



The Living Goddess: Sign and Significance of Bhaktapur's Kumari Culture

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Abstract— This study aims to explore the semiotic aspects of the Kumari tradition in Bhaktapur, Nepal. In the lively cultural practice of the Kumari tradition in Bhaktapur, a young Newar girl is regarded as the goddess Taleju, representing divine feminine force. This study examines the denotative, connotative, and mythological aspects of Kumari culture as a system of signs in Bhaktapur's Newar community employing Roland Barthes' semiological framework. This study investigates how rituals and symbols—like the Kumari's red and gold clothing, third eye, and palanquin—serve as signs using a qualitative narrative research design that includes semi-structured interviews with the devotee and the Kumari's caretaker as well as field observations during festivals like Dashain. Denotatively, these elements depict a young girl and her ritualistic roles. Connotatively, they represent purity, divine power, and communal harmony, which strengthens spiritual and social solidarity. At the mythical level, the Kumari naturalizes ideas about divine power and gender roles, presenting her divinity as an intrinsic fact in Newar faith. The study highlights Ekanta Kumari's unique position in Bhaktapur, where she has greater freedom than her peers in Kathmandu and Patan while remaining crucial to rituals that preserve traditional identities. The findings help to better understand the Kumari as a dynamic cultural symbol that bridges the divine and human realms, as well as the interplay of religion, identity, and power in South Asian communities.



Keywords— Kumari Tradition, Bhaktapur, Semiotics, Taleju, Newar Cultural Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Kumari is derived from the “Sanskrit word Kaumarya, which signifies pure princess in the form of Goddess” (Poudel, 2022, p. 3580). “To Nepal is she is known as Kumari—the word for a virgin or unmarried girl” (Tree, 2014, p. 4). According to mythology, virginity represents the basic feminine force, an identity that embodies the female's complete potential. Gupto (2018) writes “The fullness can be understood as the feminine identity that is beyond the social space of the male determinism in the sense that she is exclusive and beyond male sexual possession” (p. 63). From the day of her selection until the day of her first menstruation, the Kumari has the honour of celebrating her divinity. As the embodiment of heavenly female energy, a young prepubescent Newari girl from the Shakya or Bajracharya caste (the uppermost Buddhist clan among Newars) is

revered. “The Taleju is an important Hindu goddess, yet the Kumari is a Buddhist by birth. This distinctive custom exemplifies the harmonious coexistence and blending of religions that Nepal has long been recognized for” (Phelu, 2025, p. 12). Kumari culture has cultural, national, community, and individual significance in addition to historical and religious significance. Kumari is the magnificent representation of a young child who apparently possesses divine energy.

In Kathmandu Valley, the Kumari culture is a defining feature of Newar identity. It involves a process in which a young girl is chosen to represent the goddess “Taleju” and “Tara” for Hindu and Buddhist devotees respectively, a manifestation of divine feminine power (Ghimire, 2018, p. 24). In Bhaktapur, the royal Kumari who is often called the “Ekanta Kumari,” as “the Goddess in her full and complete form, as is Taleju,” holds a central role in

festivals, rituals, and community life, symbolizing protection, prosperity, and spiritual connection (Levy, 1990, p. 542). By employing Roland Barthes' semiological framework—which holds that cultural phenomena are systems of signals that transmit meaning through denotation, connotation, and myth—this study investigates the Kumari culture of Bhaktapur. This paper examines the Kumari tradition in Bhaktapur along with how it creates meaning, upholds social institutions, and resolves conflicts between tradition and modernity. This study focusses on the following research questions: How do the Kumari tradition's rituals and symbols function as signs in Barthes' semiotic system? What meanings and myths do these signs evoke in the context of Bhaktapur's Newar society? This paper presents a complete semiotic analysis of the Kumari tradition using a qualitative narrative research design that includes field observations as well as secondary data from existing literature.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Kumari tradition is an integral part of Newar cultural and religious life in Kathmandu Valley. The Kumari, a young girl chosen through rigorous rituals, appears to represent the goddess Taleju, a patron deity in Newar community. Letizia (2013) reveals the indifference of government bodies to accept *Kumari* culture as existing but only as a history since Kumari is believed to be strongly connected with kings' legitimacy and myths. She further elaborates, “In September 2002, a member of parliament, Bidhya Bhandari, had used such rights to urge that the Kumari tradition be abolished” (p. 36). In contrast, Ghimire (2018) highlights the contribution of the Kumari cult to cultural tourism, claiming the Kumari culture as a national asset with commercial possibilities. But this viewpoint frequently ignores the Kumari's semiotic significance as a cultural symbol.

Tree (2014) provides a thorough anthropological description of the Kumari tradition, delving into its historical origins, cultural relevance, and the daily experiences of the young girls who embody the goddess. Tree traces the Kumari system back to the Malla period, emphasizing its evolution through numerous political and religious shifts. Tree's comprehensive fieldwork and interviews provide a nuanced perspective on the interaction of religion, politics, and identity in the Kathmandu Valley offering vital insights for scholars interested in religious anthropology and South Asian studies.

Maharjan (2024) provides a performance-theoretical study of Kumari culture and frames the living goddess as a liminal and ritualistic performance that is fundamental to Newar identity from the perspectives

developed by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner. She highlights how the Kumari functions as both a religious presence and a cultural dialectic, navigating contemporary criticisms of child labor and royal legacy while also reaffirming ancient spiritual duties. The emphasis is shifted from simply theological or iconographic viewpoints to the dynamic interaction between ritual performance and cultural identity in the Kathmandu Valley by this nuanced interpretation. Similarly, Paudel (2022) underscores the ritualistic and dialectical elements of the Kumari tradition while analyzing it through the lens of performance studies. In Newar Buddhist communities, Paudel examines the Kumari tradition as a unique and sacred ritual performance, following Richard Schechner's idea of performative activity. He emphasizes the importance of the Kumari's position in the cultural identity of the Kathmandu Valley, pointing out that although some people consider the practice to be child labor, others support its continuation because of its strong cultural ties.

Allen (1975) offers a fundamental ethnographic description of the Kumari cult, firmly placing it within the socioreligious and tantric traditions of the Newar people. He highlights that the Kumari is not just an emblem but also a live manifestation of Sakti, whose cult has its roots in centuries of Newar ritual practice as well as old Vedic virgin worship. Despite these insights, little research has been done on the Kumari tradition using semiotic frameworks. The majority of research focusses on historical or ethnographic assessments, which leaves space for theoretical investigations into the ways in which the Kumari serves as a sign in Newar society.

Semiotics is “a systematic science of signs” (Culler, 2005, p. xiv). Humans communicate verbally and non-verbally. Semiotics covers “verbal language in its different media of speech and writing, and also non-verbal communication systems” (Wales, 2011, p. 380). Roland Barthes, a French semiotician, created a paradigm for analyzing signs in cultural contexts, expanding on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiological foundations. Barthes' seminal works present a triadic paradigm of signification: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural or contextual meaning), and myth (ideological narratives that naturalize cultural beliefs). According to Barthes, signs are more than just representations; they are active creators of meaning, influenced by social, historical, and cultural circumstances. His concept of myth is especially pertinent because it demonstrates how signs naturalize dominant beliefs, making them look universal and unavoidable. According to Barthes (1972), myth is not just a traditional story or legend but a “system of communication” and “everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse” (p. 107). In *Mythologies*, he analyzes everyday

cultural phenomena—such as “photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity” —as texts that convey ideological messages (p. 108).

III. RESEARCH GAP

While existing scholarship provides detailed anthropological and historical accounts of the Kumari tradition, there is a scarcity of theoretical analyses that investigate its semiotic components. Barthes' semiology provides a new perspective on how the Kumari acts as a sign in Bhaktapur's cultural and religious setting. This study addresses these deficiencies by using Barthes' methodology to examine the Kumari's position as a cultural sign, denoting, connoting, and mythological connotations.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the semiotic aspects of the Kumari tradition in Bhaktapur using a qualitative narrative research design. This study suits narrative research since it provides a thorough examination of the lived experiences, cultural significance, and individual interpretations of the Kumari tradition through the viewpoints and stories of important stakeholders. Liebllich et al. (1996) argue, "narrative is used to represent the character or lifestyle of specific subgroups in the society..."(p. 4). In line with Roland Barthes' semiological framework, which stresses the construction of meaning through cultural symbols and myths by concentrating on narratives, captures the subjective and contextual nuances of how the Kumari tradition operates as a system of signs within Bhaktapur's Newar society.

Two purposively chosen participants—the Kumari's caretaker and a Kumari devotee— participated in semi-structured interviews. Exploring emerging themes is made flexible by the semi-structured framework, which also ensures that crucial aspects like rituals, symbols, individual experiences, and cultural meanings are covered. The reason for selecting these people is that they offer different but complimentary viewpoints on the Kumari tradition. The devotee's perspective reflects the larger socio-religious meanings and myths within the community, while the caretaker's close engagement offers a perspective that is grounded and pragmatic. Together, their stories provide for a thorough semiotic examination of the Kumari as a cultural symbol, incorporating both denotative (literal roles and rituals) and connotative (symbolic meanings and myths) dimensions. Field observations were carried out in Bhaktapur during important Kumari ceremonies and festivals. Field observations enrich interview data by offering a firsthand, contextual insight of the Kumari

tradition as it happens in real time. Observing rituals and festivals enables the researcher to uncover repeating signs and their cultural value, which may not be revealed only through verbal narrative.

V. THE EKANTA KUMARI AND THE GANA KUMARIS AS PROTECTING DEITIES OF BHAKTAPUR

Unlike her contemporaries in Kathmandu and Patan, Ekanta Kumari, the royal Kumari of Bhaktapur, lives a comparatively liberated life, attending school, playing freely, and interacting directly with visitors. “What follows concerns mainly this national Kumari, whose ritual life is more strictly regulated, although many of the rules apply, with some variations, to the ex-royal Kumaris of Lalitpur and Bhaktapur” (Letizia, 2013, p. 36). Ekanta Kumari enjoys being able to spend time with her family at home. Though she lives with her parents, she has an official residence (Kumari Chhen) in Dipankar Bahal, which is located in the city's northeast. In this regard, Tree (2014) illustrates:

The Bhaktapur Kumari was believed to manifest the traditional thirty-two lakshina of a Living Goddess but there was no longer any formal physical identification as there was in the selection process in Patan and Kathmandu. The priest in Bhaktapur now merely intuited perfection and there was no removing of outer garments to check the child's body for scars or blemishes. (p. 166)

In Bhaktapur, unlike Patan and Kathmandu, no hard and fast norms govern the selection of new Kumaris. She is not even required to wear red dresses all the time, as the Kumari of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bungamati do.

“Each of the three Malla cities has its own myth, claiming its own king as responsible for establishing the first Living Goddess in the valley...in Bhaktapur, the king generally attributed with instigating the practice was Trailokya Malla, who had ruled the city over the end of the sixteenth century” (Tree, 2014, p. 163-64). Bhaktapur has a flourishing Kumari worship tradition in which she is revered as Taleju's incarnation. During Dashain, the cult is still a vital part of Taleju and Nava Durga worship. On the ninth day of Dashain, she is taken to Mul Chowk in the royal palace for tantric worship surrounded by buffalo heads, signifying her goddess-like bravery. The Ekanta Kumari is initially chosen by the dyapala (caretaker of the Kumari) based on standard criteria. Before being selected as a Kumari, she must undergo rigorous testing. Kumari should have particular qualities: she should be free of physical defects, fearless in difficult situations, and, most importantly, she should not have entered puberty. The

dyapala responsible for the selection and care of the Ekanta Kumari, states:

Her ritual preparation, especially the use of the third eye and her traditional clothing, is closely linked to the Kumari's divine power. The third eye represents the spiritual perception of the goddess. Receiving the third eye gives the Kumari the power to see beyond the material world, as if Taleju's presence awakens within her. It is thought that by applying this ritual marking during particular ceremonies, the Kumari might act as a bridge between the divine and human worlds, drawing divine energy. (R. Shakya, personal communication, June 15, 2025)

The Kumari's clothing, which includes gold decorations, and a red robe, further emphasizes her celestial position. The attires are not mere clothes; they are sacred garments created with offerings to Taleju and mantras. When she puts it on, she transforms from a girl into the goddess herself. The change signifies the Kumari's readiness to carry out rites, bestow blessings, or take part in festivities and is both spiritual and symbolic. The third eye and clothing are thought to be crucial to summoning Taleju's power, setting the Kumari apart from an ordinary child.

The Gana Kumaris—nine temporary goddesses and two boys who embody Ganesh and Bhairava—represent the Navadurga and Astamatrika, strengthening the city's defensive boundaries through tantric rituals. “The Gana Kumaris are identified by name as the Astamatrika, the eight Mother Goddesses whose *pithas* encircle the city in a protective ring, together with Tripurasundari, the fierce emanation of Durga central to the Bhaktapur pantheon” (Tree, 2014, p. 173). Gupto (2018) further asserts:

Tripurasundari and other Matrkas have the unifying symbolism for the city of Bhaktapur as a Hindu yantra or mandala. They are the protectors fighting against the evil forces. The placement of the Matrkas around Tripurasundari can be architecturally conceived in terms of feminine guardianship of the town. Her temple is not found in other cities of the valley and hence she probably is the very local deity of Bhaktapur. (p. 89)

As the goddess of wisdom, she is linked to the symbols of unity and support. She is the power of wholeness, which is understood to be the entirety of being in the heart of the city and supporting it. The essence of knowledge, or nirvana, is the centre, and Tripurasundari is the woman who embodies it. Yantra— “the design as a whole represents sakti, the divine power which motivates the universe and essentially female,” —is the feminine object of meditation where the

knowledge is in the centre surrounded by Shivas and Matrkas (Allen, 1975, p. 2).

Devotees of Buddhism and Hinduism bend their foreheads to the Kumari, the living goddesses, with great reverence in order to grant their wishes. “People worship and present her offerings to wish for jobs, visa, prosperity and success” (Maharjan, 2024, p. 74). During a field visit to Bhaktapur's royal palace on the ninth day of Dashain, October 11, 2024, I observed a large crowd gathered outside Mul Chowk, eagerly awaiting the Ekanta Kumari's emergence from the Taleju Temple to receive the first flower as prasad, believing their greatest wishes to be fulfilled. In Nepalese ritual practice, the Kumari's sacred position is emphasized by her supposed power, which include prescience, healing abilities, and the ability to bestow blessings onto believers. Also, the mood swings of the Ekanta Kumari and the Gana Kumaris during tantric worship at Kumari Chowk on the ninth day of Dashain could prophesize “economic crisis, earthquakes and other bad omen” (Kayastha, 2022, p. 132). “Historically, the Kumari's role empowered Malla kings, as illustrated by the legend of Prithvi Narayan Shah receiving a blue lotus from a Bhaktapur Kumari, symbolizing divine power that fueled his conquest of the city” (Tree, 2014, p. 169). Taleju's earthly presence is symbolized by the Kumari, who is a symbol of strength, purity, and divine awareness. “The Kumari is looked upon with much veneration even by the non-Newars, including the Gorkhas” (Nepali, 2015, p. 313). Her worship represents the conviction that all living things, especially pure female forms, are home to the goddess. The legend on establishment of Taleju first in Bhaktapur asserts:

The famous Taleju temple of Bhaktapur is the oldest original Taleju temple in Nepal. In 1325, after the fall of Simraungraha, Harisinghadev of Tirhut, along with his family, ministers, and his deity Taleju Bhawani, were coming to seek political asylum in the parental kingdom of Bhaktapur. Harisinghadev died when a great disaster struck before reaching Dolakha. After that, leading the group, enduring a lot of hardships and suffering, Harisinghadev's queen Devaldevi finally succeeded in reaching the Yuthunium Rajkul (Bhaktapur Royal Palace) of her brother Rudra Malla. She also installed Taleju, which she brought with her, in the palace. (Shrestha, 2023, p. 572)

Taleju was permanently established as patron deity of the Mallas at the royal level. In this way, the Taleju culture began and developed in Nepal Mandala from the time of Devaldevi and Jayasthiti Malla. Bhaktapur was the capital city of Nepal Mandala even after the time of Jayasthiti Malla.

Although it was politically divided into three independent kingdoms, they were culturally all united under one umbrella and the cultural centre of all three kingdoms was Bhaktapur. "The ritual practice of celebrating the Dashain worship of Taleju in Kumari Chowk makes Kumari chowk the pith of Taleju and thus is more likely to contain the original chosen site for the establishment of Sriyantra" (Tiwari, 2023, p. 83).

VI. DENOTATION, CONNOTATION, AND MYTH OF THE KUMARI

The Kumari, at the denotative level, is a young Newar girl chosen after a rigorous procedure that includes both physical and ritual criteria. She wears gold and red clothing, complete with jewelry, cosmetics, and a highly embroidered crown. She is carried in a palanquin, validated by priests, and worshipped by devotees during her public appearances, like Dashain festival. These are the main signifiers in Barthes' framework: the girl, her dress, the palanquin, and the rites. For additional semiotic examination, they serve as the basis for the literal text of the Kumari tradition.

In the context of Bhaktapur's Newar community, the Kumari's signs have deep cultural and social connotations. As the Kumari, the young girl represents Taleju, the goddess of protection, and is symbolic of divine feminine power. Her youth and virginity represent spiritual strength and purity, which is consistent with Buddhist and Hindu conceptions of divine embodiment. With gold signifying divine abundance and red signifying life, fertility, and power, the red and gold clothing conveys a sense of grandeur and holiness. When the Ekanta Kumari enters Taleju Temple adorned with her third eye, she receives divine power. "The third eye is painted on her forehead that is considered as the eye of wisdom" (Poudel, 2022, p. 3580). The majestic ornate palanquin suggests authority and detachment from the everyday life, establishing the Kumari as a person who hovers between the worlds of the human and the divine. Public performances that symbolize communal solidarity and collective identity include the Kumari procession during Dashain. When devotees engage with the Kumari for blessings, it signifies a spiritual bond and strengthens the trust in her divine powers. A devotee who regularly visits the 'Kumari Chhen' during Dashain emphasized the belief that the Kumari's blessings can bring prosperity and protection from misfortune (S. Suwal, personal communication, April 2, 2025).

The Kumari tradition naturalizes ideological narratives that influence Bhaktapur's social and cultural order on a mythical level. According to Barthes, myth turns

history into nature and makes cultural creations seem like universal truths. By depicting the goddess's presence in a human girl as an enduring fact of Newar spirituality, the Kumari mythologizes divine authority. The sacredness of the Kumari is upheld by priests and followers, who legitimize the religious and social hierarchy and strengthen established power systems. The custom normalizes the connection between femininity and spirituality by honoring young girls as divine. By portraying the Kumari as a living goddess, the myth obscures the social effort that involved choosing her, making her divinity seem more like a natural state than a culturally produced process.

This study illustrates how the signs and rituals of the Kumari culture of Bhaktapur constitute a sophisticated semiotic system that conveys socio-cultural and divine meanings. With denotative elements (the girl, clothing, rituals) carrying connotative meanings (purity, authority, cohesion) and mythologizing stories of divinity, the study uses Barthes' framework to show how the Kumari serves as a signifier of divine power and cultural identity.

VII. CONCLUSION

The semiotic examination of the Kumari tradition in Bhaktapur, based on Roland Barthes' framework, demonstrates its function as a multidimensional sign system. The semiotic analysis of Kumari culture reveals a sophisticated system of signs that transmit both social and metaphysical meanings. At the denotative level, the community can easily identify the Kumari's ceremonies and physical presence as accessible signs. On a connotative level, these signs, which are deeply embedded in Newar mythology, stand for strength, purity, and societal harmony. At the mythological level, the Kumari naturalizes ideas of divine power and cultural identity. By striking a balance between tradition and contemporary criticisms, the Ekanta Kumari's remarkable freedom highlights Bhaktapur's distinctive practice and affirms the Kumari as a vital bridge between the community and the divine.

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