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The tourist gaze on the royal Kumari of Kathmandu

Analysis of a living goddess based on online discourse

By Sofia Herslow

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Department of Sociology

Supervisor: Ulf Johansson Dahre

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Abstract

There are many possible sources for anthropological research, however, this thesis examines tourists' comments on internet forums. In particular, tourist comments on the TripAdvisor page of the Kumari Chowk in Kathmandu, Nepal will be examined. These reviews will be divided into trends in order to consider the reason why tourist decides to visit the Kumari Chowk. This will be done in the light of anthropologist Erik Cohen's theory on modes of authenticity. Furthermore, one of the central thoughts of this thesis is that tourists' opinions and their comments may have an impact on the traditions that they are commenting on. By applying the tourist gaze theory, laid down by sociologist John Urry, this paper shows possible impact the outsiders' opinions might have on the Kumari tradition and in which way governments and local communities respond to the critique expressed by foreigners. Based on the results found in the reviews, it is argued that although tourist opinions have yet to make a direct impact on the Kumari tradition, there are theoretical and historical reasons to believe that critical reviews might have an indirect effect in the long run.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In the spring of 2015, I embarked on a journey to a strange country in the hope of distancing myself from my own world and find answers in the other. Like many young twenty-somethings, I was fascinated by India and the colorful traditions that went under the umbrella term Hinduism. I was traveling alone as a young woman from Sweden and I felt safer going to the smaller country of Nepal than the subcontinent that is India. After settling down and before going on my mission to volunteer as a teacher at a Buddhist monastery, I explored the center of Kathmandu and stumbled upon a very peculiar tradition that had later resulted in not one, but two bachelor theses. This tradition is the worshiping of a young girl as the embodiment of the Hindu goddess Taleju. Being the virginal form of the mother goddess, the girl is often referred to as Kumari.¹

As a foreigner, one can only see Kumari by visiting the courtyard of her official home – the Kumari Chowk. Twice a day she shows herself in a window on the third-floor balcony. Entering the courtyard, one is immediately taken aback by the beautiful 18th century architecture.² While waiting for the Kumari to give *darshana*³ one cannot help feeling blissful surrounded by murals of Hindu gods and goddesses, enjoying the greenery in the courtyard. When Kumari shows herself, the already quiet place gets even quieter. Tourist, as well as locals, look at the girl, decorated in red clothing and luxurious and grand golden jewelry with great awe. It is said that if she laughs or make any form of facial movement except for a stern and apathetic expression the person who is the cause of the shift of expression will meet a terrible future.⁴

When I first saw Kumari I felt overwhelmed by the poise of the girl. But I also got a bad feeling when faced by this strange tradition. Instead of seeing a powerful goddess, I saw a sad child who was being treated like a circus animal. Leaving the country, I could not stop thinking about the conditions of the girl. Coming home to Sweden I decided to investigate about the background of the tradition. This research later turned into my first bachelor thesis. The thesis focused on the Kumari tradition's relationship with the monarchy; this was done by analyzing

¹ M. Slusser, *Nepal mandala: a cultural study of the Kathmandu Valley. Vol. 1, Text*, Princeton U. P., Princeton, 1982. p. 196.

² Slusser, *Nepal mandala*, p. 196.

³ "Viewing", worshiper seeing and being seen by a deity (translated from Sanskrit).

⁴ I. Tree, *Living goddess - a journey into the heart of kathmandu*. Eland Publishing Ltd, 2015, p. 34.

the various myths surrounding the origin of the goddess.⁵ When I came back to write my second thesis, I still had not let the tradition go. Why did I feel so uncomfortable with what I had seen? I decided to see what other outsiders thought about the tradition, and to my surprise I found that many shared the same feelings of discomfort.

1.2. Purpose and research question

The purpose of the paper is to investigate a phenomenon that is – tourism in relation to a foreign tradition. In the thesis, modern-day tourism will be compared to pilgrimage and various modes of authentic experience in order to understand people's intent when visiting Nepal. The Kumari tradition and outsider's reaction on online communities (TripAdvisor and such) to its peculiarities will be analyzed in the light of sociologist John Urry's theory on the tourist gaze.

In order to address these issues, the thesis will answer three questions:

- What are the common trends among the people who come to experience "strange foreign" tradition on the example of Kumari?
- How outsiders' opinion on the Kumari tradition affects the tradition in question?
- Indirectly, this paper will also consider how social forums, such as TripAdvisor, provides enough empirical materials to conduct thorough anthropological research.

⁵ S. Herslow, Myten om Kumari i Kathmandudalen: Shaktism, oskuldsdyrkan och gudomlig rätt, Bachelor thesis, Lund University.

2. Theory

2.1. Previous research

The Kumari tradition have been subjected to extensive research. Anthropologist Michael Allen's 1975 study⁶ on the tradition has long been the go-to work on the tradition. Allen provided an in-depth analysis of the rituals connected to Kumari worship. Other historians and anthropologist have touched upon the subject of Kumari in their works. Anthropologists Robert I. Levy⁷ and Mary Slusser⁸ are a few of these. Levy did a study of the Newari religion and culture, while Slusser studied the religion in relation to architecture and art in the Kathmandu Valley.

On the topic of tourism and pilgrimage, anthropologist Erik Cohen have provided a theory frequently used by both anthropologist and historians of religion. Cohen contested the previous belief that tourist thrived on superficial pseudo-events with no wish to experience the authentic nature of the locals and developed a theory on various modes of authentic experience in tourism.⁹ John Urry has studied tourism effect on the local community. Urry has not previously applied his theory on any tradition in Nepal, nor has it been used on traditions such as Kumari worship. Mainly it has been applied on popular tourist destinations.¹⁰ In this thesis, by analogy, his research is used as theoretical grounds for some of the arguments.

Michael Stausberg has also made research in the field of tourism and religion. In Stausberg's overview of the topic, he discusses everything from relationship between tourism and pilgrimage, shrines as tourist attractions and tourism mediations.

This paper will add to existing research and expand the topic by bringing the anthropological studies of tourism and the Kumari tradition together. Allen's study on the Kumari tradition focuses mainly on the rituals and history that the traditions consist of. Allen's work has often been a go to work in the field of the Kumaris of Nepal, as he is frequently being referenced in other works. However, Allen has been criticized by people inside the tradition of not portraying

⁶ See M.R. Allen, *The cult of Kumari: virgin worship in Nepal*, Third revised and enlarged edition, Madhab Lal Maharjan, Kathmandu, Nepal, 1996.

⁷ See R.I. Levy, *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the organization of a traditional Newar city in Nepal*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1990. Available from: <http://content.cdlib.org/xtf/view?docId=ft6k4007rd&query=&brand=ucpress> (accessed 18.08.2019).

⁸ See Slusser, *Nepal mandala*.

⁹ A. Morinis, *Sacred journeys: the anthropology of pilgrimage*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992. p. 49.

¹⁰ See J. Urry, *The tourist gaze: leisure and travel in contemporary societies*, SAGE Publications, London, 1990.

accurate information – mainly, some of the rituals he is describing is not practiced by the royal Kumaris but in the worship of lesser known local Kumaris.¹¹

Emphasis on historical background and ritual praxis can be found in both Levys and Slussers study of the religions in the Kathmandu Valley. This paper will rather focus on the ancient tradition that is Kumari worship and its encounter with the modern phenomena that is mass tourism. In terms of tourist and pilgrimage studies, this paper will focus on the Kumari tradition in particular. It should be noted that this tradition is not a typical pilgrimage site, even though it is an important religious shrine located in Kathmandu.¹² Stausberg's study is a general study on tourism and religion. While Stausberg have focused on various situations and locations where tourism and religious practice meet, this study will only focus on the Kumari Chowk in Kathmandu. In comparison to the religious locations in Stausbergs study, the Kumari Chowk is relatively obscure.

2.2. Theoretical framework

Two main theories will be used to analyze the material.

The first theory regards the difference between tourism and pilgrimage. The relationship between tourism and pilgrimage have long been disputed by religious historians and anthropologists.¹³ Anthropologist Erik Cohen developed a theory regarding the similarities of the two and argues for modern-day tourism having similar structural function as pilgrimage.¹⁴ Cohen argued the difference between pilgrimage and tourism and narrowed it down to pilgrims travelling from the periphery to the center of their culture. Tourists, on the contrary, travel from the center to the periphery in search for authenticity.¹⁵ By furthering his theory on pilgrimage and tourism, Cohen developed a new theory on the touristic experience and the spiritual values behind many tourist's reason for traveling.¹⁶

Cohen introduced four types of tourist experience, varying in what they want to achieve when entering a foreign community: diversionary mode, experiential mode, experimental mode and

¹¹ R. Shakya, *From goddess to mortal: the true-life story of a former royal kumari*, 2nd ed., Vajra Publications, Kathmandu, 2007 [2005], p. 143.

¹² Allen, *The cult of Kumari*, p. 14.

¹³ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 48.

¹⁴ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 51.

¹⁵ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 50.

¹⁶ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, pp. 47-60.

existential mode.¹⁷ These vary from the degree of authenticity the tourist wants to experience when traveling. On the one side, there are the tourist whom only travel for recreational purposes. They only wish to partake in the leisure activities the destinations have to offer. On the other, there are the tourist who travel in order to fully immerse themselves in a new culture. To the very extreme, these tourists wish to embrace the tradition and its practices in order to become a part of the culture.¹⁸ It is these modes that will help to decipher the reasons behind tourist decision to visit the royal Kumari of Kathmandu.

In this thesis, a shortened form of Cohen's modes of authenticity will be used. The reviews will be divided into tourists traveling for recreational purposes and tourists who seem to strive to experience true Nepali culture. The reviews will be categorized into trends based on what the tourist notice when visiting Kumari. With the help of Cohen's theory on authenticity, this thesis aims to decide if the trends indicate different modes of authenticity. For example, if positive reviews indicate a recreational tourist and negative reviews indicate a tourist hoping to experience an authentic Nepali tradition, and vice versa.

After determining if the trends indicate different kinds of touristic experience in Cohen's scale of authenticity, Urry's theory on tourist gaze will be applied to the various trends spotted in the reviews. This theory will be used to analyze the relationship between the Kumari tradition and outsiders in tourism.

Taking inspiration from Michel Foucault's gaze theory,¹⁹ Urry argues for a preconceived gaze which tourists uses to view the local communities they visit. Using the idea of a panopticon and how the sense of sight being favored when operation power over patients suffering from mental disease, Urry translates similar ideas to the tourism industry.²⁰

When tourists sightsee, they put the locals in bars built on stereotypes.²¹ These stereotypes become what the tourist consider being the true nature and habits of the local population. Thus, the locals are judged by outsiders from the perspective of these stereotypes, while the perception of what is witnessed is constructed by signs.²² Urry takes a page from the book of structuralisms

¹⁷ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁸ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 55.

¹⁹ J. Urry, "The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol 36, Lancaster University, 1992, p. 175.

²⁰ Urry, "The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"", pp. 175,177.

²¹ Urry, "The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"", p. 177.

²² Urry, "The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"", p. 173.

and uses the idea of metaphor and metonym to demonstrate the underlying language of tourism.²³ Metaphors are the details that signals different moods. Metonym is the replacement of something, much like how museums are replacement of a location's historical ruins and artifacts.²⁴ In order for these things to become signs for the tourists, they have to be extraordinary and differ greatly from the tourist everyday life.²⁵ Everyday occurrences such as dining becomes extraordinary when it is done somewhere foreign and exotic.²⁶

However, what is perceived and favored by tourists are often affected by media, the state and marketing within the tourism industry.²⁷ This creates false pretenses of the local society as the marketing for these locations tend to use misleading information and stereotypes as a way to "sell" the destination to potential travelers.²⁸ Urry argues that the biggest possible effect the gaze might have on the local communities is that the stereotypes that these tourists believe to be true will in turn be adapted by the locals as a way to please the tourists themselves.²⁹ This means that local community may adapt different practices and tendencies that originally was not a part of their tradition. It may also lead to them refraining from modern amenities, as what was witnessed in Cohen's study on modes of authenticity.³⁰

By applying the gaze theory to the trends, the thesis will analyze if there is a particular tourist gaze at works amongst the tourist visiting Kumari. Furthermore, the gaze theory will also be used in order to hypothesises how online communities, such as TripAdvisor, can change local communities. The tourist gaze theory argues that tourists change how the local community perceive themselves.³¹ As Internet is so easily accessible nowadays, expressing opinions on a particular culture and tradition may lead to consequences in local communities.

²³ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 173.

²⁴ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 172.

²⁵ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 173.

²⁶ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 173.

²⁷ Stronza, Amanda, 'Anthropology of Tourism: Forging New Ground for Ecotourism and Other Alternatives.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30, 2001, p. 271.

²⁸ Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 271.

²⁹ Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 271.

³⁰ Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*, p. 54.

³¹ Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 271.

3. Method

The method used in this paper is empirical research. An internet-based study will be conducted where blogs and reviews taken from an online travel community (TripAdvisor.com) will be analyzed. The reviews are written by outsiders who have visited the Kumari Chowk during the last four years. The research will be conducted in a form of observation of online discourse; the author will not engage in any of the discussions on the online forums, nor will authors of comments be contacted for further information.

The difficulty of this kind of source of empirical material is that there is a large amount of data that is constantly growing.³² Thus, restrictions have been made in order to focus on what is relevant for the research question. Furthermore, combined with the online research, a study of previous conducted research by other anthropologists and historians will be made in order to understand the Kumari tradition from historic and ritual perspectives.

3.1. Materials

Material used in present paper will foremost be empirical data. This data consists of reviews from online travel communities and travel blogs, as the usage of digital media as main source material is a growing trend.³³ With an expanding digital environment, online communities and social media becomes an interesting field for anthropological research that can help researchers to better understand opinions of the tourists without actually interviewing them in person.

The type of online material accessed in this study is called synchronic.³⁴ Synchronic online material means that the author behind the text has time to reflect upon what should be written in the text. Often such material is not based on spontaneity or impulse, which makes it less emotional³⁵ – the reviews are carefully thought out and planned. The negative aspect of this material is that direct emotional experience could not be registered by the anthropologist and the answers might be more edited comparing to interviewing tourist at the location of interest.

The reviews left on online communities are important for this thesis as it will give a broad spectrum of opinions on the Kumari tradition. With the help of the internet, people from all the

³² M. Berg, *Netnografi: att forska om och med internet*, 1. Uppl., Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2015, p. 89.

³³ See Berg "Netografi".

³⁴ Berg, "Netografi", p. 92.

³⁵ Berg, "Netografi", p. 92.

world can be reached and analyzed to the opinions of the Newar³⁶ community members. As the internet makes the reviewer somewhat anonymous and safe from scrutiny, one can suggest that the opinions will be more truthful than if questions were asked at the location.

For the purpose of the thesis the posted reviews will be limited to those written during April 2015 – April 2019. The selected reviews have been written in the English language, thus there has been no need for translation and the reviews will be displayed in their original form.

To support empirical analysis secondary materials will be used in the form of previous conducted research the various topics. Historic background on Kumari worship and tourism in the Kathmandu valley are touched upon in the thesis. This research will be used in order to provide historical background, as well as, theoretical and empirical source material.

3.2. Ethical reflections

When conducting this research, I had no contact with the people mentioned in the text. As most of my information will be based on previous conducted research, I will have no ethical restraints in this regard. My main ethical issue will be on the account of the authors of the reviews that will be used at material in the thesis. However, as these reviews have been publicized in agreement with the authors, there should be no limitations in regard to the usage as material in the present thesis.

³⁶ Newar is an ethnic group located in the Kathmandu Valley practicing both Hinduism and Buddhism. Newar is the main ethnic group that worship Kumari.

4. Setting

4.1. The Kumari tradition in the Kathmandu valley

4.1.1. Overview

A Kumari is a young girl who has yet to reach sexual maturity.³⁷ The word Kumari is Sanskrit for maiden.³⁸ In Nepal there is a tradition of worshipping a young girl as the living incarnation of the goddess Taleju– the girl is selected at a young age and acts as Kumari until she reaches puberty. When she has her first menstruation it is regarded to be a sign that the goddess Taleju has left the girl's body and is undergoing the process of entering a new one. This peculiar tradition has been closely connected with the king, as she is seen as a patron of the monarchy and, in extension, protector of the kingdom.³⁹

In fact, there is not one but several Kumaris in Nepal. However, only three are considered royal as they occupy a specific role in relation to the ruling monarch. These three are located in Kathmandu and the neighboring towns – Bhaktapur and Patan. For this paper, only the Kumari in Kathmandu will be of interest as she is the only Kumari left who is tasked with blessing the leader of the country. Her special role in Nepal's system of governance, as well as her long history in the valley, has made her an important part of the ancient Durbar Square in central Kathmandu and many of the tourist make sure to pay her a visit when traveling to the country.⁴⁰

There are specific requirements that need to be followed when selecting a future Kumari. The girl that is chosen must come from the Buddhist caste by the name of Shakya. This family is in charge of melting gold, and because of this profession they have a low position in the Hindu caste system.⁴¹ Since the girl is from a Buddhist family, the tradition is not only revered by the Hindu population but also amongst some of the Buddhists in Nepal.⁴² Besides her Buddhist heritage, she needs to have 32 perfections that are associated with the goddess Taleju.⁴³ When various Shakya girls have been nominated by their family, the priests of the Kumari temple, both from the Hindu and Buddhist religion, are tasked with selecting the nominees by inspecting

³⁷ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 2.

³⁸ M.R. Allen, 'Kumari or Vigrin worship in the Kathmandu Valley', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 10 No. 2, 1976, p. 293.

³⁹ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ D.R. Ghimre (ed.), *Nepal Tourism Statistics 2017*, Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Action, Planning & Evaluation Division, Research & Statistical Section, Kathmandu, 2018.
<http://tourism.gov.np/files/statistics/2.pdf> (accessed 1808.2019).

⁴¹ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 9.

⁴² Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 314.

⁴³ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 32.

their bodies of the 32 perfections. Example of these perfections are a chest of a lion, eyes of a deer and voice like a duck.⁴⁴ Supposedly, in order for them to see these perfections, they need to do the inspection while the girl is naked.⁴⁵ A process that is considered by some to be inappropriate and have resulted in a lot of controversy.⁴⁶

After the priests have selected a girl amongst the group of nominees, she is forced to do the final test to prove she is suitable for the role of Kumari. The girl is brought into a room where she is faced with the heads of 108 sacrificed buffaloes.⁴⁷ She is supposed to stay in the room with the heads without making any indication of fright. If she makes it through the trial without being scared, she has passed the test and will be elected the next royal Kumari.⁴⁸

4.1.2. Origin

The Kumari tradition is a form of virgin worship. The worship of the mother goddess virginal form has been a part of the Hindu sect known as saktism for thousands of years.⁴⁹ Saktism is the worship of the female force.⁵⁰ Therefore, many practitioners worship goddesses such as Durga and Parvati.⁵¹

Saktism is common in Nepal as the country plays an important role in the legend of the death of Sati (avatar of goddess Parvati), the wife of the god Siva⁵². In the myth,⁵³ Sati sacrifices herself. Siva, stricken with grief by the loss of his beloved, lifts her and carries her over India. Her body falls apart in his arms and parts of her land on various places in India and Nepal. Her *yoni*⁵⁴, a powerful spiritual source,⁵⁵ lands on the Kathmandu valley. The Kathmandu valley is thus considered to be a very important location within saktism, and in Hinduism in general.

⁴⁴ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Tree, *Living goddess*, p. 85.

⁴⁶ Tree, *The Living Goddess*, p. 85.

⁴⁷ A. Michael, 'Kumari or "virgin" worship in Kathmandu Valley', *Contribution to Indian Sociology (NS)*, 10:2, 1976, p. 306.

⁴⁸ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, pp. 24-25.

⁴⁹ Slusser, *Nepal mandala*, p. 312.

⁵⁰ Timalisina, Sthaneshwar, 'Śakti', in: *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, Edited by: Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, Vasudha Narayanan. Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_beh_COM_000293 (accessed 18.08.2019).

⁵¹ Timalisina, *Śakti*, 2018.

⁵² Bisschop, Peter, 'Siva', in: *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, Edited by: Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, Vasudha Narayanan. Consulted online on 07 May 2019 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_beh_COM_1030030 (accessed 18.08.2019).

⁵³ Tree, *The Living Goddess*, p. 225.

⁵⁴ Female sexual organ: Tree, *The Living Goddess*, p. 225.

⁵⁵ Tree, *The Living Goddess*, p. 225.

All of the Kumaris (including the royal Kathmandu Kumari) are considered to be living embodiments of the goddess Taleju.⁵⁶ Taleju is one of eight incarnations/version of the mother goddess Durga.⁵⁷ Historians believe that Taleju was previously worshipped in the south of India, yet there are signs that indicate the goddess being worshipped in the Nepal region since before 1200 A.D.⁵⁸

Although there has been a long history of Taleju worship in both India and Nepal, Taleju did not become important to the rulers in the Kathmandu valley until king Jayastithi Malla (1382-1395 A.D.).⁵⁹ Jayastithi Malla was a foreigner who united the city states in the Kathmandu valley: Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan, under his reign and made Taleju his lineage deity.⁶⁰ The following kings in the valley worshipped the goddess and several myths tell tales of the kings having private audiences with the goddess.⁶¹ In the most popular myth, the king one day oversteps the boundaries of his relationship with Taleju. This violation offended Taleju, resulting in her leaving the king and disappearing. The king begged for her to come back and finally, Taleju forgave the king on a condition that in order to continue their relationship she will only come back in the form of a young virgin that he will have to worship. If the king worships the young girl in a correct matter, she will see that he will have a long and prosperous reign.⁶²

There are different myths that recounts the events surrounding the establishment of the first Kumari. Since different kings have been credited of being the king in the tale, it cannot be said for certain when the first Kumari was installed. However, the house of Kumari (Kumari Chowk) in Kathmandu can be dated back to the 1700s.⁶³ In 1789 B.C., the king in the neighboring kingdom of Gorkah invaded the valley and united all the kingdoms. As a means to create loyalty from the Newar population that lived in the Kathmandu Valley it is believed that the Gorkah king Priviti Shah adopted the tradition of Kumari worship.⁶⁴ Hence, the cult of Kumari has survived as the Shah Kings remained in power until 2007 when Nepal became a republic.

⁵⁶ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, pp. 12-13.

⁵⁷ Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 216; Allen, *Kumari or Virgin Worship in the Kathmandu Valley*, p. 294.

⁵⁸ Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 67.

⁵⁹ Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 57.

⁶⁰ Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 67.

⁶¹ Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 316.

⁶² See Levy, *Mesocosmos*, p. 542; Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 316.

⁶³ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 20.

⁶⁴ Slusser, *Nepal mandala*, p. 314.

4.1.3. Ceremonies and celebrations

As the tradition is strictly exclusive to Hindus and Buddhists, outsiders are not always allowed to see and meet the goddess.⁶⁵ The only exception is for two times a day when the Kumari shows herself in a window on the third-floor of the Chowk that faces the courtyard. This daily occurrence has become the only time tourist can see the living goddess and that is how it has become a known tourist attraction.

This particular ceremony was created as a way for the goddess to give daily *darshana*⁶⁶ to worshippers and tourists.⁶⁷ It is believed that great fortune will pursue when the deity sees the worshipper. The primary belief behind the tradition of Kumari looking out from the window is that worshiper believe having Kumari give *darshana* when she is wearing her 'third eye' is a blessing.⁶⁸ Kumari is considered very powerful and according to the tradition, just seeing her can have long lasting impact on the individual's life.⁶⁹

Besides the daily *darshana*, tourist may witness Kumari when partaking in the public festival celebrated in her honor. All of the Kumaris have important roles during these public holidays and festivals. As previously mentioned, the royal Kathmandu Kumari has the task of blessing the king once a year. This happens during an eight-day festival called *Indra Jatra* – the celebration of the god Indra, the king of the heavens.⁷⁰ During *Indra Jatra* a chariot procession is held and Kumari is taken around the city to be celebrated.⁷¹ It is during this part of the festival that the king gets blessed after bringing the goddess a sacrifice.⁷² It is believed that Kumari is the one that gives power to the king, and he must then worship her in order to be in her good favor and keep his throne.⁷³ Failing to preform *puja*⁷⁴ and show respect for the goddess might lead to catastrophe for the country and its people.⁷⁵

The second public festival that celebrates the living goddess is *Dasain* and is principally celebrated by Hindus.⁷⁶ It starts at the end of the monsoon and is dedicated to the mother

⁶⁵ Tree, *The Living Goddess*, p. 14.

⁶⁶ "View" (translated from Sanskrit).

⁶⁷ Allen, *Cult of Kumari*, p. 31.

⁶⁸ Tree, *The Living Goddess*, p. 34.

⁶⁹ Tree, *The Living Goddess*, p. 34.

⁷⁰ Witzel, Michael, "Vedic Gods (Indra, Agni, Rudra, Varuṇa, etc.)", in: *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, Edited by: Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, Vadsudha Narayanan. Available from: http://dx.doi.org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1163/2212-5019_beh_COM_1030010 (accessed 18.08.2019).

⁷¹ Witzel, *Vedic Gods (Indra, Agni, Rudra, Varuṇa, etc.)*, 2018.

⁷² Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 32.

⁷³ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 32.

⁷⁴ Act of worship (translated from Sanskrit).

⁷⁵ Tree, *The living goddess*, p. 146.

⁷⁶ Tree, *The living goddess*, p. 40.

goddess Durga, of whom Taleju represents the virginal aspect.⁷⁷ It is believed that it marks the time of the year when warrior goddess Durga defeated the buffalo demon Mahisasura.⁷⁸

4.2. Controversy and reform

The Kumari tradition have been faced with criticism during the last decades. As globalization has progressed, spreading western ethics to countries like Nepal and an increased influx of foreigners who travel to Nepal, members of the Newar community and outsiders alike have started to question the ethical and legal legitimacy of the tradition of the living goddess.⁷⁹ In return, this change of ethical climate not only raises questions about how much effect outsiders morals should have on ancient traditions, but also questions whether or not one can consider the Kumari tradition as being a violation on human rights.⁸⁰ Human rights lawyers, as well as foreign media, have for long questioned the rituals that are a part of the tradition, stating that they are brutal and might be damaging to the girls' mental and physical state.⁸¹ At the same time, the Nepal government and other members of the Newar community argues that the tradition celebrates women and does not impede their societal rights.⁸²

4.2.1 Criticism

The ritual that has faced the most criticism from foreigners and community members is the inauguration ritual. In particular, the part when the girl is taken to a dark room with 108 severed buffalo heads.⁸³ Critics believe it might have traumatizing effects on the young child, who will have to go through this test at the age of two.

Another part of the tradition that faced large criticism is the girls' social future after their time as Kumari. It is argued that the girls do not receive enough assistance to survive in society and lack freedom to move around in public and access to education during their tenure as Kumari.⁸⁴ Their social and educational development are hindered leaving them well behind other children their age.⁸⁵

⁷⁷ Slusser, *Nepal mandala*, p. 311.

⁷⁸ Tree, *The living goddess*, p. 40.

⁷⁹ C. Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari at the Supreme Court. Divine kinship and secularism in Nepal', *Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, 67, p. 32.

⁸⁰ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', pp. 37-39.

⁸¹ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 37.

⁸² Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), FOURTH AND FIFTH PERIODIC REPORTS, Government of Nepal, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, July, 2009, p. 33.

⁸³ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 24.

⁸⁴ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 38.

⁸⁵ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 38.

Education has been considered the biggest flaw in the compensatory system built around the Kumari. Puna Devi, the human rights lawyer who filed the lawsuit against the state, argues that the tradition violates the girl's physical freedom and right to education, as the conditions facing the girls acting as Kumari are incredibly limiting and lead to a long-term negative affect on both mental and physical development.⁸⁶ Previously, the girl serving had little access to education. However, several former Kumaris voiced their discontent with this, as they struggled to get back into school when their tenure had ended.⁸⁷

It was only after the father of one of the Kumaris made demands to the government to allow her more education while acting as the goddess, Kumaris received private tutors every day and the girls were able to join children their age when resuming their civil life.⁸⁸ The matter of the Kumari's right to education was even discussed in the Nepal Supreme Court, which ruled for the Nepal government to further compensate the girls and their families and conduct an educational reform.⁸⁹

4.2.2 Position of the government

As much as the tradition has faced scrutiny, it has also been defended by both the Nepalese government as well as Newar community members. One member argued that the criticism takes its base in outsiders' envy of the rich Newari culture.⁹⁰ Others are less defensive in their arguments but consider the tradition to be such an important part of the Newari culture that it is impossible to change.⁹¹ Women from the Newari women's groups responded to the human right lawyer's lawsuit by emphasizing the prestige that comes with the role as a Kumari.⁹² Many pro-Kumari activist argue the fact that the girl, coming from a low caste in society, receives an elevated position in society thanks to her being elected Kumari, while the families get a monetary compensation for the rest of the girls' life, is a token of their sacrifice.⁹³

Former Kumari Rashmila Shakya discusses the question of right violation in her biography.⁹⁴ In regard to education, she agrees that there used to be a serious need of reform made to the tuition of Kumari.⁹⁵ She also said that when she acted as Kumari she felt superior to others and

⁸⁶ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 37.

⁸⁷ Shakya, *From goddess to mortal*, p. 95.

⁸⁸ Shakya, *From goddess to mortal*, pp. 102-103.

⁸⁹ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 39.

⁹⁰ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 37.

⁹¹ Government of Nepal, CEDAW, p. 33.

⁹² Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the supreme court', p. 38.

⁹³ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the supreme court', p. 38.

⁹⁴ Shakya, *From goddess to mortal*, pp. 148-149.

⁹⁵ Shakya, *From goddess to mortal*, p. 147.

that she had an elevated place in society, much like the arguments made by the Nepal government.⁹⁶ She said that considering that the country suffers many societal issues such as poverty, human trafficking and homeless children, her life as Kumari seemed much more like that of a princess rather than of someone faced with human rights abuse.⁹⁷ Shakya also notes that because of the special attention given to Kumari by outsiders and foreign media, too little attention is given to other children in Nepal who is in much more need of foreign aid.⁹⁸

Furthermore, Shakya gives criticism to the foreigners who write about the tradition. She notes that foreign media only focuses on particular issues, while not understanding the meaning of the tradition⁹⁹. She mentions that scholars listen to the false reports when they study the phenomena, such as Michael Allen. According to Shakya, Allen's account of the initiation ritual with the 108 severed buffalo heads, is based on another royal Kumari (the one in Bhaktapur) and does not seem objective as she cannot recall ever being in such a situation.¹⁰⁰ The same goes in regard to the reports on physical examination of the young girl's body as mentioned in the previous chapter.

4.3. The current state of things

Not only have the treatment of the girls serving a Kumari been criticized by foreigners and community members, but many have questioned the relevance of the tradition as the country has become a republic.¹⁰¹ The living goddess have a long connection to the monarchy in Nepal and in many ways, she has acted as a power legitimizing weapon for the kings of the Kathmandu valley.¹⁰² Parts of her inauguration is directly connected to the king as the girl's astrology sign should match the monarch's.¹⁰³ After the revolution and abolishment of the monarch in 2007, the tradition faced a crisis as an outdated phenomenon. However, the new political party used the tradition in their advantage and participated in the annual *tika* ceremony during the festival of *Indra Jatra* where Kumari blessed the leader. Only now, instead of the king, it was the prime minister who was blessed.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ Shakya, *From goddess to mortal*, p. 148.

⁹⁷ Shakya, *From goddess to mortal*, p. 148.

⁹⁸ Shakya, *From goddess to mortal*, p. 148.

⁹⁹ Shakya, *From goddess to mortal* p. 105.

¹⁰⁰ Shakya, *From goddess to mortal*, p. 141.

¹⁰¹ See Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 36; Tree, *The Living Goddess*, p. 104.

¹⁰² Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 33.

¹⁰³ Allen, *The Cult of Kumari*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁴ Tree, *The Living Goddess*, p. 311.

The survival of the tradition shows how important the tradition is for the identity of the Newari culture, how engraved it is in the community and that it should not be looked at as a soon-to-be extinct phenomenon, but rather as the one that needs to be properly researched and discussed.

5. Kumari and the Outsiders' Comments on the Web

5.1. History of outsiders in the Kathmandu valley

In this chapter, relationship of the Kumari tradition with tourism will be discussed and considered in the light of the theories brought forward by Erik Cohen and John Urry. Before the reviews left on the TripAdvisor page are presented, a short history of Nepal and tourism will be discussed. This will be done in order to fully understand the historical relationship between *Newar* culture and tourism.

5.1.1. Merchantry and esoterism

The Kathmandu Valley has long been a place of spiritual and mythological significance. Being an important location for both Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as being a central stop on merchant routes between China and India, people have traveled to and from Nepal for centuries.¹⁰⁵ From a mythological perspective, the Valley has been visited by several famous personalities and legends. For example, the bodhisattva Manjushri and even Buddha himself have both been said to have visited the Kathmandu Valley.¹⁰⁶ Several famous Hindu kings also visited the country during the period of the 5th to 9th century.¹⁰⁷ The mythological connection between Nepal and Hinduism have resulted in the country being a destination of pilgrimage. Most of the foreign visitors in Nepal before the 1950s were Indian pilgrims.¹⁰⁸

As for the western tourism, Nepal was long undiscovered. According to Anthropologist Mark Liechty, the interest in Nepal as a destination of travel arose after numerous western books and myths were published, which described Nepal and the Himalayas a source of spiritual greatness.¹⁰⁹ Because of the Himalayas significance for Hindu-mythology, the area became a symbol of “oriental” spiritualism. The perception of the mountain range being a source of great power later translated into western occultism. ¹¹⁰ The legends of Nepal spread to the west and Kathmandu became a stop on the Grand Tour.¹¹¹ During the 1950’s most western tourist was

¹⁰⁵ J. Whelpton, *A history of Nepal*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 27.

¹⁰⁶ Shrestha, H.P. 'Tourism in Nepal: A Historical Perspective and Present Trend of Development', *Himalayan Journal of Sociology & Antropology*, Vol. V, 2012, p. 56.

¹⁰⁷ Shrestha, 'Tourism in Nepal', p. 56.

¹⁰⁸ Whelpton, *A history of Nepal*, p. 149.

¹⁰⁹ M. Liechty, *Far out: countercultural seekers and the tourist encounter in Nepal*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2017, pp. 14-20.

¹¹⁰ Liechty, *Far out*, pp. 5-7.

¹¹¹ Whelpton, *A history of Nepal*, p. 149.

of the upper-class, while the interest in Indian culture during the 1960's hippie movement resulted in more lower-class westerners visiting the ancient valley.¹¹²

5.1.2. The call of the mountains

There was one historic event that took place in Nepal during the 1950s that cemented Nepal as a popular destination of travel. This event was the first ever summit of the highest mountain in the world – Mt. Everest. This was done by New Zealander Edmund Hillary and Nepali Sherpa Tensing Norgay.¹¹³ After this successful summit to the top of the world, Nepal became a hotspot for mountaineers and trekkers. Since the first ascent of Mt. Everest more than 4000 people have ascended to the top.¹¹⁴ Albeit the most popular destination, it is only one of the many expedition routes that the country has to offer.

During the 21st century, the number of tourists in Nepal per year increased significantly – more than half a million people visited the country in the year of 2010 alone, which is ten times more than the amount of tourists 50 years earlier.¹¹⁵ With the increase of transportation and accessibility, tourism in Nepal has flourished.¹¹⁶ A majority of the people who travel to Nepal comes from western countries such as England, France, Germany and the USA.¹¹⁷ The interest from western Europeans and northern Americans could originate from the previous marketing of the country as exotic and a place of spiritual significance.¹¹⁸

5.2. Tourists' opinion on the Kumari tradition

In the 21st century, as a result of technological advancements, online communities and forums have become a popular planning aid within leisure travel. One of the most popular of these online communities is TripAdvisor – each month it has about 490 million visitors and in total, 760 million reviews.¹¹⁹ On such websites people share their experience while traveling abroad and give their recommendations and warnings for various touristic hotspots. It is amongst these reviews that this paper will analyze foreigner's reactions to an obscure tradition such as worship of a living goddess.

¹¹² Whelpton, *A history of Nepal*, p. 149.

¹¹³ Liechty, 'Far out', p. 47.

¹¹⁴ Information on Mt. Everest and statistic taken from The British Mountaineering Councils official website: <https://www.thebmc.co.uk/everest-facts-and-figures>. (accessed 18.08.2019).

¹¹⁵ Shrestha, 'Tourism in Nepal', p. 63.

¹¹⁶ Shrestha, 'Tourism in Nepal', p. 55.

¹¹⁷ Shrestha, 'Tourism in Nepal', p. 66.

¹¹⁸ Liechty, *Far out*, pp. 4-5.

¹¹⁹ Information about TripAdvisor users and other statistics is taken from the official website: <https://tripadvisor.mediaroom.com/se-about-us> (accessed 18.08.2019).

When investigating these reviews, theories on tourism and the interaction between tourist expectation and local tradition will be applied. In particular, Cohen's theory on various levels of authentic experience the tourists are searching for will be used. Previous research on tourism argue that all tourist travel for recreational purposes and is not interested in experiencing the authentic nature of the local communities they visit.¹²⁰ Recreational tourism can be considered as the form of tourism where the person travels for relaxation purposes – to escape stressful everyday life and partake in activities that create enjoyment, such as visit the theater or go sunbathing.¹²¹ Contrary to previous research, Cohen does not believe that there is only one type of tourist. Rather there are various modes that differ in how authentic they want their experience to be.¹²² These tourists want to experience the strangeness of other cultures, in various degrees that differ from the inauthentic touristic experience that several other researchers have argued for.¹²³ In Cohen's four modes, there are the travelers who thrive on “pseudo-events” which Cohen calls diversionary mode, but also the experiential, experimental and existential modes that, to various degrees, want to experience the authentic foreign cultures.¹²⁴ This paper will only attempt to divide the reviews into those who only travel for recreational purposes and those whom want to experience authentic Nepalese culture.

To further understand what is being conveyed in the reviews, as well as how tourism may affect ancient traditions such as Kumari tradition, John Urry's theory on the tourist gaze and how tourist expect locals to behave will be used. In particular, it will be shown how reviews that argue for boycott of the tradition on the base of moral disagreements will be questioned with the help of Urry's theories on the tourist gaze.

5.2.1. Comments on TripAdvisor

Through the years, official house of Kumari (the Kumari Chowk), has gained its own TripAdvisor page.¹²⁵ Many tourists visit the house each year and it has not been spared the scrutiny of people's opinions: good or bad. This chapter will show common tendencies of thoughts among tourists and will demonstrate how outsiders reflect on this tradition.

¹²⁰ Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, p. 8.

¹²¹ S. Ragoonaden, 'Tourism and Recreation', *Western Indian Ocean; Regional State of the Coast Report*. 2016. http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/11349/rsocr_printedition.compressed_Part28.pdf?sequence=29&isAllowed=y (accessed 16/8) pp. 1.

¹²² Urry, *The tourist gaze*, p. 8.

¹²³ See Boorstin, Daniel J, *The image: a guide to pseudo-events in America*, Vintage Books, New York, 1992[1987]; Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 49.

¹²⁴ Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, p. 8; Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, pp. 54-55.

¹²⁵ https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g293890-d310706-Reviews-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (written in April 2019).

Between April of 2015 and April of 2019, there were hundreds of English language reviews left on the TripAdvisor website of the Kumari Chowk. These reviews give a varied view of outsider's opinion on the Kumari tradition. It should also be remembered that as mentioned in chapter 4 of this thesis, tourists and outsiders are only allowed to see the royal Kumari of Kathmandu when she shows herself on the third-floor balcony of the Kumari Chowk.

Most of these reviews are from non-Asian tourists. Albeit, all reviews are in English, not all of the authors come from English-speaking countries – there are some authors who originate from countries that is closer in proximity to Nepal. The reviews presented in this paper will represent various trends that can be spotted on the webpage: the power of a girl, architecture as the primary interest, call for tolerance, child abuse. For structural purposes, positive reviews will be discussed first, as the paper will later progress to more critical reviews. This will clarify the broad spectrum of opinions on this page, as well as display trends that exceeds the various attitudes to the tradition.

5.3. Outsiders' comments and their relevance to the research

5.3.1. The power of a girl

The Kumari tradition is unique for many reasons. Firstly, a child is being worshipped as a living goddess. Few western religions worship living people; in orthodox Christianity and Catholicism icons and saints are worshipped, but none of these are alive.¹²⁶ Secondly, the child being worshipped is a young girl making it appear as a devotion to female power. The comments on TripAdvisor prove such a point: the idea of female power fascinated many of the visitors of the Kumari Chowk. Example, a review from July 2018 not only emphasizes the reviewer's fascination for the tradition but also find it to symbolize the female power:

[the power of a girl](#)

it's amazing what people think and believe about Kumari. The new one chosen is only 3 years old! A live goddess in earth!

CHLOE S

Limassol, Cyprus

Date of experience: July 2018.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ A. McGrath, *Christianity: an introduction*, 3. ed. Wiley Blackwell, Chichester, West Sussex, UK, 2015, p. 4.

¹²⁷ https://www.tripadvisor.se/ShowUserReviews-g293890-d310706-r605378497-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (Written in August 2018).

The reviewer does not criticize the circumstances of the girl. Instead, only the notion of divine power in a girl is noticed. It's a rather short comment and does not indicate any reasons of visiting her nor any previous knowledge of the tradition. It is also difficult to analyze if the person approves the tradition as she only seems to find interest in the power of the girl.

This review is a good example of a neutral review. The main characteristic of such reviews is that they do not show the author's view on the tradition itself and rather focus on one part that the author finds fascinating.

The phrasing of the first sentence in the review indicates that the author is baffled by the myths and beliefs surrounding the girl. As mentioned in chapter 4, the Kumari tradition and Hinduism overall is filled with myths and legends. Judging from the review, the author has been informed about the stories behind the tradition during her visit. However, the author distances herself from the strange beliefs, as she notes "*what people think and believe about Kumari*". As very little detail about the author is given, it is difficult to see why the person visited the Chowk. According to Cohen, many tourist travels in order to experience something authentic that differs from their normal life.¹²⁸ The living goddess is nothing if not an authentic and strange type of cultural tradition. This could be the reason why this woman decided to see the girl.

The next review is a bit more detailed and shares the opinion that the Chowk is an interesting place to visit as it is such a strange occurrence.

Interesting and different

The living goddess Kumari actually is something interesting in Nepali culture. I wouldn't say that's a must see place but if you are around the square go there at 11 am or 4 pm to see her. She will come to the balcony for just a minute not more. A kid being worshiped as a goddess, not many cultures have it.

Kumari Chowk is a really very beautiful place.

841kristinek

Yerevan, Armenia

Date of experience: November 2018.¹²⁹

The review agrees that the tradition is an interesting part of the culture in Nepal. It also argues that it's a rare phenomenon that is limited to only a few cultures. The author does not see it as a must-see attraction, but as an interesting place for people who want to experience something odd. This review gives more details about the tradition than the previous comment. It serves

¹²⁸ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 52.

¹²⁹ https://www.tripadvisor.se/ShowUserReviews-g293890-d310706-r634420265-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (Written in November 2018).

the purpose of informing potential future visitors, yet it does not disclose if the author approves or disapproves the tradition. Because of tone of the language and the lack of negative connotations in the review, one can look at this review as a positive – supportive of the tradition.

Both of the reviews discussed above mention the uniqueness of the tradition and the obscurity of living goddess worship. Cohen argues that cultures and people in far-off places turn into attractions as they are considered authentic, while western society is not.¹³⁰ In the light of Cohen's theories these two comments seem to point towards a traveler who wants to experience a deeper meaning when visiting a historic place like the Chowk – a tourist who strives for an authentic experience.¹³¹ These tourists search for the authentic life in the cultures they visit but do not wish to engage in the culture, only observe.¹³²

5.3.2. Architecture as the primary interest

Not all tourists find the Chowk interesting because of Kumari. Another trend that can be spotted amongst the positive reviews are the lack of interest for the rituals of the tradition. Rather they seem more focused on the architecture of the building that Kumari resides in. A tourist that only pays interest to the architectural aspects of a tradition is not uncommon. As religious historian Michael Stausberg argues, many of the most visited tourist attractions in the world are religious places such as the Notre Dame and Hagia Sophia.¹³³ However, not all of the tourists who visit such attractions go there for religious purposes. Rather, they come to see the building for its historical and architectural significance.¹³⁴ Since architecture is considered to be an important part of culture,¹³⁵ such comments can be analyzed in the light of Cohen's theory regarding the authentic experience being an important part of tourism.¹³⁶

Nonetheless the majority of the reviews that discuss the architecture, comment on the traditional peculiarities as well. Some of these are positive and some – have a negative connotation.

[A part of culture & tradition that needs to be preserved.](#)

There is something different in this place, in its feel & the overall impression it leaves. It's as if time has something to convey that cannot be explained in rational terms.

The respect earned by the KUMARI'S is legendary & has stood the test of time, even

¹³⁰ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 52.

¹³¹ Morinis, "Sacred journeys", p. 54.

¹³² Morinis, "Sacred journeys", p. 54.

¹³³ M. Stausberg, *Religion and tourism: crossroads, destinations, and encounters*, Routledge, New York, 2011, p. 79.

¹³⁴ Stausberg, *Religion and tourism*, p. 79.

¹³⁵ R. Butler & W. Suntikul, (red.), *Tourism and religion: issues and implications*, Blue Ridge Summit, PA : Channel View Publications, Bristol, UK, 2018, p. 84.

¹³⁶ Morinis, *Sacred journey*, p. 52.

today . Sadly , the KUMARI house could be better maintained since the institution is old & needs to be preserved. Even modern Nepal , after the abolition of monarchy has retained its place for the KUMARI tradition. I was there approx 2 years ago & I believe that the KUMARI house has withstood the fury of the recent devastating earthquake....perhaps an example of its divine powers as all believers would say !! Besides visiting the place, its definitely worth reading about the KUMARIs & its traditions.

bharat1956

Pune, India.

Date of experience: August 2014.¹³⁷

This review clearly defends the tradition. The person argues that Kumari worship has been an important part of Nepalese culture for hundreds of years and that the government must actively work to protect it. As the building was severely damaged in the 2015 earthquake, it raises emotions and the author expresses an urge of protecting this cultural heritage. It is not clear whether or not the person is well read up on the criticism that the Kumari tradition faced during the last decades, however, the arguments put forward in this comment resembles the pro-Kumari position during the court case that was argued in the Nepal supreme court¹³⁸ – that the tradition is an important part of the Nepalese culture and heritage, and thus should not be abolished.¹³⁹

The trend of the divine female power is recurring in this review. The author emphasizes the power of the Kumari by both crediting her power to be the reason the house has not yet fallen down and arguing the fact that the tradition is still maintained even though the country is no longer a monarchy.

The author stated India to be their country of origin. As Nepal and India share religions, one can assume that similar cultural and religious traits could make it easier for the person in question to accept or appreciate the tradition.¹⁴⁰ From a historical perspective, virgin worship is a phenomenon that was a common occurrence in India and might still be occurring today.¹⁴¹ Therefore, this review from India can be argued to be in contrast to other reviews with an author whom originates from a western culture.

¹³⁷ https://www.tripadvisor.se/ShowUserReviews-g293890-d310706-r285663233-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (Written in April 2015).

¹³⁸ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', pp. 37-38.

¹³⁹ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court' p. 38.

¹⁴⁰ Slusser, *Nepal Mandala*, p. 214.

¹⁴¹ Allen, 'Kumari or "virgin" worship in the Kathmandu valley', p. 302.

The trends presented so far is that of positive reviews towards Kumari worship. Both the idea of a girl being worshipped and the rich historical background of the building and the tradition as a whole is noted and praised. In the light of Cohen's theories these reviewers seem to look for some kind of authenticity and might be the driving force behind their decision to visit the Chowk. It appears to be rather difficult to see how deep their quest for authenticity goes. Cohen believed that some of the tourists who actively chose to visit obscure and alternative places also want these places to maintain their authenticity.¹⁴² The reviews above do not oppose the ways of the tradition, which put them at a possibility of belonging to the category of tourist whom travel to experience authenticity.¹⁴³ However, these authors might also belong to the groups who care less for authenticity than other tourist and the reason for their seemingly positive encounter with the tradition is their ability to be tolerant to the culture. In this regard, they could both be tourist who strive for an ultra-authentic experience or belong the group of tourists who want to thrive on pseudo-events.¹⁴⁴

5.3.3. Call for tolerance

The authors on the Kumari Chowk TripAdvisor page are far from unanimous in their opinion. One trend that can be found among a large number of comments is both amazement with the tradition and distaste because of the young age of the girl. The gist of these reviews is cultural and traditional tolerance while expressing concern for the wellbeing of the child that is acting as Kumari.

It appears that some tourist objects to the tradition by providing their own perspective. Reviewers find personal experience as the reason behind their aversion to the tradition. They appear to use their own emotions when describing their reaction to what they have witness, instead of arguing from the standpoint of the norms and morals of their own culture. For example, one reviewer from Great Britain writes the following:

[Beautiful carvings and a poor child](#)

I already knew the story of the Kumari (the Living Goddess) but it was still an experience to visit the courtyard. The carving was magnificent but photographs were strictly forbidden. The majority of the people were respectful and were quiet when the Kumari appeared and offered a blessing. I did feel sorry for the child, however, who is destined to live in this building until puberty, only going out on certain religious festivals. Despite the honour of being chosen for the role, it's not one I would choose for a child.

¹⁴² See Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁴³ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 54.

¹⁴⁴ See Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, pp. 53-54.

peterjg63

Windlesham, United Kingdom

Date of experience: March 2019.¹⁴⁵

This review displays respect for the culture but argues that if it was up to the author, they would not choose this kind of life for a child. There are occurrences of comments on the TripAdvisor page where the author argues from a personal role, such as that of a parent, in order to support their discomfort by what they witnessed. At the same time, it would not be entirely accurate to look for connection between being a parent and opposing the tradition, as plenty of the others who have reviewed and did not oppose the tradition might be parents as well.

Compared to the previous two categories, this trend is neither positive nor completely negative. Cultural tolerance is an approach that permeate this category, as people try to respect cultural differences but also express their own moral values. Cultural tolerance becomes a trend in its self.

As discussed, one reason why people seem positive towards the idea of a young girl being worshipped as a living goddess could be because some people are more tolerant to this kind of cultural tradition. Although there may be different explanations to this kind of neutrality, tolerance and fascination to other cultures could indicate that a tourist is more inclined to pursue an authentic experience when visiting a foreign community.¹⁴⁶ However, what these reviews also indicate is that there is a need to state one's own standpoint on the matter and distance themselves from the tradition. All these tendencies make it difficult to divide this trend into Cohen's mode of authenticity. On the one hand, tolerance argues for someone who want to experience an authentic culture that is not modified by western standards.¹⁴⁷ On the other hand, the need to distance themselves from the tradition argues for someone who values their own morals above the tradition's authenticity.

5.3.4. Child abuse

The notion of cultural tolerance is a disputed topic as some ask how much one can tolerate the potential abuse before it has gone too far.¹⁴⁸ In more critical reviews on the website, many argue

¹⁴⁵ https://www.tripadvisor.se/ShowUserReviews-g293890-d310706-r663164669-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (Written April 2019).

¹⁴⁶ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁴⁷ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 54.

¹⁴⁸ https://www.tripadvisor.se/ShowUserReviews-g293890-d310706-r461309854-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (written February 2017).

that the girl is ill-treated to such an extent that one can no longer call for tolerance, and that people should not support the atrocities by visiting the house of Kumari at all.

[Child abuse as a tourist attraction](#)

Yes, I understand that this is a hallowed Nepalese institution. Understand, however, as I did after discussing this with several international diplomats in Kathmandu during my visit there, that the young girl is essentially a prisoner in a hermetically-sealed environment until she reaches puberty, at which point she is replaced, cast out of the house, and suddenly has to try to live a normal child.

It's monstrous. Don't encourage this sort of thing. I wandered past the house and a couple creepy men attempted to entice me into the courtyard with promises of glimpsing a real, live "deity." Simply awful exploitation of a child.

Abbotsbury92

Chevy Chase, Maryland

Date of experience: May 2016.¹⁴⁹

The reviewer states their respect for other cultures and their tradition. In the review the author emphasizes their concern for the wellbeing of the child when learning about the tradition and its historical background. Here tolerance is no longer a state of the mind the tourist possesses in order to handle the clash between their own morals and a strange culture. Nor is the author interested in the preservation of the tradition for the sake of authenticity, as has been discussed by Cohen and is a common trend in the more positive reviews.¹⁵⁰ This reviewer openly displays detest towards the tradition and appears to actively encourage a change. In fact, this review is the first example of an outsider believing that outsiders can bring change to the tradition by deterring and boycotting it.¹⁵¹ However, it is not the only review on the website where the author tries to initiate change via their comment, the idea of boycott continues throughout the next review:

[Interesting, but terribly sad](#)

Wasn't sure what to expect when our guide told us about the living goddess and the tradition it encompasses. We were intrigued and kind of expected of her to be princess-like. She came to the window for a brief ten seconds, looking so miserable that we both left feeling heartbroken for her. It's interesting that this is a tradition that still continues. The tradition itself is very interesting, but I think it's wrong. I don't see how this is enjoyable for anyone.

jordanmhblase

Columbia, Missouri

¹⁴⁹ https://www.tripadvisor.se/ShowUserReviews-g293890-d310706-r446467304-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (Written in December 2016).

¹⁵⁰ See Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, pp. 53-55.

¹⁵¹ Call for boycott is a trend that will be deeper discussed in Chapter 6.

Date of experience: August 2016.¹⁵²

Others who object to Kumari worship do not call for a boycott but clearly state that regardless its cultural and historical value, the practice is wrong. Although there is no urge to boycott, as in the review above, making a critical statement can be seen as a way to influence others not to visit Kumari. The author of this review admits to having created a certain fantasy of what they would encounter when visiting Kumari. But instead of a happy princess, they saw a gloomy girl. Although it should be reminded that according to the tradition Kumari can cause great tragedy in a person's life just by smiling or frowning when looking at the person – and that is why the girl is instructed not to portray any kind of facial expression when giving *darshana*.¹⁵³ Urry argues that tourists construct their gaze based on what is considered normal in their own society.¹⁵⁴ In the light of the tourist gaze theory, that will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, one could argue that visitors may judge the tradition with their own cultural template and fail to consider the rules and superstitions of the local tradition.

Furthermore, the tourist follows symbols in order to categorize behaviors and patterns.¹⁵⁵ An example Urry gives in his book on the tourist gaze is a couple kissing on a bridge in Paris being a symbol of the traditional romantic Paris.¹⁵⁶ When tourists hear about a young girl worshipped as a goddess they think of a princess. When they later witness her and see that she does not match the picture of a princess they had in mind, their pattern makes alternative conclusions. In this case, most of them see it as abusive and disturbing.

The negative reviews, such as the example above, can be assumed to be a sign of a potential clash between traditional practice and the visitor's moral value. The tourist finds a way to boycott what they witness, without making deeper enquiries in why the tradition is as it is. In many ways, Cohen's theories on modes of tourism cannot explain this occurrence as authenticity takes the backseat for the sake of ethics. Neither does Urry's theory on tourist gaze delve deeper into situations where this kind of clash occurs. A case could be made that the tourist favors their own values and considers them superior to other cultures. But to further analyze this

¹⁵² https://www.tripadvisor.se/ShowUserReviews-g293890-d310706-r406467836-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (Written in August 2016).

¹⁵³ Tree, *The living goddess*, p. 90.

¹⁵⁴ Urry, *The tourist gaze*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁵ Urry, *The tourist gaze*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ Urry, *The tourist gaze*, p. 7.

claim is a task for another research, based on theories that discuss western ideals and its adaptations in non-western countries.

Much of the reactions made to the Kumari tradition have been based on what the author experienced when they saw the girl give *darshana* on the third-floor balcony in the Kumari Chowk. Some reviewers call it a theatre and a show as the small girl comes out dressed in a red dress with gold jewelry,¹⁵⁷ which resembles Urry's claim that the tourist gaze is connected to the visual.¹⁵⁸ In the light of this theory, what can be considered bizarre and spectacular get more attention than other things. Visually, the tradition is eye-catching and controversial. The extra focus on the “strange” explains why the Kumari tradition has become such a disputed topic on online communities as well as in foreign media.¹⁵⁹

5.3. Relevance of the comments in the light of Cohen's theory

The reviews have been considered using the aid of Cohen's theory on modes of authenticity. What has yet to be discussed is the comment's relevancy to the theory and how it can show the constant flow of influence that outsiders, such as tourists, bring upon local communities in distant countries.

The trends that can be spotted in the reviews left on the TripAdvisor site of the Kumari Chowk suggest that there is little agreement in the opinions. Disagreement about the tradition and the treatment of the girl can also be shown in various publications and court cases disputing the tradition.¹⁶⁰ While some see the tradition to be a sign of female empowerment, others see it to be a crime against human rights. Some only visits the house for its historical architecture, others only come to experience the strange tradition that is worshipping of a living goddess.

Yet one common trend can be spotted in nearly all the reviews – people come to Durbar Square and to the Kumari Chowk to witness a culture and history different from their own. When applied on these reviews, Cohen's theory on tourists' quest for authenticity seems to explain the underlying reasons for people to travel to Kathmandu. Coming from their own cultural center, these tourists travel to the exotic periphery in order to get away from their life and experience the strange “other”, as the Kumari tradition has become a typical symbol of the enchantment

¹⁵⁷ https://www.tripadvisor.se/ShowUserReviews-g293890-d310706-r578271922-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (Written May 2018).

¹⁵⁸ Urry, *The tourist gaze*, p. 86.

¹⁵⁹ See Shakya, *From goddess to mortal*, pp. 104-121.

¹⁶⁰ See Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court'.

that the western world has lost.¹⁶¹ Thus, due to the tradition's obscurity, tourists' visit to the Chowk is most likely in a quest to experience authenticity and the recreational mode is not applicable to these reviews.

What is difficult to explain by using Cohen's theory is how the more criticizing comments fit into the modes of authenticity. In the case of Kumari, it appears that the authenticity of the Newar customs is not met with astonishment, but rather with aversion. An explanation to this reaction might be that Nepal's history with tourism is relatively young compared to other countries, and the fact that traditions are perceived as strange (as noticed in the reviews above) might stem from the country's inability to develop an infrastructure adapted to tourism.¹⁶² For example, the Kumari tradition could have been cultivated into a positive touristic experience, yet this would risk the goddess losing her authenticity.

To further examine the trends spotted in the reviews, other theories must be applied. John Urry's theory on the tourist gaze have already been used in order to understand the negative opinion on Kumari. But the theory may help to consider the overall effect that outsiders opinions have on local communities. According to Urry's theory on the tourist gaze, places are chosen to become travel destination based on fantasy and anticipation which is further enforced by books, television and media.¹⁶³ Nepal has long been seen as one of the last hidden and exotic places on earth, the home of the Shangri La.¹⁶⁴ The picture of Nepal is that of a melting pot of all eastern religious traditions,¹⁶⁵ an embellishment of what is known as Hinduism and Buddhism in the "West". However, when faced with a controversial practice such as Kumari worship clash between ritual practice and moral values becomes more obvious. Thus, the next chapter will take on the relevance of the gaze theory to the comments in more detail.

¹⁶¹ Morinis, *Sacred journeys*, p. 52.

¹⁶² Urry, *The Tourist gaze*, p. 8.

¹⁶³ Urry, *The Tourist gaze*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁴ Liechty, *Far out*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁶⁵ A. Michaels, 'Nepal', in: *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, Edited by: Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, Vasudha Narayanan, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_beh_COM_1030030 (last visited 18.08.2019).

6. Possible Effects of the Gaze on the Kumari Tradition

This chapter will further delve into how tourism affects the host society. This will be applied on the example of Nepal and in particular, the tradition of Kumari worship. To understand this “clash of cultures” the author will continue using John Urry’s theory on the tourist gaze, set forth in 1990. The Kumari tradition is authentic to its ancient ways which will be further discussed in the light of its clash with the modern world as this meeting of cultures is a trend that is visible throughout the reviews.

The gaze theory is based on how tourists perceive and imagine the places they visit.¹⁶⁶ In order to use the gaze theory, one needs to access subjective opinions on the Kumari tradition. The reviews presented in the previous chapter have provided with various types of opinions, as well as trends that group together various reviews. In this chapter, the reviews will be the underlying basis for a potential “gaze” of these tourists. Together with the historical background, the chapter will consider if tourism and outsiders have affected the Kumari tradition and if there might be a future risk of outside ideals and morals changing the tradition.

As Nepal’s history with tourism is relatively new it will provide a good example on the confrontations between foreign tourism and a tradition that yet has adapted to outside influence.

6.1. The gaze theory and Nepal

Being the third largest source of income, tourism in Nepal is an important economic factor for the country’s GNP.¹⁶⁷ This means that tourists and outsiders hold power and could possibly affect the local communities that they visit.¹⁶⁸

The theory on the tourist gaze can be used when analyzing the reviews on the Kumari tradition left by outsiders on TripAdvisor. Not because the authors of these reviews were pleased by the authentic nature of the tradition, but rather because of their aversion to it, even though it can be considered authentic.

Nepal was long considered one of the last untouched exotic places,¹⁶⁹ which means that the tradition has not been influenced by the westerner’s unfamiliarity of the Newari culture and has been protected from being subjected to stereotypes. Although some urge for the tradition to be

¹⁶⁶ Urry, "The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"", p. 177.

¹⁶⁷T. Brown, *The challenge to democracy in Nepal: a political history*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 171.

¹⁶⁸ Urry, "The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"", pp. 177-178.

¹⁶⁹ Liechty, *Far out*, p. 17.

protected, many, which has been reflected in the tourists' comments, argue that Kumari worship is out-of-date and oppressive, and thus needed to be changed. In this regard, the relatively untouched nature of the Kumari tradition was not appreciated even though it provided the tourists with a real authentic experience.

6.2. Comments' possible effect on the tradition

Various trends could be spotted amongst the comments left on the Kumari Chowks TripAdvisor page. Some were positive towards the tradition and the ideas behind the worship of a young girl as a living goddess. Others were condemning the act of “locking up” a girl and forcing her to act as Kumari before discarding her when she reaches puberty. The multifaceted opinions and positions on the tradition seem to discredit the idea of a single tourist gaze. The supposed stereotypes that marketing departments in various tourist enterprises feed potential visitors does not seem to be applicable to the Kumari tradition.¹⁷⁰ Yet one could also argue that the Kumari tradition shows the existence of several possible gazes.

The positive reviews embraced similar ideas of female divine power and the unique experience of a live goddess as many of the defenders from the Newar community accentuate.¹⁷¹ Instances of positive experiences and symbolism of female empowerment, can be explained using the gaze theory. When the Kumari shows herself to the tourist they see a striking girl wearing all red clothing and golden jewelry, she is elevated and stands above everyone else.¹⁷² This could send a signal of power and thus Kumari can be seen as a metaphor for female empowerment.¹⁷³ Urry accounts for one crucial part of the gaze that is the need of liminality and a boundary between what is normal and that of what is considered extraordinary.¹⁷⁴ If Kumari was not dressed in costume that would signal her power, she might have not become a subject of interest. These esthetic qualities of the Kumari tradition makes it a phenomenon of interest which seem to be noted by the tourist who have a positive experience at the chowk.

In terms of tourist gaze, the positive reviews do not seem to be based on stereotypes that can damage the authenticity of the tradition in any way.¹⁷⁵ Rather these positive comments may be used by defenders of the tradition when facing legal charges.¹⁷⁶ However, as mentioned

¹⁷⁰ Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 271.

¹⁷¹ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 38.

¹⁷² Allen, 'Kumari or “virgin” worship in Kathmandu Valley', p. 309.

¹⁷³ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 172.

¹⁷⁴ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 182.

¹⁷⁵ Stronza, 'Anthropology of Tourism', p. 271.

¹⁷⁶ See Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', pp. 37-39.

previously, the mixed reviews seem to indicate that there could be several gazes in play at the Kumari Chowk.¹⁷⁷

The other form of gaze that could be spotted in the reviews is the negative view on the practices of the Kumari tradition. These reviews seem to favor their own moral values over the authenticity of the tradition, and thus urged for a reform of the tradition to be made. Even if most of the reform made to the Kumari tradition has been done by organizations pressuring the government to change the tradition, one cannot rule out the power that outsiders' opinions have on such matters. Urry's theory argues that preconditioned stereotypes and expectations placed on the local community put risk on that community to adapt into these stereotypes.¹⁷⁸ When tourists experience the tradition and comment on it, they might impact the tradition. Because of these comments being subjective opinions that is passed on to others, the risk of creating stereotypes that effect how future tourists perceive the tradition is quite high.

6.2.1 Boycott to initiate change

The critical and negative comments on TripAdvisor are more at power to lead to change in local tradition. Because of the comment author's strong stance against the main dogmatic requirement of the tradition – worship of a young girl as a goddess, it becomes a strong incentive to advocate change in the tradition. One of the most recurring trends in the reviews where the urge for boycott of the tradition. There was the shared belief that tourist by actively trying to avoid witnessing the tradition might force the government, and the people in charge of the Kumari Chowk, to improve the life of the girl acting as Kumari.

Because of tourism being an industry, the tradition needs to be dependent on financial income from the tourist that visit the Chowk in order for a tourist-boycott to cause any change or reformation of the tradition. Yet directly, there is no financial ties between tourism in Nepal and the Kumari Chowk. Most of the funding of the tradition comes from the state,¹⁷⁹ which is dependent on the income it receives from yearly tourism.¹⁸⁰ Even though there is no entrance fee to the Chowk, tourist still have to pay for entrance in order to visit many famous places in Kathmandu, including the square that the Chowk is located on. Being governmentally owned, this money should go directly to the state.¹⁸¹ By commodification of culture, the culture turns

¹⁷⁷ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 173.

¹⁷⁸ Stronza, 'Anthropology of Tourism', p. 271.

¹⁷⁹ Tree, *The living goddess*, p. 145.

¹⁸⁰ Brown, *The challenge to democracy in Nepal*, p. 171.

¹⁸¹ Brown, *The challenge to democracy in Nepal*, p. 171.

into a product which, in theory, can be changed if received enough critique.¹⁸² Thus, monetary pressure on the Nepali government by tourist could make them apply reformations in order to change the product they are selling.

Although it is not stated in the comments, one can assume that criticizing and boycotting another culture and its traditions can be seen as an attempt to disparage the other tradition in favor of own morals and rules. Accordingly, there must be a sense of entitlement amongst these tourists to speak their mind when faced something that deviate from their own ideals. Urry speaks about democratization of landscape when discussing the gaze theory.

*What is most significant here is that everyone in the “West” is now entitled to engage in visual consumption, to appropriate landscapes and townscapes more or less anywhere in the world (...), has become a right of citizenship from which few in the “West” are excluded.*¹⁸³

This can also be applicable to judgment of Kumari as culture is seen as something tourist have the right to experience.¹⁸⁴ When a culture gets commodified it transforms into a product.¹⁸⁵ In theory, if a product is deemed faulty, the consumer has the right to complain, which may lead to change of that product. However, this leads to the product (in this case a culture) loses its original value and becomes inauthentic.¹⁸⁶

Stereotypes are important for the gaze theory. It is fully possible that the stereotypes that the tourist use to judge the Kumari tradition springs from other sources beyond marketing ploys. The negative view of the Kumari tradition could be based on already set stereotypes of Indian societies as a place where women are seen as a secondary citizen.¹⁸⁷ If this is the case, the tourist visiting Kumari immediately gaze on the girl as a victim of female oppression by a female-hostile society. This is done without taking historical facts, nor her general living conditions compared to other children in Nepal, into consideration. As a side effect of this, the boycott initiated by these reviews risk being spurred from false information. As it was put by Anthropologist Amanda Stronza:

¹⁸² Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 270.

¹⁸³ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 180.

¹⁸⁴ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 180.

¹⁸⁵ Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 270.

¹⁸⁶ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze "Revisited"', p. 177.

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/27/india-abuse-women-human-rights-rape-girls>. (accessed 19/8).

*A problem here is that authenticity is a subjective concept, and tourists often define for themselves what authentic, relying on popular stereotypes as points of reference rather than on historical or ethnographic facts.*¹⁸⁸

If the boycott leads to change in the tradition it will affect all of the Newar community members, including the girl who acts as Kumari. But since there is no clear evidence that the girl is suffering, the change that will follow the boycott might not be a welcomed option by the community. Quite the opposite – it might be regarded as a sign of oppression of the Newar people.

6.2.2. The unanimous cry of despair in the reviews and from human right lawyers

Another trend that was recurring amongst the negative reviews is the accusation of human rights violations. Many reviewers remarked on the girl's conditions and how they are not in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹⁸⁹ These claims are not entirely groundless as the tradition have been discussed by the UN and by human rights lawyers (see chapter 4.4).

History has proved that some of the issues raised by human rights activists and fellow Newar community members has led to changes in the tradition. For example, the critique of the girl's lack of education and freedom to play.¹⁹⁰ This question was raised in a United Nations document on women's rights as well as by the parents of a Kumari, something which later led to reform.¹⁹¹ Even though this reform had happened before the critique of poor educational opportunities for the Kumari girl surfaced on the TripAdvisor website, reason for the online critique still shows similar arguments.

When human rights lawyers and the general public start to bring up legal reasoning in their comments, the Newar community does not have many options in their hands. In regard to Urry and Stronza's argument on local communities adapting to foreigners' stereotypes,¹⁹² one can hypothesize about the options left for the Newar community. Either they make changes to the tradition in order to please outsiders.¹⁹³ In this case, the power of the gaze, and the financial pressure that a boycott might cause, could mean that outsiders opinions and comments, such as

¹⁸⁸ Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 271.

¹⁸⁹ UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, 1989.

¹⁹⁰ https://www.tripadvisor.se/ShowUserReviews-g293890-d310706-r200127881-Kumari_Chowk-Kathmandu_Kathmandu_Valley_Bagmati_Zone_Central_Region.html (Written in April 2014).

¹⁹¹ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

¹⁹² See Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* and Stronza, 'Anthropology of Tourism'.

¹⁹³ Stronza, 'Anthropology of Tourism', p. 271.

the ones left on the TripAdvisor page for the Kumari Chowk, could be a factor in future change of the Kumari tradition. Or they could stick to their tradition and rather try to change the outsiders' opinion on the Kumari tradition.¹⁹⁴ This means that to better cope with outside pressure, the Newar community might try to change the narrative of how their tradition is perceived. For example, they could argue the deep historical connection between the state and Kumari, making it difficult to change. What makes the latter scenario more plausible in the case of the Kumari tradition is that there are a number of positive reviews left on the TripAdvisor page referencing the ancientness of the tradition and praise female power. This means the state and local community may feel support, knowing that there are enough people who approve of the tradition as well.

6.3. Community members' response to outside critique

The response of the members from Newar community and Nepali governmental officials proved an unwillingness to reform the tradition. Some of the response from the community are in accordance with the positive reviews on the TripAdvisor page. An opinion raised in the reviews that is favorable towards the tradition is the notion of female energy and divine power as being a symbol for female empowerment. This has not only been argued in the reviews but was also used in the Nepali government's response to the 2009 UN report. The government argued that the tradition is a symbol of female power is one of the main reasons why they cannot abolish it.¹⁹⁵

Furthermore, there seem to be a unanimous opinion within the Newar community that outsiders should not be allowed to judge the tradition: "*Kumari is our (Newar) culture; only we can change it, and nobody else has the right to judge our culture.*"¹⁹⁶

This standpoint might originate from the fear that a tradition that becomes too adapted to outsider demands risk losing its cultural value.¹⁹⁷ Fear of traditions losing its meaning might explain the general exclusiveness within Hinduism and the Kumari tradition's ability to maintain its authentic nature. In general, Hindu communities try hard to exclude outsiders. Many religious temples in Nepal are even restricted for non-Hindus,¹⁹⁸ which means that the most religious sites are still isolated from westerners. As tourists are only allowed to witness

¹⁹⁴ Stronza, 'Anthropology of Tourism', pp. 272-273.

¹⁹⁵ Government of Nepal, CEDAW, p. 33.

¹⁹⁶ Letizia, 'The goddess Kumari in the Supreme Court', p. 38.

¹⁹⁷ Stronza, 'Anthropology of Tourism', p. 270.

¹⁹⁸ Michaels, *Nepal*, 2018.

the Kumari when visiting the temple-backyard, the traditions is still rather shielded from outside intrusion. The religious dogmas of the Hindu tradition thus act as a protective shield and limits the amount that outsiders can change the tradition.

Exclusivity might prove to be a double-edged sword as the peculiarities of the Kumari tradition is what makes it the most vulnerable. Firstly, it attracts the gaze of outsiders such as tourist and secondly, the strangeness of the culture means that it is yet to be affected by the hegemonic westernized culture.

6.4. Globalization as a driving factor for the comments and their indirect effect

As previously discussed, trends in the discourse on the Kumari Chowk TripAdvisor website indicate outsiders wanting to both support and discourage the tradition. Reason for most of the negative comments is that the tradition does not correlate with these visitors' moral values. This has led us to consider this phenomenon of the tourist gaze theory in the light of the Kumari tradition. Yet we have failed to prove that the comments left online has any direct effect on the tradition in question. But what about indirect effect?

Stronza argues that locals still have some autonomy as they themselves can alter traditions and decide what they want to show tourist.¹⁹⁹ The opportunity to change one's tradition can be considered empowering– the locals themselves can decide to emphasize on the qualities they want displayed.²⁰⁰ In regard to the comments on TripAdvisor and such, locals can take these into consideration when facing the immediate clash that occurs when foreigners visit their community. By reading the comments locals can understand how outsiders perceive their tradition.

Then how can one see that the locals have adapted to outsiders' opinions and stereotypes? On the one hand, the changes in education process made to the Kumari tradition goes in accordance to what is being criticized in the reviews. Although, it is not certain if tourism has had much responsibility in this change, the ideas argued by the UN and lawyers are still spread via globalization, a process in which tourism is very much a part of.²⁰¹

On the other, what is being displayed to outsiders at the Kumari Chowk has not undergone much reformation. Either the Newar community has been able to withstand the pressure of

¹⁹⁹ Stronza, 'Anthropology of Tourism', p. 273.

²⁰⁰ Stronza, 'Anthropology of Tourism', p. 273.

²⁰¹ E. Cohen, 'Globalization, Global Crisis and Tourism'. *Tourism recreation Research*, vol. 37(2), 2012: p. 104. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Erik_Cohen3/publication/271725375_Globalization_Global_Crises_and_Tourism/links/5727304d08aef9c00b8b18d3/Globalization-Global-Crises-and-Tourism.pdf (accessed 18.08.2019).

adapting to outsiders' stereotypes; which can be seen as an act of empowerment as the Newari culture refuses to change in order to better fit into a more homogenized culture.²⁰² Or the tradition has yet to be influenced by tourism to the extent that it might generate direct effect on ancient traditions and practices.

Beside commodification, Urry's theory does not further delve into what the long-term effects of the tourist gaze will be on local communities. It is unclear if tourism can have effect on tradition, besides the expansion of western ethical norms that has already been planted in these societies due to the globalization process.²⁰³ However, as tourism is an important source of income,²⁰⁴ tourist boycott could lead to financial loss for the Nepali government.

As some visitors at the Kumari Chowk find the idea of a girl goddess to be a sign of female empowerment and deep spiritualism, others find it as oppression and child abuse. While a direct effect on the tradition is still questionable, it is quite possible that the comments indirectly effect the tradition in several ways: for example, a boycott from tourists might put pressure on the government to create reforms to better the conditions of the girl, or western ideals that tourist spread to the people in the local community via media such as TripAdvisor might lead to a change in the public perception of the tradition. This could, arguably, be the main power of such comments.

What Urry's theory comes to show is that the power that outsiders' gaze on locals can cause change. In this regard, the presence of tourists and the mix of cultures will lead to influence that, in turn, lead to a change. Coming from a hegemonic culture, western tourist spread ideals with the help of media, the internet and popular culture.²⁰⁵ The more known Kumari becomes to the world, the more she is at risk to change. Even the comments left on TripAdvisor could potentially lead to change as more than half the earth population has access to the internet.²⁰⁶ People from inside the community could use these comments and other reports on the tradition, as evidence to create reform. The question left to be answered is whether the Kumari tradition should change, but that is a topic for another research.

²⁰² Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 273.

²⁰³ Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 270.

²⁰⁴ Brown, *The challenge to democracy in Nepal*, p. 171.

²⁰⁵ Stronza, 'Anthropology of tourism', p. 270.

²⁰⁶ Digital 2019: *Global Digital Overview*, 2019, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-global-digital-overview> (accessed 18.08.2019).

7. Conclusion

With the rise of the internet, people have an easier access to other cultures than ever before. At the same time, numerous ways of transportation make traveling more accessible. People more often travel to exotic places in search for a distant culture and authenticity, trying to escape their everyday life and find sanctuary in the other. While some people are open to learn about cultures, some cannot stop applying their own moral values on new cultures. Sharing experience online may cause a vicious circle of people's opinions forming the foundation how other people see the foreign cultures. This has become the case of the Kumari tradition.

The Kumari tradition is a tradition that has come to give identity to a whole nation. For centuries, this tradition has been closely connected to the government of Nepal and has an important role for the ethnic groups in the Kathmandu valley. While the rise of globalization and mass tourism this ancient tradition has faced scrutiny by outsiders.

In the last decades, the Kumari tradition has been criticized by both members of the Newar community as well as by organizations, such as the UN, and foreign media. Majority of the criticism has been focused on the girl's educational possibilities when acting as Kumari and the inauguration process.²⁰⁷

The purpose of this thesis was not to debate wheatear or not the tradition might be a violation of the girls' human rights or be immoral, rather to study tourism in relation to ancient tradition. In particular, the thesis researched the role of internet forums in modern day tourism and how opinions based on preconceived stereotypes might lead to change in local communities and the Kumari tradition as such.

When conducting this research two questions were at the center of the discussion. The first question – which common trends could be spotted amongst people who come to experience a “strange” tradition – was answered by analyzing, selected reviews from TripAdvisor's webpage on the Kumari Chowk. These were divided into categories based on which trends spotted in the reviews: “the power of a girl”, “architecture as prime interest”, “call for tolerance” and “child abuse”. Subsequently these reviews were analyzed with the help of Erik Cohen's theory on modes of authenticity.²⁰⁸ The aim with using this theory was to understand if the various trends indicate level of authentic experience the visitors strived for. The trends showed that tourist interpret the tradition differently. While some see the tradition as a test of female power,

²⁰⁷ Shakya, *From Goddess to Mortal*, p. 147.

²⁰⁸ See Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*, pp. 53-55.

other sees it as child abuse. What was answered with the help of Cohen's theory is that tourist who visit obscure traditions such as the Kumari tradition do so with the hope to experience authentic culture, in this case – Nepalese. No recreational purposes were seen amongst the reviews.

The second question – how outsider's opinion may impact ancient traditions – was answered with the help of the John Urry's theory on the tourist gaze. The reviews that were criticizing the tradition were considered in historical, political and human rights contexts. By interpreting a tradition using stereotypes and own moral values, the person may use their opinion to persuade others to share the same views.²⁰⁹ As a result, tradition might be misunderstood, misinterpreted or left with an undeserved reputation. The thesis showed that in the last decades the tradition saw some minor changes to the way Kumari is treated after her time as goddess. These changes were partly due to the comments made by the local community as well as western human rights lawyers. And although direct effect of the comments on social media is yet to be seen, the rise of popularity in the tradition and its controversial character, may lead to some changes in the future.

In addition to answering why tourist seek to visit strange foreign tradition like the Kumari tradition, and how outsider's opinion may affect such tradition, this thesis aimed to prove how online materials can be used for an empirical research. Although there is a certain difficulty in using short and subjective opinions, in this particular thesis, online reviews proved valuable sources when analyzing the discourse amongst travelers visiting Kumari. The internet provides easy access to a large amount of opinions made by people from various cultural background, that could be categorized and analyzed. It enabled to generalize opinions based on region and do a comparative study with the local community practicing the tradition in question.

While there are several perks with using online community as anthropological resources, the author hopes this thesis will inspire others to use similar methods when studying ancient traditions; it is the author's belief that online communities' hand in the tourism industry has not been researched thoroughly enough within the field of anthropology.

²⁰⁹ Urry, 'The Tourist Gaze Revisited', p. 173.

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