 inches touch screen with 360x640 pixels resolution*

*5-mega pixel camera*

*music player supporting various formats (The Himalayan Times 2010)*

In addition to how this article circulates the standards and measures through which the universality of mobile technology is achieved it also simultaneously interpellates the reader as a consumer who can choose between different visual styles. In another newspaper (The Kathmandu Post 2010) X6 appeared in an advertisement which portrayed X6 in a more visual manner.

**The New Nokia X6**

Nokia X6 RRP Rs. 36,150  
Easy access to OVI/facebook/MySpace, Touch screen  
16 GB memory for all your music, games, applications and much more.

Nokia X3 MRP Rs. 12,890

**NOKIA**  
Connecting People

**COME GET EVERYTHING ENTERTAINMENT**  
NOKIA.COM/PLAY

call The mechanism had decided to finalise the component on Wednesday as agreed on Tuesday.  
winning as the first to after a shot hit a window. "We are very close to arresting the criminals," said senior  
also took at least 1,000 black Pulsar motorcycles under control and interrogated their riders.  
Party (Revolutionary), Chowdhury stayed on with Jwala Singh. It was  
benoit. Or he may want to take the credit to establish himself as the  
journalist who covers contemporary politics with special focus on politics

1 Year Warranty  
AUTHORIZED DISTRIBUTORS  
PARAMOUNT ELECTRONICS  
AUTHORIZED NOKIA RETAIL PARTNER  
CITY CENTRE (1st floor, 4th flr. No. 7-26, Kamalpuri, Kathmandu) & SHARDA COMPLEX (2nd flr. No. 19, Pashupatinagar, Kathmandu)

In the light of ANT the practices of translating mobile technology into written text and visual representations and their circulation are also ways to measure and construct some kind of common context and to construct the particular position of mobile technology user. They provide how differences in mobile technology for example between handset models are understood by all those who use this technology. Circulation of a common language and common measures is a method to construct mobile technology as a context that unifies different people. It was evident that this terminology consisted mostly of ways to designate the functions of mobile phones and the differences between handsets. This is a performative action: the way people speak about, write and visualize mobile technology adds into the construction of a particular kind of a relation between universal and particular which unified me and my ethnographic subjects even though we came from very different cultural backgrounds.

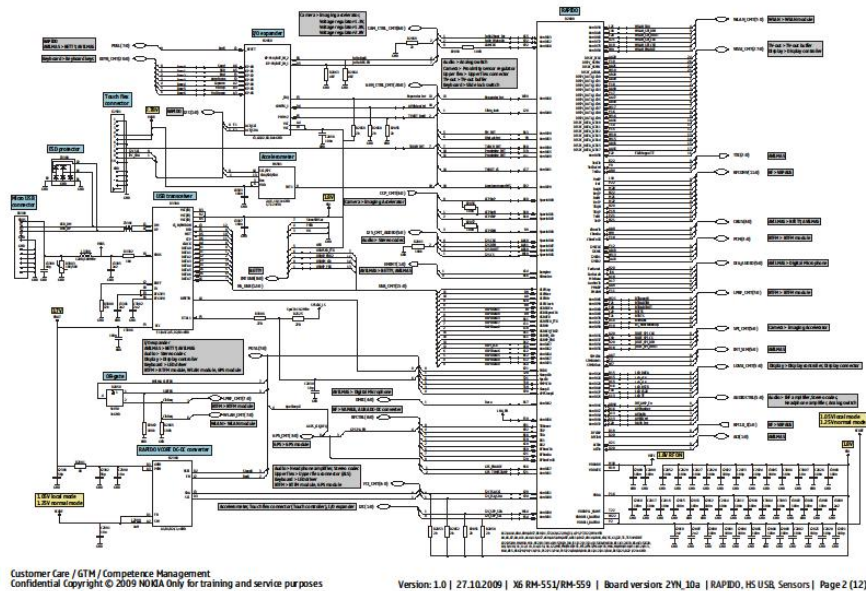
Yet the representations of mobile technology do not just participate in the construction of a common relation to an external world in a sense that they enable comparison and conversations. Representations of mobile technology also participated in how this relation was constructed in other ways. This becomes evident if one focuses on the practices of those who are experts in the field. For instance, this is how a mobile phone repairer in Bishal Bazar explained what was, in addition to his expertise, needed to repair a new handset model.

*Whenever new model comes we need to get research in that phone. Just like the components, what type of IC or chip that had been used in that mobile phones. We need to know first. So we got knowledge from the internet. If you involved from two to three years back in this field you know easily about the components that been used in either in old models or new upcoming models you'll know very easily . If you get problem then you can go through internet and search. You can get schematics.*

*You can download schematics and what is the problem you can diagnosis from that schematics. First of all we have to diagnosis what the certain problem is in the phone; stuff like battery problem network problem and then we go through to the certain sections that has been problem.*



The repairers in the Kathmandu valley used visual representations of the phones downloaded from internet which bring into focus even more specific and complex language and representation of mobile technology.



For example, these schematics of X6 can be downloaded from a site called CPKB wiki (Cell Phone Knowledge Base 2013). The possibility to download and decipher these schematics was crucial for the mobile phone repairers in Kathmandu and provided that phones could be repaired much cheaper compared to official repair shops. Hence, the circulation of these representations in internet was an important part of how mobile technology was constructed in Kathmandu.

Another practice in which the circulation of a specific technical language was important was that of hacking of mobile phones:

*I'm interviewing a friend of one of my informants who was introduced to me as a hacker. My informants told me that he could teach me how to perform a "jailbreak" for iPhone.*

Jailbreak was a method to override various security measures in iPhone's operating system which prevented using applications that were not authorized by the Apple Corporation. This process of hacking allowed one to customize one's iPhone with any kind of software one could

find or produce. In addition it also enabled one to install copied pirate applications which one could usually get free or at a much cheaper price than the originals.

*During the interview the hacker describes elaborately in very specific terms of how a jailbreak can be done and writes me a list of actions and terms I need to perform such an action. This process consists of downloading programs from the internet, installing them to the iPhone through a computer and then performing various operations on the computer connected to the iPhone.*

In this instance the practice through which the qualities of a mobile phone were altered consisted mainly of typing words and giving commands to the computer through a keyboard. In hacking practices representational acts enabled in real time to transform a technological artefact into something that it was not designed to be. Or in other words, in mobile technology the circulation of various standardized languages through internet enabled that some of my informants had the agency to alter the mobile phone artefacts themselves and make them perform in ways that they were not supposed to by their designers.

Thus it can be argued that the representations and symbolic entities like words, pictures, schematics and a specific code language are very active participants in the constitution and form of the mobile technology artefacts themselves. In the world of modern technology it is not very useful to separate material objects from discourse. In his study of Aramis Latour emphasizes this performativity of representations. During its existence Aramis goes through various cycles in which it shifts between being a representation and an artefact. Latour (1996:68) characterises how Aramis was born as an idea which got translated into writings, plans and diagrams out of which modes and prototypes were made out of. Then, on the basis of ideas and representations produced by testing these prototypes, new plans were made and new prototypes again constructed. This cycle of transformation between an idea and a thing in a technological project can go on through many times before a required result surfaces or as was the case with Aramis, the project gets dismissed.

## **Learning mobile technology**

Yet the circulation of scales and standards cannot be separated from the practices in which they are utilized. During my fieldwork I often recorded narratives of processes and practice through which my informants had first become acquainted with mobile technology. For

example one of my informants described in a quite detailed manner how he had become somewhat adept with mobile technology:

*It was very much easy because I had the shop of electronics ones. We had a shop of electronics in Baneshwor (a central suburb in Kathmandu). So at that time all the catalogues used to come in German (Dutch) language. There was no English language catalogues over here. So I used to see catalogues of German and Dutch language and I used to compare it and I used to sell it and I used to sell it by using the functions to customers. So it wasn't any hard... before I took a mobile I used to sell it so it wasn't that hard for me to use it.*

In addition to self-learning from catalogues and working with electronics there were also schools that provided teaching in electronics. A mobile repairer explained me that he had got the basic skills in a private school which provided courses in electronics:

*Yea first when upon when I took training when I was involved on basic electronics.... means I was trained repairing electronic goods like a radio tape recorder. That was the first step of electronic items in the repairing field. So then I got in wireless radios, cordless phones, wireless phones and then I went to more phones because it's very growing market all over the world not only in this country.*

Many of my informants who were not working directly with technology also affirmed that they had acquired the proficiency to use mobile technology quite easily as they already possessed the skills to operate various electronic devices and technologies. In other words' my informants were already subjectified into other similar technologies.

In general, skills related to mobile technology were in many cases learned through informants' personal relations. For instance in the case of the employees of mobile phone shops proficiency was often achieved through work provided by relatives or friends and not by formal education. In these cases the circulation of schematics had a crucial role:

*Yeah like some take (skill to repair phones) from the private (schools) and some take (from friends)... If I have some brothers who deals with mobiles and I'm totally free and if I gonna say like: Come on brother teach me how to make it. Then he gonna teach me. Thats it. No any certificate. If you gonna go any all the shopkeepers who have the mobile repairing shop. If you gonna ask like do you*

*have any certificate? I don't think so no one have the certificate. Very few people who are certified now as the mobile engineers and I guess 99 percent of them are like they were just taught by someone and they just... and in each and every electronic item you gonna get like a big blueprint. You gonna get books for it. Inside the books the whole bunch of diagrams. Where the power like if you put the battery where is the minus and where is the plus where the power goes like how the power goes there is in a board you can see the video board. You can get the diagram for the board.*

Some of my informants also pointed out that they had to teach their parents how to use mobile technologies:

*Everybody can speak but what I have seen is like people who don't know about new technology even my mom she finds it difficult to use the phone. It takes a while to use. She has been using a mobile phone. But if I give her a new set new model she wouldn't know how to use it. It will take a few week just to get to know how to use that mobile phone.*

In these practices of making a mobile phone user various intellectual technologies had a major role. One of these technologies was the SIM-cards and related practices.

*Almost immediately after my arrival in Nepal an informant whose house will be my home during my fieldwork hands me a SIM card. After installing the SIM card my informant calls me so I can save his number in the new SIM card, for even though I had previously possessed his number it was located on the SIM card that I had just removed and is consequently inaccessible. I call him back to check if there is any balance left in the prepaid account which the SIM-card connects me to. There is none and we decide it is a top priority to recharge my account by buying a recharge card from a store. These cards have a code which is fed into the handset and which consequently recharges the account. I also save my new number in the SIM card for future reference.*

Hence a part of my re-union with my informant was about creating a connection between us through mobile phone technology. This compatibility was partly achieved by the technological artefacts themselves which possessed numerous intellectual technologies that subjectified us. For instance the SIM cards translated our particular connections into numbers which we could

store in our handsets and use to initiate connection. The SIM cards also connected us to an account through which I could transform my economic resources into a possibility to utilize the various functions of my handset. This account could also be visualized through the handset providing me the ability to manage my usage according to my assets.

The way mobile technology subjectifies can also be seen in how the human-mobile phone hybrid produces a particular and distinct habitus. For instance the stance in which a mobile phone user stares into his handset quite oblivious to his surroundings has become quite an universal sight in modern societies, like this random shot from central Kathmandu witnesses.



Analysing mobile technology as a relation thus enables also to explain how the historical methods to contextualise still hold ground in the Kathmandu valley. If the human subjectivity consists of partial connections and not of one encompassing and coherent whole, there is no need to posit one of these connections as more prominent than the others. For example, one of my informants who is an expert in various fields of electronics, believed in the encompassing power of a sovereign king, and at the same time was also a devout Buddhist and believed that renouncing worldly things was a way to salvation. Hence the subjectivity of a person can consist of relations that pose totally different universals and are based on very different ontologies. This

is possible because not any of these relations is a whole that would encompass the subjectivity of a person and hence would dictate his or her actions in all given situations. We as humans are not always coherent in our ways and we can act in seemingly contradictory ways. When societies change through the new relations, the old often persists as long as it is being practiced. In a similar manner a new relation established by a person does not necessarily require disconnecting from the old ones, even though it obviously might lead to such actions. Among my informants it was very common that in some situations they acted according to modern truth values for example by scaling the world through measures such as megapixels, in some they utilized very different ones like the caste divisions stemming from divine truths concerning purity. Thus, taking mobile technology as a relation enables to explain how technological unity is achieved through the circulation of various connectors that establish a shared context and subjectivities.

# Conclusions and afterthoughts

In the first part of this thesis I examined how the ontological turn enables to investigate the shifting ways truth was established in the history of the Kathmandu valley. Consequently I described how the same method could be utilized to describe the ontological presuppositions behind the current transformations taking place in the Kathmandu valley. I elicited how in various ways my informants and other actors such as multinational companies relied on a method of contextualising which divides reality into objective and subjective and separates facts from values.

Next, I argued that this method of contextualising is the same what anthropological theory has used to analyse its subjects. Thus analysing modern ontology requires the construction of an alternative theoretical approach. Consequently, I have described how ANT and science studies offer tools to begin unravelling alternative ways to interpret what ontology is by shifting the focus from wholes to relations. In sum, this means shifting from using coherent wholes as categories which can be studied to how these wholes form out of relations.

In my view this shift to relations has enabled to fulfil the goal I set in the beginning of this thesis. It enables to construct a description of how technological unity is achieved through methods of contextualising. These methods can be circulated and through their circulation they enable myriads of heterogeneous entities to co-operate and form stable collectives. But even though the ontological turn and ANT open up new ways describe technologies and solves some theoretical obstacles that have haunted the discipline it also brings with it certain other questions.

## **Anthropology is also a relation, but what kind of relation, is the question**

If anthropology is also taken symmetrically as a method of creating relations, the question shifts from how accurately it depicts its objects, say culture or society, to the way it relates. In words of Viveiros de Castro:

*In sum, anthropological concepts are relative because they are relational — and they are relational because they are relators (Viveiros de Castro 2003).*

Consequently one must then choose how this relating is done in practice:

*Universalizing the Christian metaphysics of body and soul, the modern theory of the social contract or the contemporary biopolitics of kinship is one of the ways of doing just this — of relating. A very unimaginative way, to be sure. But the alternative cannot be the fantasy of an intellectual intuition of other forms of life 'in their own terms,' for there is no such thing. 'Their terms' are only determined as such in relation to 'our terms,' and vice-versa. Every determination is a relation. Nothing is absolutely universal, not because something is relatively particular, but because 'everything' is relational. All perfectly obvious, you'll say. For sure. Admitting the obvious is one thing, though: it's a very different kettle of fish drawing from it all the possible consequences (Viveiros de Castro 2003).*

Thus the question of how to practice anthropology is inherently political question.

According to Latour (2004:122-124) what social scientists in particular do in practice when they conduct research is that they participate in the process of assembling collectives by producing and circulating written accounts. If then social sciences are a part of the collectives they study and hence participate in their construction, the question of method is not about how accurately it represents reality, but how it participates in its construction (Latour 2004:124). Because the construction of a collective is, in Latour's vision, always a political issue social scientists' job is consequently not to affirm some particular methods of contextualising which are used to construct associations, but to provide an arena for all the heterogeneous elements of a process to gather by eliciting the inherent multiplicity of reality. Certain society, culture, technology, person or whatever the social scientists study is not an object out-there but a gathering. This is also the reason for the reversal Latour is vouching for. Instead of asserting a single and coherent cause for the gatherings of enormous multiplicities ANT tries to elicit this multiplicity and the distributed nature of agency. In Latour's (2004) conceptualization, objectivity in social sciences cannot mean purifying and separating objects of reality from the processes in which they are constructed. Instead for him it means getting closer to the objects and if you ethnographically get closer to an object it multiplies and the coherent matters of fact become matters of concern. According to this view social sciences should attend to these processes of constructing collectives by opening them up and acknowledging the multiplicity of associations, negotiations and conflicts they inherently consist of.

*The controversies about what types of stuff make up the social world should not be solved by social scientists, but should be resumed by the future participants*



*and that are every moment the 'package' making up existing social links should be opened for public scrutiny... The two tasks of taking into account and putting into order have to be kept separate (Latour 2007a: 257).*

If you prematurely suspend and conceal this process of assembling by ascertaining a single cause like society or material reality you make politics impossible. Or in other words, taking a singular ontological truth as an a priori removes the need to discuss its legitimacy and authority (Latour 2005:247-262).

In the case of mobile technology this is evident. If mobile technology is taken as a solid object of reality that can be used to compare different worldviews or cultures means affirming certain mode of politics as universal because as we have seen mobile technology is not a solid fact but an assemblage which consists of negotiations and ambiguities of numerous kinds such as issues concerning piracy, hacking, anonymity, health effects and numerous others which tie it in many ways to questions of authority and power. For example, the division between particular cultures and a universal modernity is an method of contextualising through which the multinational companies market their products to their customers To ask, what the relationship between mobile technology and some particular culture is, is no doubt the question multinational companies also ask when they try to implement their agenda. Hence by starting from this division disregards how the division itself is method of organizing collectives. Ontology that scales the world as cultures and global context is quite obviously entangled in certain form of politics as it reduces mobile technology into material artefacts like mobile phones and conceals most of the associations they consist of.

Thus, I would claim that the ontological turn and the critique posed by the science studies poses some major questions concerning what anthropology as a science will become in the future. I would argue that symmetrical anthropology is a worthwhile goal to strive for because the modern methods of contextualising have connected the humankind into a collective geological force for which the geologists recently have given the name anthropocene. Thus, if anthropology wishes to stand up to its name as a science of the anthropos I would propose that it would be primarily important to focus on the ontology that enables the reality of this collective and not just on the differences its unity produces in its wake.

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| <p>In contemporary times, modern communication technologies connect enormous amounts of different people from different cultures together. Yet, for all these different people to be able to utilize these technologies requires that they also share some kind of a common understanding of them. Consequently, the purpose of this thesis is to study how a shared understanding of a technology is constructed and maintained among people who might otherwise have very different worldviews. It answers to this question through an ethnographic fieldwork which focuses on how the culturally very heterogeneous people of the Kathmandu valley are unified through mobile technology into a connected communication network.</p> <p>To analyse how the common understanding of mobile technology is achieved it conducts a comparison. It compares mobile technology to other different methods of establishing social unity in the Kathmandu valley described by anthropological studies of its cultural forms. By contrasting and comparing these different practices it elicits how the construction of a common understanding concerning mobile technology requires some ontological presuppositions concerning reality in general.</p> <p>Yet, analysis of the presupposed truths that are used to establish technological unity raises a theoretical and methodological problem. This problem is that the ontological truths concerning reality that connect the users of mobile technology together are similar to those which are often used as the basis of social scientific research. To solve this problem this thesis utilizes a method of science and technology studies known as actor-network theory. Consequently, by utilizing actor-network theory it constructs a method which enables to give an ontological description of mobile technology.</p> |  |  |  |
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