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Samuele Poletti

University of Edinburgh, poletti.samuele@gmail.com

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Obscure Existential Narratives: Predetermination and Freedom in Nepali Horoscopic Knowledge

Samuele Poletti

Nepali astrological divination can be seen as a form sense-making which, in providing access to the 'hidden motifs' attained to determine life events, mitigates the irreducibility of being-in-the-world by providing existential narratives. Conveying hope to act upon what is initially approached as a hopeless fate, astrological knowledge forwards the perception that troubling events, apparently out of control, are also liable to be acted upon. This reveals a permanent tension between 'fatalism' and 'freedom' that challenges rendering Nepal exclusively in fatalist terms, as argued by the Nepali anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista. Yet, accounting for these reinterpretations requires a personally-tailored inquiry, usually overlooked by sociocentric approaches that patronizingly disregard people as mere carriers of a worldview, as in the case of the ontological turn.

Keywords: astrology, divination, narratives, sense-making, fatalism, ontology, Nepal.

A Bolt from the Blue

Me: Jaggy's still not feeling well, eh?

Sandeep: Yes, and his horoscope says he will die soon...

This exchange between my research assistant and I took place in Autumn of 2015, during my doctoral fieldwork in the Sinja Valley of Jumla District, in northwestern Nepal. That morning, after having washed my face and collected some water at the communal tap, I had joined him on the rooftop of his house. The intense blue of the sky contrasted with the mountains around us, while a bright sun warmed us up from the crisp air. Looking around, I suddenly noticed Jagya Prasad, lying on the balcony of the neighboring house. He was completely covered by a thick blanket, as Jumlis do when feeling unwell, because of the healing properties of heat. Jaggy—as we called him—is a Jumli farmer and father of five children, distantly related to Sandeep by kinship ties. Over the previous months, he had suffered, with increasing frequency, from what he described as stomachache, lovingly tended to by his devoted wife, Sarala.

Recently, he had been haunted by a *muiyā* (Khas.¹ wandering spirit—see Poletti, 2016), and he visited a *dhāmī* (Khas. shaman), also known as a reliable diviner, for this reason. In Sinja, the most common divinatory technique is known as *jotta herne*, literally meaning



Figure 1. The divinatory practice of *jotta herne*, performed by the *dhāmī*.

(Poletti, 2015)

consists of making predictions interpreting the position of a few rice grains on the shaman's palm, or on a plate (Figure 1). When Jaggy went to him, the *dhāmī* promptly dismissed a connection between the *muiyā*'s attacks and his stomachache, which he warned was a much more serious matter, liable to result in his imminent death. However, these forecasts are not always taken seriously, so I did not pay it much attention. A few days later, on a quiet afternoon before his children came home from school, Jaggy and I sat down to have a glass of milk in the dark and windowless kitchen of his house. The rhythmic sound of a charcoal-black kettle rattling on the stove was the backdrop to our conversation, as I started realizing the seriousness of the matter.

Jaggy: The *dhāmī* told me I will die at the beginning of the coming month of *māgh* [February 2016]...

Me: [hesitant] Do you think this is true?

Jaggy: I think so... This is all written in my forehead. Long time ago, my father-in-law looked at my *cinā* (Nep. horoscope), and said I would have had troubles at the age of 58. Then I haven't looked at it anymore, and I forgot about that. Now, the *dhāmī* told me thus, so I'm sad and nervous... Next month I shall go trading in India, but I'm afraid that if I go I will die there...²

A Written Fate

In Sinja, the predetermination of fate has distinct connotations. On the sixth day after birth, during a ceremony known as *cinā laḡāune*,³ a child's fate is predicted by *jyotiṣ sāstra* (Nep. astrological divination). On that day, people usually gather on the flat rooftop of a house, and, whilst chatting among themselves, a *jyotiṣī* (Nep. astrologer) is called upon to write down the infant's *cinā*, as described below in more details. This consists of a generic account of someone's future personality, along with the major events that will characterize that life, and a tentative period of death included (Figure 2). That same night, a priest will perform a ritual known as *khāsti pūjā* during which, after having recited some prayers, they will leave an open notebook and a pen next to the baby. During the course of the night, a divine entity named Bhabini⁴ is expected to write, on the newborn's forehead their 'life plot' disclosed earlier by the *cinā laḡāune*, becoming thus inescapable. "Therefore, you see," a friend once told me, "what Bhabini writes always comes true!"

Consequently, this religious determinism leads to a passive acceptance of life. According to the thesis put forward by Dor Bahadur Bista in *Fatalism and Development* (2011), a fatalist worldview is deep-seated in Nepal. Actually, Bista suggests, especially among the high castes, most people accept that their lives are irrevocably decided in advance. Thus, personal initiative is not only absent but actively discouraged as it would interfere with an obscure plan everyone is expected to simply accept. Consequently, "[f]rom the fatalistic perspective, there is no free will or choice in decision-making" (Bista, 2011: 83). This, claimed the Nepali anthropologist, is what discourages any proactive engagement liable to create a brighter future for Nepal.

At first sight, this actually mirrors Jaggy's attitude. Stimulated by what appeared to me a complete dismissal of agency, I naïvely asked him whether Bhabini could be blamed for every misdeed people commit. His answer dissipated any possible misunderstanding.

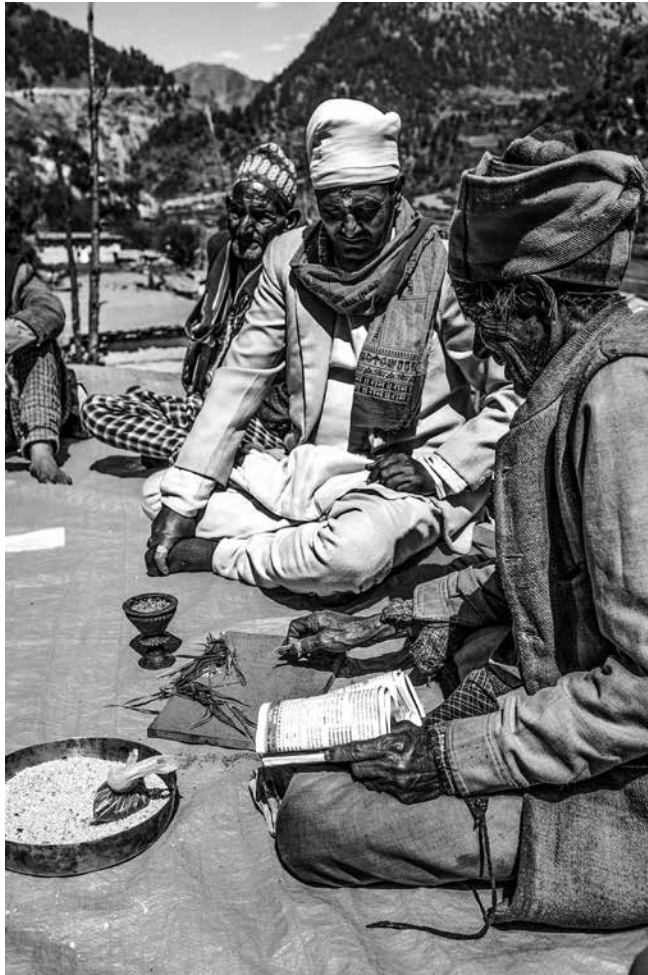


Figure 2. The *cinā lagāune*: an astrologer is preparing the horoscope for a new-born baby.

(Poletti, 2015)

Jaggy: No, Bhabini decides only the end of life and the main events of it, not everything we do.

Sandeep: [In English, wishing to clarify] Everything happens according to Bhabini, but she doesn't write every single action. Like your University, it says you must submit by a certain date, but it doesn't tell you all what you must write in your thesis. Bhabini is the same.

Jaggy: On the sixth day [after birth], Bhabini writes about our life and our death, but only she knows... Like a thief coming to our house, we don't know when this will happen and what will be taken away, and so we can't prevent it. This is why we look at the horoscope.

Since not everything is determined in advance, I suggested a medical check-up.

Jaggy: No... I don't have the money for that, and I can't sell some land... I don't have much property, and I have to keep it intact for my son, for I don't want to put him in the middle of an island.⁵ Last year, when I came back [from India], I went to the hospital in Nepalgunj, but I hadn't enough money to complete all the necessary tests. So, eventually I just took some pills and I returned to Sinja. There is nothing I can do, and by February I'll be dead...

Then, his son Kapil and his four sisters arrived home from school, and amidst the cheerful mess they created, our conversation was dropped. Walking back across the tiny gangway over the narrow draining ditch that separates Jaggy's house from Sandeep's, I remember feeling saddened, thinking about this man who appeared completely crushed under his burdensome fate, without showing the slightest attempt to fight the future.

Fight the Future

Thus, I was amazed when, a couple of weeks later, as it was nearing the time for me to take a break from the field, the news reached me that Jaggy was preparing to travel to Kathmandu in order to seek medical care. What had happened, Sandeep explained, was that Jaggy's impending demise—predicted years ago by his *cinā* (Nep. horoscope), recently confirmed by the *dhāmī* (Khas. shaman), and substantiated by his invalidating pain—had aroused great worries in his family. Consequently, Jaggy's older brother had decided to come to his aid. So, instead of going trading through their usual route, they planned to go to Kathmandu first, where Jaggy would undergo the necessary treatment before proceeding south to India.

Very surprised by this turning point, before we both left the village I had a final chat with Jaggy, sitting on a wooden bench in the sun of Sandeep's terrace. We were yet forced to move inside because of a dense shower of straw waste coming from the above rooftop, where people had gathered to beat the barley stocked there to dry since the late spring, now ready to harvest.

Jaggy: I'm worried, because my *cinā* says I'll die, and the *dhāmī* told me I won't live longer than when he said. However, going to the hospital might resolve the problem... Last time I hadn't enough money, but now I'm happy, because my brother is helping me. I'm not worried to leave home, and neither is my family, because they know I'm not alone and that Kathmandu is a better place than here, with good doctors that will treat me well. So, I hope I'll completely heal.

These brief remarks demonstrated hope for a different outcome, revealing a tension between determinism and freedom which is a paramount also in Hindu philosophy (Duck-Joo and Hye-chong 2010; Stone 1981: 111). The introduction of astrology to the Indian Subcontinent⁶ seems to have weakened the previous acceptance of predetermination with the prospect to alter future events, recurring to divinatory practices.

Urban Turmoil

When we met again two weeks later, Jaggy was sitting in the cold waiting room of Kathmandu's Bir hospital. Seeing him in such a different setting felt rather surreal. After the first analysis, the long waiting times had dissolved the hope for a rapid solution. So, not being able to afford the risk of jeopardizing his own trading season, Jaggy's brother was forced to proceed on the journey, leaving his brother in the care of his son who studies at the local university. In the following weeks, my friend Bhuwan and I assisted him visiting the many offices and with the paperwork he had to deal with. To make matters worse, at the time the blockade of Nepal's southern border by the Indian government had made moving around town difficult and expensive.

Nonetheless, thanks to a relative of Bhuwan who works at the hospital, the day before I went home Jaggy was finally hospitalized to undergo the last medical checks before a major surgical operation aiming at removing a benign tumorous mass located outside the stomach wall. Compressing the nearby organs, this tumor was the cause of his illness. In the common hall, the patients' beds were lined all next to each other, with groups of relatives shuttling around to provide medicine, food and other nursing tasks that fall beyond the concerns of the hospital staff. When I entered the hall, Jaggy was lying on his bed, a tight smile on his face. Bhuwan had fortunately volunteered to keep an eye on him, and had brought some blankets along with a camping mattress to improve Jaggy's comfort. I sat down next to him, and we exchanged a few words. Not many, to be honest, as he appeared visibly nervous, and I could not really concentrate with the turmoil of mixed feelings I had about going home after the most disorientating year of my life.

Jaggy: [About the operation] I don't know if this will be successful or not... If it doesn't, I will lose my life and my brother his money... It will be very bad for me and my family... The future is dark, and when people act in the dark they are bound to fail. [Nep. *bhāṣya andhakār cha, ra jaba mānche haru adhyāro ko chapet ma kām garchan tiniharu niras hunchan*]

A disquieting feeling of wonder followed me when, leaving the hospital, I asked the doctor in charge of Jaggy what would have happened without this surgical intervention. "He would have probably died in the next couple of months," he replied, "February maybe."

Taming Uncertainties

It was a sunny and uncommonly warm Christmas day in Canton Ticino when, in the early afternoon, I received a call from Bhuwan, telling me that Jaggy's operation had gone well. I was pleased to see him again, some two months later, at my return in Sinja, where he wholeheartedly welcomed me, looking even a bit stouter than usual. We had tea and a long conversation, in which he recounted all the discomforts of his convalescence. Living with his nephew in a small room on the fourth floor of a building in Kirtipur was fairly inconvenient, especially during the days immediately after the operation, when the agony of going back and forth to use the only toilet, located on the ground floor, made him feel dizzy. Nights were cold without a fireplace, and the increasing shortage of gas forced them to cook on a small electric stove. Yet, this was erratic because of the long hours of loadshedding: the interruption of electricity supply that used to be typical of the dry winters. Moreover, due to scarcity of water, it was not always possible to maintain the hygiene essential for a safe recovery. All this made him nostalgic for home, so, only a few weeks after the operation—and not without concern on my part—, he rushed back to Sinja.

A few days later, towards the end of a grey and drizzly afternoon, Jaggy, Sandeep and I were trying to keep warm with a cup of tea in our hands. Next to us on the rooftop, his son Kapil and other kids were playing football with a turf of grass they had uprooted for that purpose.

Jaggy: Before the operation I thought often of death, and I was quite sure to die in February, like my *cinā* (Nep. horoscope) says. Then, the night before the operation, a man died in the same hall where I was; he was 52. All his relatives came and took him away, and this made me really anxious, because also my father had died when I was only one year old, and, after his death, life became very difficult for us. So, I thought, 'now if I die it will be the same for my children too...'

Then, a moment later, he added: "I don't know how to read the *cinā*, but now I'd like to know what is written in it..." This last sentence stuck to my mind.

All that happened since the *dhāmī*'s (Khas. shaman) prophecy seemed to have reawakened in Jaggy old and

long forgotten memories that unsettled him a great deal, leaving a much deeper mark than the big scar that now runs obliquely along his belly. During the following chat, I actually discovered that, as soon as he had got back from the capital, he had asked an astrologer of his trust to read his *cinā* again. He also told us about the death of his previous two sons, which had also been predicted by his father-in-law. When Kapil was born they were all uncertain about his survival, and so they simply gave him an appropriate name, noting down the time of his birth in case of a further usage, to avoid spending again the important amount required for a proper *cinā laḡāune*.⁷ Then the years went by, and since the need to consult it never arose, Kapil remained to this day without a *cinā*. Now that Kapil is a healthy 10-year-old boy, this had been a recurring thought for his father since his hospitalization, and so he had also asked the astrologer to prepare his son's horoscope.

Rather than being dismissed as a vestige of ancient times, Hindu astrology remains popular, growing even among urban dwellers, by whom it is considered valuable to get a hold upon what is seen as the increasing elusiveness of a fast changing world (Guenzi 2012: 41; Kemper 1980: 745). People are rarely satisfied by pure coincidence, and divinatory practices seek to provide access to knowledge normally inaccessible through intuitive methods that expand individual drama to include a cosmological design behind apparently random events. This cosmocentric vision transcends the human domain, since the entire nation, too, is subjugated to the same forces. Accordingly, both in India and Nepal, a national horoscope is regularly consulted to scrutinize matters of national and international relevance (see also Guenzi, 2012: 46).

This suggests that gaining a vantage point over the uncertainties of life, knowing that things happen for a reason, can be reassuring, especially when going through difficult times. However, while most anthropological studies on the topic have described divination as an explanatory means to past occurrences, Shaw argued that it also importantly tackles the obscure areas laying beyond the reach of the public normative discourse (1991: 141-42). Actually, contrary to other circumstances in which people summon previous *pāp* (Nep. sin) to justify their misfortune, Jaggy never really questioned the potential causes underlying his issue, which he simply attributed to the hardships of life in Sinja. Astrology, therefore, acquires the role of a specific “technology of anticipation” (da Col and Humphrey, 2012), taming the uncertainties of life not in relation to past events, but in a sort of anticipatory sense-making aiming at “presentifying” the future.

Existential Narratives

As Jaggy had foreshadowed, some days later I was awakened by the hustle of some unusual excitement coming from outside. Venturing downstairs, I noticed the astrologer had finally arrived, and was getting ready to prepare Kapil's *cinā*. His task consisted of interpreting the content of a *pātro* (Nep. horoscopic booklet), printed each year in Kathmandu and available in the local shops.⁸ Out of curiosity I bought one myself, and was astonished by its complexity. Basically, it contains astrological data suggesting suitable initials for a person's name, which is then chosen by the relatives accordingly. Alongside diagrams and tables of figures indicating the positions of the *graha* (Nep. planets) at the time of someone's birth allow predicting, through mathematical operations, their influxes upon that person's life. This practice operates therefore a sort of “astrological reductionism” (Guenzi, 2012: 41), tracing all existential vicissitudes back to the obscure forces that planetary motions are deemed to exercise on human life, rendered in terms of *bhāgya* (Nep. fortune) and *abhāgya* (Nep. bad luck) (see also Campbell, 1978: 211).

I took place, among a crowd of onlookers, on Jaggy's terrace, where the astrologer was seated before a wooden board covered with fine sand, used as a sort of ‘blackboard’ upon which to make the necessary calculations (Figure 3). The astrologer drew a round diagram on the sand, encompassing twelve distinct sections, or *bhava* (Nep. houses), each of which symbolizes a portion of the firmament and refers to a specific existential domain. Kapil was born in *māgh* 27, 2062 BS (Nep. February 8, 2006). His birth was *subha* (Nep. auspicious) for his entire family, putting an end to some previous difficulties. The divinatory forecasts that followed described him as a very gentle and clever person, destined to become a powerful man. He would always take care of his parents, of whom he would be the only son. He would receive a very good education, allowing him to secure a good job in the public sector. He would earn more money than he would have the possibility to spend, and he would never suffer from shortage of resources.

The purpose of astrology, however, is not simply taking stock of one's situation, but of identifying possible negative influences exercised by the planets. In Kapil's case, the only planet in a bad position was *maṅgal* (Nep. Mars) in the fifth house, the one related to affections, which will remain strong until about the age of 35. Because of that, Kapil will encounter problems in the arrangement of his marriage, which will be successful only after several attempts. Although Hindu ethno-ontology conceives of



Figure 3. The wooden 'blackboard,' used to make the necessary calculations to forecast the influence of the planets.

(Poletti, 2015)

a person “as substance containing the principle of its own development” (Kemper, 1980: 746), this destiny is not fixed or absolutely determined. Far from positing a homeostatic perspective, due to the transit of the planets through the various houses their influx is bound to change over time, so that fortune and bad luck might appear or disappear later in life.

Moreover, subsequent events can partially alter the initial predetermination, which can be seen either in terms of intentional acts or as the influences of external agents, along with the passing of time itself. Actually,

[i]n the context of Hindu culture, seeking divination is a strategy that involves accepting the external constraints of fatalistic forces while looking for areas of personal control that enable mitigating measures (Young et al. 2011: 1048; see also Wagner 2012: 167).

To minimize this negative influence on Kapil's future life, the astrologer gave precise indications about the actions he should undertake when this issue arises.

No other difficulty was foreseen for Kapil, whose life expectancy is going to be long according to the horoscope. The astrologer noted down all the results, and eventually handed Jaggy his son's *cinā*. The family has the choice to either immediately get, for an average price of 1500 Npr (≈ \$15), a simple piece of paper indicating only the main astrological findings, or, for a higher sum, one embellished with colorful decorations and references to

the gods (Figure 4). The *cinā* is then kept at home, and as most people cannot interpret it by themselves, they call an astrologer to read it when misfortune is perceived to be at play, or to check whether the time for certain activities—especially marriages—are auspicious (see also Campbell 1978: 212; Guenzi 2012: 52). If it gets lost, this document can be replaced with a new one, the reliability of which remains unaffected provided that the time of birth is precise. After death, it would be better throwing the *cinā* into a sacred river in a holy place, although this might not happen for years, or even at all.

Making a person aware of these astral influences, “[a]strology projects the individual into an open future; but it is a future in which every individual has a determinate place” (Kemper, 1980: 754). In light of that, divination narrows down ‘existence’ from an initially obscure plethora to a structured narrative, suggesting adequate responses to the problematic situations envisaged (Tedlock, 2001: 192). In other words, Hindu astrology tames the wilderness of the world and the irreducible experience of it by providing *existential narratives*. Indeed, what the diviner reveals is a sort of ‘life plot’ that mediates between cultural axiology and personal agency, harmonizing them with a reality in continuous flux. At the same time, by ordering these confused elements divination sheds new meaning upon them, suggesting a right course of action leading to a new and more adequate form of understanding (Peek 1991b: 195, 204-05; see also Devisch 1991: 130).

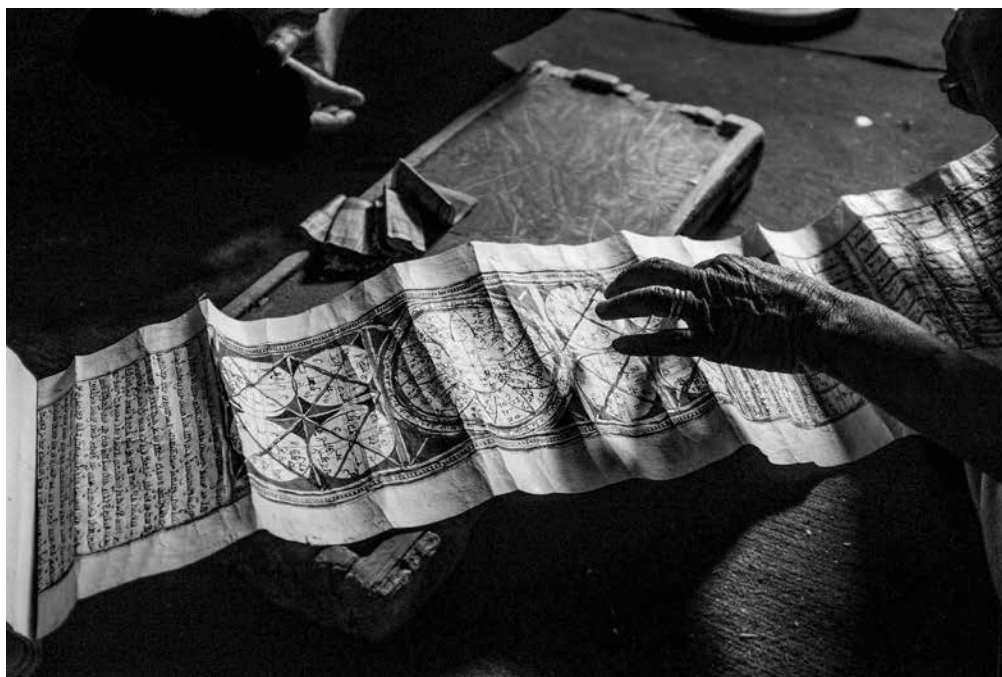


Figure 4. A typical embellished *cinā*.

(Poletti, 2015)

A Revisited Fate

When Kalip's *cinā* (Nep. horoscope) was done, it was Jaggy's turn to have his own read again. Once rolled out, the crumpled paper, yellowed by time, showed portions of text and numbers adorned with red motifs (Figure 5). After some rather truthful general indications about the man's personality and his past, the astrologer revealed a *khaṭko* (Nep. obstacle) arising at the age of 58, which was his current age. Then, according to the astrological calculations, Jaggy would come across another obstacle at the age of 63, and then again at 67 and 73. *Khaṭko*, Sandeep explained, is used as a euphemism to indicate *māru* or *mṛtyu* (Khas. / Nep. death)—a term the astrologer usually avoids, to prevent causing his audience unnecessary worries. Therefore, as I later ascertained, the *cinā* never really shows an accurate time of death but only tentative periods of crisis, approximated at best to a month in which that person's demise, although not certain, cannot be excluded.

When the astrologer went away with his rich load of offerings, I asked both Kapil and Jaggy how they felt about knowing 'all' about their lives. In his usual shyness, Kapil simply mumbled "I don't know" before nestling next to his father, the bright colors of his brand-new school uniform contrasting with Jaggy's worn-out and sun-faded black suit jacket.

Jaggy: The astrologer simply says what the gods have decided for us. He said I'll have many difficulties in my life, and also my wife's father had told me

the same... I was in great pain, so, I went to Kathmandu, and thus I'm alive. If I had no operation maybe I'd be dead now, but the gods saw that I'm an innocent man, so they entered my brother's *man* (Nep. heart) and mine, convincing him to pay for my treatment and me to go to Kathmandu. Now I feel I have a new life, and that death has gone away. I hope to live still for some years, but my horoscope says I'll die at 63...

As Guenzi pointed out, astrological knowledge is claimed to be ontological, and it is actually rendered with the verb 'to be,' being generally privileged over 'felt' experience, despite not being always validated by it. A gap between the two domains is commonly acknowledged, and the consultation of oracles serves precisely to trace people's phenomenologies back to a specific ontology (Guenzi, 2012: 48). As for the case of Africa, divination hence appears as

another such truth-constructing process in which, through the public reclassification of people and events, a particular interpretation emerges as the authorized version of 'what really happened' (Shaw 1991: 140).

For many people in Nepal, too, said Desjarlais, there exists a 'true knowledge' about existential vicissitudes concealed from the understanding of most, as only a few people are able to master it. For this reason, ordinary folks do not light-heartedly speculate about the reason of things, resorting instead to divinatory practices in an attempt to shed some light upon the obscure



Figure 5. Jaggy, now completely recovered, observes the astrologer unfolding his cinā.

(Poletti, 2016)

causes of events (Desjarlais, 1992: 24-25). Consequently, “a divination often appears like an ‘epiphany’—an image that ‘shows’ [...] the truth of a situation” (1992: 181).

Although this endeavor to establish connections between apparently unrelated events has led some anthropologists to compare divination with the scientific enterprise (Peek 1991a: 10; Stafford 2009: 123; Tedlock 2001: 195), the comparison is not entirely fitting. Often, in fact, it is a misfortune that triggers the need to summon an occult design of fate, which these practices aim to tackle (see also Duck-Joo and Hye-chong, 2010: 62). Moreover, despite its sacred guise, astrological truth tends to be approached with a much more disenchanting attitude than what is commonly expected from science, since people appear to be more aware of its limitations. Indeed, Maskarinec noted discussing Nepali shamanic practices, “[f]atalistic realism tempers the hope for miracles” (1995:

60). This ‘applied knowledge’ is actually meant to be discussed as a relative matter. Its acceptance, therefore, has often more to do with the expert’s authority than the veracity of the message itself, for instance in the case of sand divination in Southern Mali (Jansen, 2009: 124).

Nevertheless, while many anthropologists around the world have shown the importance of personal reinterpretations and interpersonal negotiations of the enigmatic answers given by oracles, Holbraad recognized their value in their alleged veracity. He criticized Evans-Pritchard and Boyer’s analyses of divination for their “mild” approach to oracular disclosures, which they treated as mere *options*, whereas “[i]nsofar as practitioners do believe the verdicts, they take them as not only true but also *indubitably* so” (Holbraad, 2012: 67-68, emphasis on text, see also 244). This constitutes a major issue of with the ontological turn, which, against common sense, insists on taking people’s assertions at face value (2012: 248). If this were to be the case, it would certainly imply the death of hermeneutics, and not just for the sake of a radical phenomenological description. Paradoxically, in fact, upon this epistemological agenda its proponents construct giant theoretical machines that not only trespass those very voices, but also refuse them any credit, conceiving of people as the passive products of specific cosmological ontologies. Holbraad’s essentializing rendering of Cuban divination, for example, deprives people of their agency—a position he acknowledged is liable to raise concerns for its exoticizing tendency. Yet, he argued, whereas the imperative of agency might appear desirable to us, it may not be the case for ‘the natives,’ since it largely reflects an ethnocentric sensibility (2012: 15).

The fascination for cosmological ontologies and radical alterity promoted by the ontological turn, however, is quite problematic, and may well be just a post-modern chimera (Jackson and Piette 2015: 19-25; see also Vigh and Sausdal 2014). In fact, I have a hard time conceiving of people as passively dominated by their ontologies, regardless of what they pay lip service to. In fact, although astrological ontology *must be true* in Sinja, its meaning is endlessly reinterpreted. What emerged throughout these pages is actually that the phenomenological experience prevails over the local ontology, inasmuch as the latter provides a horizon of meaning constantly reinterpreted in an attempt to make sense of unfolding events. This applies just as much to indigenous cosmologies as to scientific determinism, since “[t]here seems always to be an experiential gap between our scientific account of the world and our actual experience” (Duck-Joo and Hye-chong, 2010: 56). In other words, as the hermeneutic

tradition suggests, the experience-of-the-world always exceeds our narrative accounts of it, requiring ongoing interpretation (Meretoja, 2014: 97). The ensuing turn of the conversation instantiates the point.

A Personally-Tailored Existential Approach

Me: Is it good then to know the time of our death?

Jaggy: It is, because if a person already knows the time, s/he can prepare everything before s/he dies.

Jaggy explained that this would consist of bidding farewell to everyone, paying debts and collecting credits still pending, and instructing the family about what to do after his death.⁹ These words echoed similar views I often came across during my fieldwork, and can be found elsewhere in Nepal too, bearing striking similarities with those of the Hyolmo people described by Desjarlais (2016: 59). Nonetheless, they appeared to me rather dissonant with the personal feelings Jaggy had expressed in our previous chat. Thus, a moment later, I asked him if it would not be more peaceful living without such knowledge.

Jaggy: If people knew the date of their death, some will complete the things still to do, while others will do nothing at all. If one is told s/he would die falling into the river, s/he would always avoid rivers... But this all depends on the gods; simple people don't know about these things, and so we do everything normally. We should remember that one day we will die, but it's better to ignore its exact time, because knowing it would arise ceaseless worries and unhappiness.

Me: ... and for you?

Jaggy: Now I'm scared, because my *cinā* says I am going to die soon, and so I feel sad about having to leave my family here. A problem came and it was removed, and now another will come... Maybe, if I do something, I may have more time, so when I'll turn 63 I'll give the priest a cow, or whatever he indicates to remove this *kharāb dasā* (Nep. bad sign). Thus, I might live up to the age of 67... I would like to live longer, but I think my time is running out...

Initially, Jaggy showed a positive attitude towards a forecasted death, corroborating what a pious Sinjali would be expected to say. However, moving from this abstract domain to his actual situation revealed another story, suggesting that “the knowledge whereby one lives is not necessarily identical with the knowledge whereby one explains life” (Jackson, 1996: 2). In fact, while the means and the end of intersubjective life seems that of

creating a collective narrative by which to live, personal experience cannot be fully enclosed in a cultural narrative. Nonetheless, people keep trying to adjust to those collective endeavors, though constantly reinterpreting them in order to accommodate the lives they actually live—a process Meretoja refers to as “triple hermeneutics” (2014: 98).

However, whereas she cogently speculated on the influence that shared narratives have on personal subjectivities, Meretoja only briefly touched upon how people's reinterpretations lead to a constant reshaping of collective representations, attributing new meanings to these. This does not obviously mean that personal experience disproves cultural narratives, but rather that trying to retrace the former back to the latter is an ongoing impulse. Indeed, without invalidating its overall ‘truth,’ the reinterpretation of Jaggy's *cinā* not only managed to account for his recently escaped demise, but, at the same time, it also empowered him to feel capable of opposing the adversities to come.

Sociocentric approaches, however, preclude accounting for these personal reinterpretations, conveying instead a fatalistic understanding of divinatory practices. Actually, Bista argued that astrological forecasts are intrinsically linked to the fatalist mind-set he denounced (2011: 110). This conclusion, however, stems from a systemic study in which the Nepali anthropologist, influenced by Edmund Leach, postulated that “generalization is the only way with which we can learn anything about the complex society such as that of Nepal” (Bista, 2011: 7). From this generalization followed unfortunately a very essentialist portrayal of Nepali people, irrevocably condemned to the supposed fatalism they were said to embody. Consequently, the propositions he advanced concerned the country as a whole, whereas its population was patronizingly disregarded as the passive carrier of a worldview, as in the case of the ontological turn.

Much has obviously changed over the past thirty years, but what Bista pointed out still remains pertinent. Yet, his absolutist rendering of fatalism in Nepal, in which people entirely surrender to their fate, does not do them justice. In fact, divination may be seen as a sort of ‘agency in disguise.’ Accordingly, Bista's suggestion of tapping into the value systems of other ethnic groups as the only way out of this vicious circle appears deplorable to me, if only because it implicitly condemns to hopelessness those people already affected by fatalistic attitudes. Instead, looking carefully, the seeds for more pro-active positions are already there. To germinate and bear fruit, it is important to foreground the ways in which fate is engaged with by actual people in their everyday lives, moving

beyond the general worldview. Devisch misses indeed the opportunity to concretely address the existential questions he mentions by approaching the network of relationships *as a whole*, albeit refraining from treating ‘the social’ as a homogeneous domain (1991: 131). Along similar lines, and despite his phenomenological approach, it is a pity that, in his rendering of Hyolmo divination, Desjarlais does not address potential skepticism and reinterpretations. In fact, apart from briefly mentioning that not every oracular verdict is equally trusted (1992: 184), these are presented as if they were unquestioningly accepted.

Different circumstances induce different people to respond in different manners, which is why my argument is presented as a personally-tailored inquiry. However, by this I do not mean to treat astrology as a personal whim, for it certainly determines people’s lives¹⁰ well beyond their control. This foregrounds *the struggle for being* that this kind of anthropology aims to investigate. Jackson, indeed, defined the attempt to regain control—at least to the degree allowed by the circumstances—upon the world in which one is thrown, rather than to simply endure life as it comes (2008: 182). Consequently, what follows is “a commitment to explore empirically the lived experience of actual people in everyday situations before venturing suggestions as to what human beings may have in common” (Jackson, 2013: 9). Making Crapanzano’s words mine,

I do tend to stress the individual—at least the individual perspective—rather than the social and the cultural taken as such. [...] I find that the singular has often been sacrificed to the general in the human sciences and that, more often than not, this has resulted in a distorting simplification of the human condition; in a failure fully to appreciate its ambiguous nature and the ambivalence it generates; in an implicit if not explicit emphasis on determinism; in an indifference to human creativity, transgressive possibility, and imaginative play; and in a failure to address the question of human freedom, however delusional that freedom may be (2004: 6).

The aim of an existential approach is hence not the exhaustive analysis of a phenomenon, but rather an inquiry of how it is experienced. In this case, this implied investigating how Jaggy engaged divinatory knowledge, and what repercussion this has had on his life, without the unsustainable claim of encompassing all possible ways in which astrology is experienced in Sinja.

Epilogue

While going through the recordings of the conversations with Jaggy, one day, Sandeep told me that these events had affected him deeply. His children were born during the tumultuous years of the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006), so, mainly due to lack of resources, their horoscopes had never been done. One unfortunate night, in fact, Sandeep’s house was completely plundered by Maoist rebels, his savings stolen, and his own *cinā* burned along with other documents.¹¹ Sandeep had never perceived this as an issue, until, in recent times, some tensions had arisen in his family, which he confided had made him quite concerned.

Sandeep: Now that we have seen what the horoscope says about Kapil and Jaggy, I would like to know what is happening to us [Sandeep’s family] too. But I’m unsure, because to see the horoscope is good and bad at the same time... Some people say it is helpful, and others that it gives only anxieties, because if the astrologer says you will have problems on a certain year, that year you’ll become very anxious. But for me, prevention is better than cure, so I think it would be better to do what the astrologer suggests, otherwise I’ll be always on moving ground.

Sandeep’s words encapsulate what I have described so far. What has become progressively evident, in fact, is that the acceptance of a destiny thoroughly determined in advance does not suffice to bear the unsettling events encountered in life. Consequently,

[e]ven among peoples who believe that life patterns are established prior to birth into this world, it is possible through correct action based on proper information—information available only through divination—to improve one’s life (Peek 1991b: 203).

Providing access to the ‘hidden motifs’ written on his forehead, astrological divination has indeed helped Jaggy cope with the problematic occurrences that fell upon him. Hence, astrology appears as a form of sense-making, recasting order over a chaotic world. Despite the risks related to its Janus-faced character—which resulting prophecies might, at times, end up generating even more worries—it still offers a resource to avert feeling constantly *on a moving ground*. However, it does not achieve this by overshadowing singular lifeworlds under a totalizing worldview. On the contrary, within its system can be found the means for personal empowerment.

In Jaggy’s case, the real value of divination was not so much that of establishing causes, but rather that of elaborating a plausible narrative, in which what really

mattered were the consequences it brought along. That is to say, it conveyed the perception that troubling events, apparently out of control, were liable not only to be endured but also to be acted upon. This was achieved primarily through acts of sense-making. Actually, making sense of undesirable circumstances may well constitute the first step towards their resolution, especially when one lacks other means to tackle them concretely. From an existential perspective, this is a form of resistance against the simple unfolding of life, which here took the form of an attempt to gain partial control upon the occult machinations of fate.

Not that this necessarily constitutes a new discovery for anthropologists. As Herzfeld elucidated (1996), in Greece, too, the widespread idea of a written fate might initially lead to it being mistaken for fatalism. However, people resort to it opportunistically, as a retroactive means to legitimize personal faults, mitigating possible reproaches. Moreover, representing death as marriage, Herzfeld showed how funerary lamentation enabled a widowed woman to rebel against the male authority and the supposed irreversibility of her destiny, paving the way for a viable future lying beyond her painful condition. This led him to conclude that “[w]hat is written cannot be unwritten, but what is sung or keened can most certainly be reinterpreted” (Herzfeld, 1996: 164).

As Stone pointed out, ancient scripts contained in the *Yajnavalkya Smṛiti* indicate human vicissitudes as a combination of both intentional endeavors and determinate fate, since “[j]ust as a chariot cannot move on one wheel, so ‘fate’ is ineffective without human effort” (see 1981: 112). A Sinjali proverb, *bhāgya cha bhanera doko mā dudh doyama addaina*, epitomizes this well, suggesting that “a lucky person is the one who doesn’t milk a cow in a wicker basket” (Nep.). Therefore, while Campbell illustrated Jumli society as characterized by the coexistence of two antithetical power dynamics—a dominant hierarchic model based on Brahmanism and a ‘rebellious’ egalitarian one inherent to the local oracular religion (see 1978)—, I add that a permanent tension between ‘fatalism’ and ‘freedom’ constitutes another major force at play in the lifeworld of the people living in Sinja.

Samuele Poletti is a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh (UK). His doctoral research focuses on the perception(s) of death in the Sinja Valley of Jumla District (Western Nepal), and how this may shed light upon the ways in which people make sense of existence. Besides resorting to the classic instrument of academic writing, he is interested in the possibilities that photography may offer as a complementary means to the ethnographic description, not least by virtue of a communicative immediacy not always possible in the written text. <poletti.samuele@gmail.com> <www.samuelepoletti.com>

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Endnotes

1. *Khas* is the vernacular language spoken in the Sinja Valley. This idiom featured prominently for the shaping of Nepal’s national ethos, since it was chosen as the national language, and can thus be considered the antecedent of modern Nepali (see e.g. Adhikari 1997: 112; Bista 2011: 153).
2. Each year, from December to March, many Jumli men go trading in India. This is the only period that does not require their workforce in the fields, which allows them to earn the money to sustain their families now that subsistence economy is no longer enough.
3. Throughout Nepal, this is known as *janma kuṇḍali*.
4. Bista describes her as Bhavi, the demi-goddess of providence (2011: 77), whereas Campbell refers to her as Bhābi (1978: 224). Yet, “Bhabini” is the only name I heard people using during the course of my fieldwork. In Nepal, the idea that a person’s fate is located in the forehead is shared by non-Hindu peoples too, such as Hyolmo Sherpas of the Helambu region (Desjarlais 1992: 164, 2016: 13).
5. “Island” is used here as a metaphor for existential uncertainty. In fact, he referred to the natural islands appearing sometimes in the middle of rivers, which risk being submerged when the waters rise.

6. From Mesopotamia through Ancient Greece, astrology reached the Indian Subcontinent in the second century A.D. (Pingree 1981: 10-12, 81; Stone 1981: 118-19). In the specific case of western Nepal, however, the lack of historical sources does not allow to pinpoint with precision the local ramifications of these broader dynamics. The sporadic generalizations made through the paper serve to contextualize the story narrated, not what the latter necessarily illustrates.

7. According to the period of someone's birth, astrological divination indicates a set of suitable initials for a personal name, which is then chosen by the relatives accordingly. Since the astrologer requires to be adequately remunerated for each of his consultations, this may constitute an important expense for the family, which is not taken light-heartedly.

8. Competence in astrological matters are part of the stock of expertise usually handed down, from father to son, in priestly families. In fact, the astrologers who enjoying the greatest reputation happen to be *pūjārī* (Nep: Hindu Brahmin priests). In western Nepal, some of these priest/astrologers still do all of the complex astrological calculations contained in the *pātro* themselves, although this skill is being gradually eroded by the increasing availability of ready-made ones, published on a vast scale both in India and Nepal. The priest prepares the *cinā* for the people of all castes, with the exception of *Dalit*: the so-called untouchables, traditionally addressed with the derogatory term *dum*. *Dalit* have their own priests, who take care of these matters in a fashion not too dissimilar from that described in these pages.

9. For example, Jaggy indicated what gifts would be better to give the priest during the mortuary rites, which are attained to reach the deceased thanks to the priest's intercession.

10. The stigma attached to an inauspicious birth chart can indeed represent a heavy burden, and heavily conditions an entire existence since the early childhood.

11. This had been one of the only tense occurrences that happened in the village during the civil war, which had affected the District of Jumla of which Sinja is part at times with violent escalations, despite in a less furious outbursts than elsewhere in Nepal.

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