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(Re)building Sexed Genres in Contemporary Nepal. Ethnographic Notes and Narratives about the Kichkannī

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(Re)building Sexed Genres in Contemporary Nepal. Ethnographic Notes and Narratives about the Kichkannī

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Abstract

One of the most interesting supernatural ontologies in the pan-Nepalese narrative folklore is definitely that of the Kichkannī. An ethereal feminine spirit of elegant beauty and vampire who steals one's life breath, the Kichkannī is at the center of an astonishingly rich narrative complex that allows us to question the realms of gender in the sexualized imaginaries of contemporary Nepal. The Kichkannī represents the dissatisfied *ātmā* (soul, Self) of an unmarried virgin girl (Nep. *kanyā*), who decided to commit suicide without having been able to satisfy her sexual desire. In other cases, the Kichkannī may also originate from the *ātmā* of a girl who, having been raped and, as a result of this forced and violent sexual act, having become pregnant, decided to kill herself. Alongside this supernatural being, a unique ethnographic document highlighted a folk-belief concerning her 'othered sexed' counterpart: the Domāse, the spirit of a *hījaḍa*, a transsexual or transgender person, who committed suicide because he could not fulfill his sexual desires. I propose to reconsider the narrative folklore around these supernatural beings, which are embedded in beliefs and narrative practices, in order to question the sociocultural processes by which gendered and sexual identities are produced.

Keywords: Kichkannī, narrative folklore, ethnography, gender, Nepal.

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In the dark of the moon the whole ugliness,

the disgusting nakedness,

in that void, in the complete darkness, is exposed.

She is reduced to rubble, she is reduced to muck,

to charred remains, destroyed completely.

Do not search man's nature,

do not paw his handsome face,

or he will seem to you

as corrupt as *kichkannī* I pray

you do not meet him thus

because man

and moon's face:

in front, perfect brightness.

And behind?

Disfiguring darkness:

A *kichkannī*.

Translated excerpt from Banira Giri's poem *Mānchhe*: *junko anuhār*

Virginity, sexual abuse, and unfulfilled motherhood in the Nepalese folklore of the Kichkannī

The folklore concerning the feminine figure of the Kichkannī (alternative name, Kichkandī) is widespread across the whole territory of Nepal, from the Himalayan highlands of Mustang (cf. Kich kinne in Vinding 1998: 294–295) to the plains of the Terai. The popularity of this belief is such that, on simply mentioning her name to any Nepalese, of any caste or ethnic group, they will be able to report at least a more-or-less precise narrative concerning an encounter with this supernatural being. Moreover, the Kichkannī has become quite common even outside Nepalese oral literature: for example, Anju Shrestha, a Newar illustrator living in New York Queens, published a short comic book, *True Tales of the Kichkanni*, in the Study Book Comics on October 31, 2013.[2]

To introduce the nature of this supernatural being, who is in-between a feminine spirit of glittering beauty and a fairy bloodsucker, I want to focus on the popular categorization of such an entity. The Kichkannī is a particular form of *bāyu*, a manifestation of the soul of the deceased (Nep. *ātmā*) during the liminal period of *kriya*, the thirteen days following the cremation ritual during which the deceased loses their physical body and awaits the formation of their subtle body (Armand 2019). More specifically, the Kichkannī belongs to

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[2] http://studygroupcomics.com/main/true-tales-of-the-kichkanni-by-anuj-shrestha/ (accessed on May 23, 2022).

the large family descending from the *rakta bāyu* (Nep. *rakta* 'blood'), which gathers the spirits born from a violent and premature death: she is grouped with those *bāyu*s who have committed suicide (Nep. *ātma-hatyā gareko*). In fact, she represents the dissatisfied *ātmā* of a virgin girl who is not yet married (Nep. *kanyā*) and who has decided to die by suicide without having been able to satisfy her sexuality. In other cases, the Kichkannī may also originate from the *ātmā* of a girl who, on being raped and forced into a violent sexual act, becomes pregnant and decides to kill herself. However, in popular beliefs, this supernatural being is often described as a *bhut*, an unappeased and potentially dangerous spirit deriving from the soul of a person who died a sudden death and whose funeral rites and rituals were not performed according to Hindu customs, or not performed at all.

An extensive series of interviews, conducted in 2013 with a Newar *jhākri* (Nep. shaman) and *tantrika*, Umesh Kumar Rajbhandari, in Dallu, at the foot of Swayambhunāth hill (Kathmandu), revealed a rather interesting connection between the Kichkannī and a pentadic feminine figure, known as the Panchakanyā. Traditionally, the Panchakanyā (Nep. *pañcha*, 'five'; *kanyā*, 'virgin maiden') represents a group of five heroic icons from the Hindu epics, the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata: Ahalyā, Draupadī, Mandodarī, Tārā, and Kuntī or Sītā. These five female figures represent the ideal archetype of the woman, respectful of her *dharma* as mother, sister, and wife. As I have already indicated, even if the term *kanyā* indicates the chastity and virginity of a young girl, these five female figures are nevertheless supposed to be ideal wives. As observed by Bhattacharya (2017: 4):

> Of the five *kanya*s, none quite measure up to the standard of monogamous chastity, commended so overwhelmingly in our [Hindu] culture. Each has had either an extra-marital relationship or more than one husband. Why should invoking these *panchakanya*s be extolled as redemptive and why, indeed, is the intriguing term *kanya* applied to them? As we shall see, the key to the mystery of these five 'virgin' maidens lies in the type of sexual encounters they have with non-husbands, encounters that are neither rape nor adultery but are, in fact, quite unique.

Significantly, the Kichkannī does not benefit from the same type of sexual encounters that I have just described for this feminine pentagon. On the contrary, as indicated above, the nature of the Kichkannī is that of a ghost-like figure that emerged from the suicide[3] of a young virgin maiden or from that of a raped girl who has been discovered to be pregnant after being sexually violated. Is it for this reason that, according to the *jhākri* Umesh Kumar Rajbhandari, the Panchakanyā can be considered the direct guardian of the Kichkannī, from whom she emanated? In any case, just as for the pentadic maiden group, the Kichkannī seems to be related to a non-stabilized form, belonging to a bistable state, which relates her to the nature of a virgin, as well as to that of a potential mother.

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[3] As observed by Marahatta *et al*. (2017: 46) psychological problems and suicide are highly prevalent among young Nepalese girls (of less than 30 years) when compared with boys. "The higher rate of mental health problems and alarmingly high suicide rate among Nepalese women is not surprising, given the social hardship they face, such as poor empowerment of women, lack of educational opportunities, and cultural norms restricting self-expression, space and choice, etc. Even worse is the prevalence of child marriage among girls in Nepal, where more than half of girls aged under 18 years are married."

Kichkannī in the city night: Reversing gender relations in the afterlife

The folklore of the Kichkannī represents a good example of a process of the urbanization of supernatural beliefs and narratives that closely follows the broader rural exodus of Parbatiyās and Upper Himalayan inhabitants, who came to settle in the inexorably expanding metropolis of Kathmandu. At night, urban roads become liminal places: visited by human beings and their frenetic activities during the day, they become places of obsessive fear during the long nights of Kathmandu. Thereby, the nocturnal city hides, in its darkness, wandering human and non-human predators… and the Kichkannī too roams along these paths.

The Kichkannī is usually described as a beautiful girl with long hair falling on the white *sārī* that envelops her seductive body.[4] She uses her fascination to approach and attack young men (Nep. *keṭālai mātre dukha dine*, 'she brings misfortune only to men') in order to satisfy the desire for sexuality that she could not fulfil when she was alive. In the worst case, as we have seen, the only sexual encounter the Kichkannī has ever experienced was the violent sexual abuse that drove her to commit suicide. Following the only access to sexuality she has known, the Kichkannī proposes the same modalities of sexual relations, based on violence and suffering, in the phantasmagorical reality that unfolds in the nocturnal Kathmandu where young people meet. She assumes the role of a vampiric succubus, wrapped in her subtle body, forced to wander in the human realm.

Thereby, most of the narratives concerning the Kichkannī state that she attacks exclusively men and/or establishes a sexual relation with them. In this latter case, she meets her victim every night and, during their intercourse, she sucks the blood from his body (Nep. *kichkannīle ragat liera jāne*) keeping and storing it in her femur bone (Nep. *nalikuttāko haddi*). Her victim becomes more and more weak and sick (Nep. *sukdai, sukdai jānchha; suknu*, 'to dry'), until he dies. A narrative document will provide a better picture of the action of this supernatural being:

> In the night time, at around midnight, a beautiful girl came to visit my uncle while he was sleeping in his bed: she was so beautiful and she wore a white *sārī*. He immediately fell in love with her. During the first night, they just talked to each other until the morning but, during the following weeks, the girl continued to visit him every night and they became closer and they started a sexual relationship. However, at the same time as their relationship became closer and closer, my uncle, formerly very strong, started losing weight and he became very sick. His friends were worried: since he met this girl, his health was at risk and doctors could not help him. (Translation of conversation with Narayan Bista, Lamatar, Lalitpur district, on February 26, 2013)

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[4] Another trait that allows recognition of the Kichkannī's ghostly nature is the fact that she has her feet twisted backwards, a characteristic shared by many other supernatural beings inhabiting the Himalayan and sub-Himalayan folklores.

This account reveals the Nepalese imaginary of a sexual relationship in an urban context. However, it is important to note that this type of narrative is often depicted from the male perspective and seems to be greatly influenced by representations across recent Indian and Nepali music and filmography. In fact, ethnographic evidence from Nepal indicates that arranged marriage was normative in most ethnic groups in rural regions before the 1950s. However, since the mid-1980s, the frequency of arranged marriage in Nepal has dropped to 50 percent of all marriages (Ghimire *et al.* 2006: 1190), allowing young people some choice in their romantic and sexual relationships, especially in the city. Ahearn (2004) shows an increase in courtship behavior and elopement among young Nepalese people, indicating an important shift from arranged marriage toward love marriage, at all levels of Nepali society. Notwithstanding these changes in the sociocultural context where young people live, it is still possible to notice a significant gender gap in agency concerning questions of marriage and love: boys have more freedom in comparison with girls, who are still more bound by tradition and their parents' choices, and would presumably not visit their lover by night as in the account above.

The changes in love patterns are associated with young people's exposure to magazines, love letters, novels, and Hindi and Nepali films, where love marriage often prevails over traditional arranged marriage.[5] According to Ghimire *et al.* (2006: 1209-1212), education promotes individual participation in the choice of the first spouse, as well as participation in youth clubs and non-family living arrangements—in other words, moving away from home to pursue education, especially in another city, often in the capital, Kathmandu, and employment outside of one's home.

Such societal changes clearly challenge traditional gender roles, especially those of girls, by granting them increased freedom. Similarly, the Kichkannī challenges—and reverses—the subjugated role she was subjected to during her life: from being dominated by men who violated her body while alive, she becomes the one in charge, seducing and making men her victims in a sexual relationship that sucks their blood and life forces until they die. I have already suggested a possible etymology for the denomination of this supernatural being (Armand & Cathiard 2019: 239): the Kichkannī would be a *kanyā*, a virgin and unmarried girl—in a ghostly manifestation—who crushes, pounds, and weighs down her male partner, the prefix *kich-* deriving from the verb *kichnu*, which means to crush and is linked to the semantic field of oppression. This 'crushing maiden' thus returns in the sensorial reality, the material reality that can be perceived by the senses, to take the active role in the sexual relation, refusing to be once again subjected to violence and rape and, instead, fulfilling her

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[5] In this regard, conversations I had with young people (16–28 years old) in Salyantar Village Development Committee (Dhading district), during my 2012–2016 research fieldwork, revealed that watching Indian and Nepali movies, where very often love marriage prevails over arranged marriage, does not significantly affect young people's vision on this topic. While suggesting a new interpretation of love, young people seem to be aware that what they watch on the screen remains a fictional representation, far from the reality in which they live every day. Tradition and the choice, made by parents, of the future wife and husband still remain for most young people the only way to follow, both from a practical point of view and in terms of their own imagination. Moving away from tradition does not seem to be an easy or desired path.

sexuality and desires, even perhaps her revenge, by leading the relation and overcoming the condition of subordination that society traditionally attributes to her.

The tale of the Kichkannī and gender-based vulnerabilities in Nepalese society

Although societal changes have affected relationships among young people, Nepalese society, especially in Hindu contexts, is still characterized by a strong control of women's sexuality through the restrictive role played by the institutions of family and marriage. These conventions are built on the notions of chastity and ideal Hindu womanhood, which are intertwined with the supposed dichotomy of purity/impurity, often overused by Western scholars to describe South Asia and, particularly, Nepali society. Hirmer (2015–2016) has clearly shown the limitations of interpretations that reflect "exclusively the value system of upper-castes and the Vedic concept of purity; along with those came the image of an extremely fragile woman, who had to be constantly protected by her male relatives … , [which is] in stark contrast with what was expressed in tribal myths or village folklore as well as in everyday practices" (Ibid.: 9).

When a woman loses her virginity, she is considered 'impure' and is excluded from society, since she is unfit for marriage. The state of *kanyāvasthā*, maidenhood or virginity, represents, in Hindu society, an imperative that must be followed by young girls, who are subjected to considerable social pressure around their virginity and purity. In this regard, Allen (1982: 6) repeats the traditional interpretative model when he writes that:

> In India … the purity of the caste is a direct function of the purity of its womenfolk. The male members of the caste are in large measure dependent for their status rating on the purity of their women—primarily on that of their sisters and daughters whom they give in marriage, and secondarily on that of the women they take in as wives.

Considering the association between purity and virginity, Allen fits into a perspective that emphasizes this dichotomy of purity/impurity, highlighting that the Hindu woman can be "alternately viewed as pure/impure, sinister/benign, creative/destructive, ally/opponent, goddess/witch" (Ibid.: 1). Such a dichotomized and stereotyped image of the Hindu woman is associated by Madhu Khanna (2000) with the reproductive model of female sexuality in Hinduism, which considers the female body as the instrument of fertility, where "the female is the virgin maiden and the chaste-wife (*kanya-patni*) whose womb is the receptacle to receive the male for perpetuation of the patriarchal line" (Khanna quoted by Chanana, 2001: 40).

What is important to underline is the fact that this image of the woman has a significant impact on contemporary Hindu girls and women and on the way in which they conceive of themselves, always torn between tradition and the will to go beyond it. Moreover, this dichotomized structure associating purity with virginity does not apply equally to males and females. For women, virginity is defined physically—besides being culturally

prescribed—by the breaking of the hymen during a sexual penetration—despite this possibly happening outside sexual intercourse. For men, on the contrary, virginity is not a physical issue, but rather a social one: the social status of a boy is improved when he proves to have taken possession of the woman's body. Hence, a woman who claims the right to her sexual freedom would always be pointed out as 'impure,' for having dared to oppose the pervasive tradition that seeks to control her body and, with it, herself.

The tale of the Kichkannī shows what happens when this traditional structure, supporting the male ownership of female bodies, is disrupted, especially in the extreme case of the rape of a young girl. As shown by the *Report on Access to Justice for Rape Survivors in Nepal*, published by WOREC Nepal (Women's Rehabilitation Centre) and Isis-WICCE (Isis Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange), "rape devastates their [rape survivors'] life as chastity is the socially and culturally approved means of maintaining normal relations in the family and society" (WOREC & Isis-WICCE 2011: 15).

The rise in violent sexual crime against young girls and the lack of judicial accountability for the perpetrators lead young rape survivors to choose suicide as a normative alternative, if not the only one. Police records show that instances of rape and attempted rape have grown almost four-fold since 2008: in the fiscal year 2077–2078 according to the *Bikram Saṃbat* calendar (2021–2022 CE), 1665 girls had been raped. Of them, the number of girls between the age of 11 and 18 years was 1360.[6] These numbers represent just the tip of a very deep and disturbing iceberg of cases: in fact, most rape cases are not reported because women often do not know their legal rights and because there remains a history of institutional injustice meted out on women who have survived rape, as justice and support are not delivered properly. According to the Nepalese journalist Bhrikuti Rai, a young rape survivor has to deal with victim blaming: "reporters commented freely on the woman's body, her personal life, relationships, her decision to drink with male friends, and other issues that distracted from the crime."[7] Moreover, victim blaming discourages women from seeking institutional aid and, especially in the case of sex crimes, the tendency to blame victims of rape greatly affects a sexually abused woman's return to society: she will continue to carry the stain of the rape and, with it, the idea that the fault for having been sexually abused was hers.

Therefore, narratives concerning the Kichkannī draw attention to these gender-based problems within Nepalese society, which can affect both the urban and rural areas. In this regard, during my fieldwork, I have highlighted a cycle of 'on the road' narratives, which clearly fit into the realm of contemporary—or (r-)urban, highlighting the intersection between rural and urban contexts—legends. Well-rooted in the metropolitan sphere, these urban legends continue to spread across the Nepalese countryside, thus developing the

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[6]   https://www.spotlightnepal.com/2022/04/03/nepal-police-registers-856-rape-cases-last-seven-months/ (accessed on May 30, 2022).

[7] https://www.nepalitimes.com/opinion/how-does-the-nepali-media-cover-rape/ (accessed on May 30, 2022).

narrative motifs of legends such as that of the 'Vanishing hitchhiker'[8] situated in a rural environmental context (Armand & Cathiard 2019; cf. for the *Aufhocker* narrative motif: Armand 2021).

The following account might be related to the narrative motif of the 'vanishing hitchhiker,' but it may also show a much harsher reality:

> Five years ago, I [male narrator] was back from Kathmandu to Dhading, in the middle of the night … you know, at eleven or twelve o'clock. On that time, I was riding my motorbike and I was with my friend too. But on the way, I saw a girl. She raised her hand to stop my bike and she requested me to give her a lift. She was wearing white clothes, *kurtā surwal* [traditional clothing worn by women, consisting of a collarless shirt and pants]. I asked her: "Where are you going so late in the night?" She told me that her mother was sick in Dhading Bhesi. I gave her a seat. On the way, we talked about many things and she really liked staying with me. We decided to stay in a hotel for one night, so I booked a room. When we were near Dhading Bhesi, she told me that she needed to go to the toilet. So, I stopped my motorbike and she disappeared from there. Only in this moment, I knew that she was a Kichkannī. My friend and I were scared, but slowly we came back home again. (translation of conversation with M. B., Dhading district, on October 21, 2013)

This account, reported from the point of view of the male narrator who has agreed to give the girl a lift, highlights the difficulties that a girl in distress may encounter on the road. The two men, entertaining the idea of a fulfilling night of love with her, have booked a room in a local hotel to spend the night together enjoying this fortuitous meeting. The girl's escape before arriving in Dhading Bhesi, the district headquarters of Dhading district, rather indicates the opposite feeling, one of fear for the unpleasant situation she finds herself in. The sudden escape indicates, from her point of view, the fear that she may have experienced, having found herself in the company of two men who just wanted to take her to a hotel room. For them, on the other hand, this unimaginable disappearance of the girl in the jungle could only be interpreted as a meeting with a Kichkannī, as they were unable to even imagine the sense of vulnerability to which they exposed the young maiden through their proposal. Hence, when appreciating the different vantage points of the protagonists of this event, it becomes clear how the inexplicable idea that a woman could reject the men's advances results in their creating the narrative of an encounter with a supernatural being.

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[8] In his *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Stith Thompson resumes the 'vanishing hitchhiker' narrative as follows (E332.3.3.1.): "Ghost of young woman asks for ride in automobile, disappears from closed car without the driver's knowledge, after giving him address to which she wishes to be taken. Driver asks person at address about the rider, finds she has been dead for some time. (Often driver finds that ghost has made similar attempts to return, usually on anniversary of death in automobile accident. Often ghost leaves some item such as a scarf or a traveling bag in car)."

Gendering tales to raise awareness on violence against sexual and gendered minorities

While the reality of discrimination and sexual violence against women is a serious and pervasive issue, it is important to highlight another often-silenced population that suffers the same fate. Recently, Nepalese feminists and LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual) activists have noted a problematic issue related to gender awareness in the legal statutes treating rape cases (Sharma & Tamang 2016). In fact, the definition of rape laws is limited to penile–vaginal penetration, which is expressed in the legal texts with the Nepali term *jabarjastī karaṇīko*, meaning, literally, forced sexual intercourse. Chapter 14, "*jabarjastī karaṇīko mahal*" (Chapter on Rape), of the *Muluki Ain*, the National Code of Nepal, recently amended this with "Some Nepal Acts to Maintain Gender Equality Amendment Act" (2063 BS / 2016 CE), which states that:

> Whoever does have sexual intercourse with any woman without her consent or with a girl child below the age of sixteen years with or without her consent, it amounts that the person has committed rape of such woman or girl child. (art. 14.1)

The Act further explains that "consent acquired through fear, threat, duress or coercion or by subjecting her to an undue influence, fraud or by use of force or kidnapping her or making her a hostage shall not be deemed to be the consent" (art. 14.1a).

The *National Penal (Code) Act*, amended in 2017, is more precise and states that:

> Where a man has sexual intercourse with a woman without her consent or with a girl child below eighteen years of age even with her consent, the man shall be considered to commit rape on such woman or girl child. (219.2)

This rape law raises the concerning fact that only the penetration of the vagina—and not that of other bodily orifices—by the penis, fingers, or other objects is considered rape. Thereby, Section C of the same article specifies that:

> The penetration of penis into anus or mouth, penetration of penis, to any extent, into anus, mouth or vagina, insertion of any object other than penis into vagina shall also be considered to be rape. (219.2c)

By defining rape as a forced sexual act occurring between a man and a woman mainly through penile–vaginal penetration, the notion of rape expressed in the Nepalese code is gender-specific and does not provide sufficient protection for men, boys, and transgender persons. Thus, practices such as oral or anal rape, the insertion of other body parts such as fingers, and the use of objects are simply considered as "unnatural sexual intercourse" (Nep. *maithun* 'coitus') or even linked to the realm of bestiality (*Muluki Ain*, art. 19; cf. *Gender Equality Amendment Act*, art. 11). For this reason, the condition of transgender people can be even harsher: as noted in the *Report* published by WOREC and Isis-WICCE, "the situation was especially dire for transgender survivors who were either humiliated with comments

such as 'rape between men is not possible' or were further raped by the police themselves" (2011: 171).

In terms of recognizing the discrimination and violence perpetrated against transgender people, oral literature seems to be ahead of Nepalese legislation. While talking with the *jhākri* and *tantrika* Umesh Kumar Rajbhandari, I collected a narrative account about a supernatural being that might be considered as the 'othered sexed' counterpart of the Kichkannī: the Domāse.[9] This is the spirit of a *hījaḍa*, a transsexual or transgender person, literally a eunuch,[10] who committed suicide because, when alive, they could not fulfill their sexual desires or because they had been victims of rape. Like their feminine counterpart, the Domāse belongs to the category of *bāyu*, but is often classified as a *bhut*.

Therefore, the Domāse and the Kichkannī share a strong connection, mainly related to the way in which they are generated, that is, after committing suicide as a result of a sexual violation. The Domāse too appears in a ghostly shape but, unlike their feminine counterpart, it attacks only girls by coming to oppress them with its weight during sleep. It plays the role of an incubus, a male supernatural entity who appears during sleep in order to have sexual intercourse with a woman. Umesh Kumar Rajbhandari explained that it is very difficult to treat someone who has been attacked by this being: it is an evil, immoral, and stubborn spirit (Nep. *Domāse dherai harāmi ra jiddi hununchha*) who spits (Nep. *thucknu*) on its victims while pounding them with blows (Nep. *piṭnu*) and scratching them with its nails (Nep. *chitharnu*). Probably forced to submit to the image that society imposed on it—i.e., the fixed image of a heterosexual relationship where a man, in his masculine virility, can only wish to sexually pursue a woman—the Domāse transfers the violence, both physical and psychological, that it underwent when it was alive, onto the body of its female victim. Analyzing these ethnographic data, it can be argued that the Domāse powerfully revendicates the LGBTQIA+ community by replicating the violence to which this community is subjected while alive for challenging mainstream notions of femininity and masculinity, and redirecting this same violence toward its original perpetrators. The extreme violence displayed by this supernatural being could be a reflection of the level of trauma and depression experienced by transgender survivors as a result of sexual violation: for them, this level can be considered to be higher in comparison with that of other rape survivors, precisely because the abuse they suffer is rarely recognized.

Finally, Nepalese narratives report cases of ghostly manifestations that are less violent than those highlighted above. These narratives are mostly inserted in a traditional context of male–female relationships, while being quite innovative in acknowledging the importance of

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[9] Turner (1931: 320) proposed the following meaning: "one who goes frequently from one country to another; ambassador; spy; interpreter."

[10] Turner translates the word *hījaṛo* as 'eunuch,' considering it as a probable extension of Persan *hīz*, 'hermaphrodite.' However, it is worth highlighting that the word *hījaḍa/hījṛā* has often been translated into Western languages as 'eunuch' or 'hermaphrodite,' thus emphasizing physiological abnormalities of the genitalia or describing the members of this population as intersexed, or even asexual, which contributed to the marginalization of these communities as sexually othered individuals. However, in the cultural context of Southeast Asia, *hījṛā* identity is primarily sexed and gendered (Ung Loh, 2013: 37).

sexuality and desire among young boys and girls. Rape and abuse are usually not mentioned within this last kind of narrative: these spectral returns are often explained by the will to satisfy, upon death, an unfulfilled sexual desire that was ripened while alive. This is the case in the following account:

> Murkāṭṭa[11] means … if someone died in childhood, if someone died when she/he is child, her/his desire and dreams cannot be fulfilled. If he is a boy, he needs a girl and, if she is a girl, she needs a boy … He cannot fulfil his sexual desire. The dead boy, sixteen … seventeen to twenty years old, can come in the night, in a dream, because he continues to feel the same desire. Suppose that one boy died when he is young and he was searching for a girl … He can act, he can go to the girl's house and establish a loving story with her in a dream. (Translation of a conversation with Narayan Simkhada, Majh Gāun, Salyantar, Dhading district, on October 24, 2013)

The view on sexuality expressed by Narayan Simkhada during our conversation reflects the innovations in the representation of love portrayed by new media. What appears is an image of romantic love that persists even after the death of one of the two lovers. In such a view, suicide and violence are absent: it is the depth of love and affection felt by the dead lover that makes his/her *ātmā* return in order to continue the relationship with his/her beloved one on a subtle plane of existence.

A research pathway: from Kabylia to Nepal…. How do folk-narratives contribute to (re)building sexed genres in the Nepalese Himalayas?

The first time I thought of reading the Nepalese narrative materials regarding the supernatural figure of the Kichkannī through a feminist and non-patriarchal paradigm, I was working on Kabyle folklore, as part of a long-range comparison regarding supernatural ontologies inhabiting the universe of the wilderness (Armand 2022). While analyzing the mythical figure of Teryel, a supernatural being whose form can change from that of a horrifying ogress to that of a remarkably beautiful girl, I noticed that she had been chosen as an emblem by feminist movements to claim a better position for women in Kabyle society (Lacoste-Dujardin 2008). *Yessis n Teryel*, 'the daughters of Teryel,' is the name chosen by this movement to claim a new image of woman, a "wild and free woman, rebellious, anti-social … at the antipode of domestic roles and of fertility that men expect from women"

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[11] The Murkāṭṭa is a headless ghost riding a black horse, typical of Nepalese narrative folklore. It is associated, like the Kichkannī, with the Panchabhāya, a Nepalese form of the Wild Hunt (Armand *et al.*, 2016).

(Lacoste-Dujardin 2010: 85; own translation). By taking a feminist interpretation of Kabyle cosmogony,[12] the administrators of the *Yessis n Teryel* movement blog clearly wrote that:

> Teryel appears. The ogress. … Another vision of the space other than that which knows the contemporary Kabyle society was possible in our collective imagination. And we owe it to a female figure, Teryel: active woman, mistress of her 'destiny,' autonomous, complete, insubordinate. This is why I chose to refer to Teryel rather than to Loundja [Teryel's daughter], who is too close to the current stereotypes: beautiful and submissive. But mythology does not tell us how Loundja was transformed into Teryel. It does not tell us how the Kabyle woman, this distant descendant of Teryel, was transformed into a vestal. How did she agree to join 'the house' and give up her freedom and her free will? I offer you this space to talk about us, you, Kabyle women, daughters of the distant Teryel. Hence the choice of the name: *Yessis n Teryel*, the daughters of Teryel.[13] (Own translation)

Based on these considerations, I notice that, transculturally, women's rights movements—and, more generally, those of sexual minorities—adopt fictional narratives to represent the harsh realities and discrimination to which their members are subjected. Such movements draw from narrative traditions to reinterpret the contemporary world. Thereby, a newspaper column entitled 'Kichkandi,' published in *Ekantipur* (March 27, 2015) by Smriti Jaiswal Ravindra, a Nepali journalist and writer, offers an analysis of the Kichkannī narrative, by placing it within the broader context of youth relationships in contemporary Nepal, without neglecting the overwhelming weight of traditions in Nepalese society.

Written in a bittersweet and rather sarcastic key, this text intends to show the Kichkannī tale as a "cautionary tale for men," warning them "against love, lovers, and prostitutes." Namely, "it warned them against women":

> Beware the pretty girl, it said, the charming woman, the helpless female. In all her forms, she wants to trap you, either into love, into marriage, or into betrayal. Any girl who has such power over you that you want to live and die for her is a blood-sucking witch. Any girl who demands you make a place for her in your home just because you have spent some evenings with her, given her rides on your motorcycle, kissed her passionately, or declared your heart to, is a witch. A real girl would not allow such indecencies. Besides, you would not fall in love with a real girl. Real girls stay at home and do not instigate the passions of young men. (Ravindra, 2015)

What emerges is a poignant portrait of the sexual imaginary of a young Nepalese man, torn between the desire to walk his own path, by following his desires for a chosen love, and the

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[12] According to Kabyle cosmogony, Teryel represents the mythical woman of the origins, mother of the world. Women and men came out from the underground world and women took the initiative of the first sexual intercourse. When men decided to build the first houses, they imposed their domination over women, confining them in the houses. Only one couple refused to enter the houses, preferring the wild life: they were Teryel, the ogress and mistress of the wilderness, and Waghzen, the ogre. Summary of the text published at https://yessis-n-teryel.1fr1.net/t8-yessis-n-teryel-forum-des-femmes-kabyles#9 (accessed on May 31, 2022).

[13] https://yessis-n-teryel.1fr1.net/t8-yessis-n-teryel-forum-des-femmes-kabyles#9 (accessed on May 31, 2022).

looming tradition, which forces him to have a completely different view on women and on the relationships he can(not) pursue. Obviously, the situation of young girls is even more dramatic than that of their male partners. Women are crushed by tradition and cannot afford to stray from the path imposed on them, or else they are abandoned by their family and by the society as a whole, including their male counterparts, torn between their wishes and the choice they have to make. As I have already shown, a love story can quickly turn into a nightmare for a young Nepalese girl. Zaidi and Ravindra (2011) use the term 'Good Indian Girl,' abbreviated to GIG, in order to indicate the 'qualities' that make up what is generally acknowledged as desirable behavior for a girl in the Indian subcontinent:

> Virginity is right up there: top of the list. If you have a reputation as a good Indian girl, virginity is considered a given. If you've lost it, you've lost it. You've also apparently lost the right to be called a 'girl.' (Ibid.: 1)

These concerns remind us of the raw reality of the 'on the road' narrative I collected in Dhading district. Our informant's interpretation conveys a phantasmagorical narrative of an adventurous encounter with an illusory Kichkannī in the guise of the 'vanishing hitchhiker.' If we could listen to the experiential account of the young girl, who fled into the jungle before arriving at Dhading Bhesi, we would probably have a completely different flavor. Thereby, in her *Ekantipur* column, Smriti Jaiswal Ravindra proposes an interesting reflection about the different involvement and consequences of the youth's choices, depending on whether they are male or female:

> The Kichkandi tales marked the adrenaline-pumped male youth who might zoom out on his bike, stay out late with friends, meet new people, explore new ways of living, and ultimately want a life-partner not chosen for him by his family and relatives. In addition to many other things, the Kichkandi tale was a high sign against making personal choices. It alerted you against choice. Remember, good boys make choices that are validated and sanctioned by their families. Good boys and real girls don't make independent choices. If you are making a choice that clashes with the interests of your family, you are a bad boy and the girl is … well, she is not a girl.

While leaving aside the serious problem of rape, which remains one of the scourges of contemporary Nepalese society, the Kichkannī narratives represent the desire of young Nepalese men and women to be able to fly on their own wings and follow choices they have made for themselves. However, they are still in the grip of the power of traditions that prevent them from fully living their choices. The young victims of the Kichkannī accepted being seduced by this young and attractive supernatural girl with "diaphanous chiffon *sārī* and long, soft hair," who represents the image of the woman they desire in their sexual imaginations. At the same time, the Kichkannī represents the inner despair and the distress of young Nepali girls, who are even less free to express their own sexuality and who find that the only solution to their troubles is suicide.

Just as does Teryel for Kabyle society, the Kichkannī goes beyond the realm of narration and myth to become a phantasmagorical mirror that reflects the dangers, often very

concrete, of an oppressive reality that continues to constantly reproduce a fixed, stagnant image of the roles that men and women must fulfill in society. This is not to mention the sexual minorities and LGBTQIA+ movements—here represented by the narrative evidence of the Domāse—which are still far from being properly acknowledged and becoming part of mainstream understandings of gender, although they are well rooted in the contemporary world.

Thus, the folklore of the Kichkannī takes us far beyond the narrative fictional imaginary about the ghostly illusion of this vampiric being wearing a white *sāri*. Rather, it offers a clear picture of the stakes that are hidden behind the invisible impositions of an overwhelming tradition, by highlighting the problems of a society where, as Smriti Jaiswal Ravindra states:

> The newspapers and televisions are full of reports of what happens to girls who find themselves in the world after dark. Or who find themselves in the world alone. Rapes and murders are abundant. Acid attacks. Honour killings. These are not fiction. These are realities that keep girls locked away at home, afraid of needing help, afraid of falling in love, afraid of attracting attention, afraid of streets, of careers that demand late hours, afraid of having daughters as children, afraid of being girls, afraid of living. (Ravindra, 2015)

This excellent article gives us the opportunity to consider the tension between two different views of gender construction—and their connection—in contemporary Nepal. These reflections allow us to delve into a narrative analysis of Kichkannī oral folklore that reveals how the contrasting dynamics between, on one side, traditional visions and, on the other, changes in the making, contribute to the construction and deconstruction of gendered and sexual identities within the Nepali cultural sphere. In closing this ethnographic essay, I would like to propose the same question that Smriti Jaiswal Ravindra puts, in a provocative tone, at the end of her text—"Is it not time to change our stories?"—as a reminder about the need for better recognition and implementation of gender rights in contemporary Nepal.
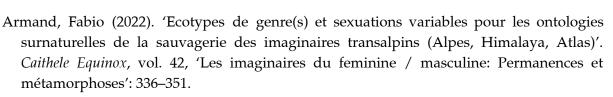
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