

## **Shrines and Identities in the Britain's Nepali Diaspora**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the tension between publicly affirmed religious identification and private religious practice among Britain's Nepali diaspora population. It compares census and survey figures for religious affiliation with religious shrines in people's homes. In some cases there is complete congruence between religious affiliation and home worship (most strikingly in the cases of Sherpas, whose affiliation and shrines are unequivocally Buddhist). Among many other groups, however, there is plenty of evidence of multiple belonging. The most common case is singular identification for census purposes and multiple practice, but there are also many instances of multiple identification when offered the opportunity. For example, when asked for their religion, Gurungs frequently affirm a Buddhist identity, but when given the option to be both Hindu and Buddhist, they frequently embrace it as it more closely describing their actual practice. Many Kirats keep no shrine at home because they believe that their tribal tradition is properly aniconic. Our material clearly shows that the distribution of ecumenical attitudes is not random, but reflects particular ethnic, regional, and caste histories within Nepal. The ethnic/caste makeup of Britain's Nepali diaspora is not identical to that of Nepal, mainly because of the history of Gurkha recruitment, and this demographic shift is reflected in the higher proportion of Buddhists in Britain. Nonetheless, we suspect that the findings of this study would be replicated in an urban context in Nepal.

Key words: multiple belonging, religious shrines, Hinduism, Buddhism, personal religion

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## Introduction

Migration often (though not always) gives rise to diaspora populations. Where there are diaspora populations, there are often (but not always) public conflicts over culture and religion. In the study of such conflicts, Vertovec (2011) suggests, social anthropologists are in a good position to question the homogenizing and totalizing views of culture that are often invoked. In particular, anthropologists are able to examine how far the conspicuous ritual and political statements made in the public sphere reflect what people actually do in the rest of their lives. In other words, they (and anyone who shares their commitment to ethnographic fieldwork) are well placed to ask and analyse in what ways Baumann's 'official discourse' is in tension with 'demotic discourses' (Baumann 1996). The issues raised by this tension are perhaps nowhere more salient than in contexts of changing identity such as religion in diaspora.

In this article we ask what kind of relationship there is between the actual practices of private shrine-making by Nepali migrants to the UK (most of whom arrived after 2004) and the complex and contested processes of public religious identification, which are perhaps easier to track and generalize about (though, as will be seen, they are very far from being straightforward).<sup>1</sup> The Vernacular Religion (VR) project brought together anthropologists from the University of Oxford (Gellner, Hausner), with Nepali social scientists based in the UK, who had set up their own research organization, the Centre for Nepali Studies UK (CNSUK), including the two co-authors (Laksamba, Adhikari) and Rajubabu Shrestha, as well as one full-time researcher (Bal Gopal Shrestha). As part of the project, in 2010-11, Adhikari, Laksamba, R. Shrestha, and B.G. Shrestha surveyed 300 households. The households were selected randomly (but with care to have representation from all sub-groups) from a larger non-random sample of 2,151 households (7,842 individuals) put together by CNSUK two years earlier (see Adhikari 2012 for details). The Vernacular Religion survey of 300 households collected, along with information about age, education, and employment, detailed data on levels and kinds of religious practice. After every interview, the respondents were asked permission to photograph their shrine, if they had one.

Our focus on ordinary shrines in people's homes may seem unusual. Historians of art have, not surprisingly, tended to focus on outstanding images and objects of veneration, on objects of great ritual significance, or on objects that might be of interest to Western art dealers because of their visual or practical uniqueness. Anthropologists of material culture have naturally reacted against this trend and concentrated on mundane or popular art (e.g. Pinney 2004), but they have not done as much in this field as might have been expected. Here we focus on the vernacular ritual objects that are used by Nepalis for everyday worship in their homes and in order to create private sacred spaces in a new country. We suggest that diaspora Nepalis<sup>2</sup> use

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<sup>1</sup> We thank the AHRC and ESRC for the funding which made possible the Religion and Society programme directed by Linda Woodhead ([www.religionandsociety.org](http://www.religionandsociety.org)); this paper is based on research carried out as part of a project (Vernacular Religion: Varieties of Religiosity in the Nepali Diaspora) sponsored by that programme. We thank also Bal Gopal Shrestha and Rajubabu Shrestha, who also assisted in the collection of data for the Vernacular Religion project, for their input. In this paper all quotations from informants are taken from interviews with Chandra Laksamba and all photographs (except Plates 1 and 2 by Bal Gopal Shrestha) are also by him. We thank all those who so graciously agreed to be interviewed and photographed. They have all given permission for the photographs of them and their shrines to be used.

<sup>2</sup> We are aware that many diaspora scholars would question whether Nepalis constitute a diaspora given how young the community is (Tölölyan 2012). However, Nepalis in the UK and elsewhere frequently refer to themselves as a diaspora and there is even a Nepali magazine based in London called *Diaspora*.

various material strategies to express their relationship (or lack of relationship) to different religious currents (Buddhist, Hindu, shamanist, and other), but also that particular patterns of expression are difficult to ascertain: like other modes of visual self-representation, personal preferences or circumstances may determine the configurations of a shrine as much as religious identification does. Sometimes shrines are fully aligned with explicitly asserted political or ethnic affiliations, while at other times they seem to be entirely independent of or even at odds with them.<sup>3</sup>

### **The emergence of Nepali national identity**

The stretch of hills and adjoining plains and mountains on the southern flanks of the Himalayas that we know today as Nepal was united under a single ruler, Prithvi Narayan Shah, for the first time in the 1760s. His descendants continued their conquests both west and east in the decades that followed, but with the Treaty of Sugauli signed with the East India Company in 1816, Nepal was restricted, more or less, to its present boundaries (four districts in the mid and far west Tarai were added as a reward for backing the British in the 1857 Indian rebellion). The idea of uniting all the diverse subjects of the Shah dynasty within one state system was expressed by the Muluki Ain or National Legal Code of 1854. It was supposedly modelled on the Code Napoleon, which the then Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana had learned about on his visit to Paris (Whelpton 1991). But a legal code less like the Code Napoleon it would be hard to imagine, since it was built on the principles of traditional Hindu law, and therefore sought to maintain and reinforce caste differences: Brahmins (in line with the Hindu idea that killing Brahmins, women, children, or cows were great sins) were not subject to capital punishment; and in fact many punishments varied with the caste of the offender.

The notions of Nepal as a nation, Nepali as a national language, and the country as a cultural unit, only began to be promoted, and then only very tentatively, in the first half of the twentieth century while the country was still under the dictatorial rule of the hereditary Rana Prime Ministers (Burghart 1984). The nation-building period par excellence came only with the introduction of King Mahendra's non-party Panchayat regime (an authoritarian and modernizing guided democracy under the leadership of the king).<sup>4</sup> This configuration lasted thirty years, from 1960 to 1990, when it was overthrown by a revolution known as 'the People's Movement' (*jan andolan*). Favourite slogans of the Panchayat regime – alongside those emphasizing the leadership of the King and the role of the monarchy in bringing democracy, and advancing development, and guaranteeing national integration – were variations on 'unity in diversity' and 'religious tolerance' as hallmarks of Nepal. Political parties were banned: it was claimed that they encouraged sectional (or 'communal' as it is known in South Asia) interests. Organizations representing particular ethnic groups were not permitted. There was no positive discrimination for 'tribals' or 'untouchables' (Dalits) as established in India from 1947. The dominant ideology

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<sup>3</sup> This tension is examined in Hausner & Gellner (2013) and Gellner & Hausner (2014). On the themes of this paper, see also Gellner, Hausner, & Shrestha (2014) and Pariyar, Shrestha, & Gellner (2014).

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to the political history of Nepal in this period, see Hachhethu & Gellner (2010). For more detailed treatments, see Joshi & Rose (1966), Hoftun, Raeper, & Whelpton (1999), and Whelpton (2005). For introductions to the tumultuous events of the Maoist insurgency/civil war (1996-2006), see Hutt (2004), Thapa (2004), Pettigrew (2013), and Adhikari (2014). As well as describing the Maoist insurgency, Jha (2014) is a key introduction to the Madheshi issue.

was that all Nepalis, whatever their background, were now equal (an official position that – as figures collected later and presented in the second column of Table 2 below – hid considerable advantage for high castes). Foreigners who asked about caste occasionally found themselves rebuked for bringing up something that no longer existed.

These dynamics all changed with the collapse of the Panchayat regime in 1990 and the reintroduction of party politics. The new constitution still banned parties based on communal interests, but increasingly ethnic parties were formed anyway. There was an enormous efflorescence of ethnic activism (Lawoti 2005; Gellner et al. 2008; Hangen 2010); a decade later the ethnic issue was pushed still further up the political agenda because of the support it received from the Maoists (Hutt 2004; Lawoti & Pahari 2010; Adhikari 2014; Jha 2014). The election of a Constituent Assembly in 2008, where the Maoists were the largest party, was followed rapidly by the removal of the King, and declarations that federalism, republicanism, and secularism would be foundational principles of the new constitution. This first Constituent Assembly collapsed in May 2012 without being able to produce a constitution (Adhikari & Gellner 2016). New elections were held in November 2013 (Gellner 2014), which resulted in a very different balance of power: the Maoists were reduced to third place and the role official opposition. Following the devastating earthquakes of April and May 2015, a new constitution was declared in September 2015. However, the country immediately became mired in controversy and ethnic conflict, as the Tharus and Madheshis in the plains protested against what they saw as discriminatory provisions.

The years of increasing political turmoil, starting just before 1990, were also the years in which migration from Nepal took off. Nepalis have long migrated, usually in search of land, and latterly in search of jobs and other forms of livelihood. Thus, there are millions of Nepalis in India, particularly in northeast India, where they are famous as cattle herders. Many of these migrants continued onwards into Burma and others went still further into Thailand in the first half of the twentieth century. A second type and wave of Nepali migration began even before Indian independence in 1947, but accelerated after it: here Nepalis, rather than migrating east in search of land, went south and west looking for jobs as coolies, porters, waiters, and watchmen in the towns and cities of India. A third wave of migration began in the late 1980s as Nepalis started to go further afield: to the Gulf, to Southeast Asia, to Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. Others began to arrive in Europe, particularly the UK, and in North America and Australasia: often initially as students, but many as economic migrants such as highly skilled migrants or skilled work permit holders as well. In the UK there was the special link with the Gurkha brigade of the British army: post-1997 retirees were given the right to settle in the UK in 2004; following a public campaign and the defeat of Gordon Brown's government on the issue in 2009, pre-1997 retirees with at least four years' service were also granted the same right.<sup>5</sup>

The more settled and better-off of these diaspora populations were and are in increasingly close touch with events in Nepal and often provide support for particular movements and parties within Nepal. They also support philanthropic efforts in Nepal and increasingly in their new locations in the UK. Although far removed from their homeland, they tend to recreate, or create

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<sup>5</sup> Nepali/Gorkhali migration history is summarized in Gellner (2013). On labour migrants to Delhi, see Thieme (2006), and to Qatar, Bruslé (2010, 2014). On Nepalis in the UK, see Adhikari (2012) including Laksamba (2012).

in a new form, the cultural and religious practices of Nepal. In so far as they are new forms, they are equally to be found in Nepal.

### **Changing religious and cultural identities**

Given the fact that Nepal encompasses terrain stretching from the Tibetan plateau and high Himalayas in the north to the flat Gangetic plains in the south, taking in foothills (which would count as mountains anywhere else) in between, it is hardly surprising that Nepal is culturally extremely diverse. It could well be argued that it is even more diverse than mere geographical determinism would predict, exemplifying a sociological pleasure in luxuriant diversity for its own sake, packing in as much linguistic, cultural, and religious difference as is humanly possible within short distances from valley to valley and village to village, divided as they are by ridges, rivers, and forest.

One illustration of this diversity can be seen in the official recognition of 59 Janajati groups ('nationalities') as well as numerous caste groups making a total of 125 castes and Janajati groups registered in the census of 2011. Before 1990 Janajati groups were usually referred to as 'hill tribes' (or just 'tribes' – some of them, like the Tharus, are in fact found in the plains), After 1990 they are often, loosely, called 'ethnic groups'; they correspond to what in India are called Scheduled Tribes (but their proportion of the population in Nepal is much higher than it is in India). A still unpublished 2011 government field survey by Professor Om Gurung, an anthropologist at Tribhuvan University, suggested that a further 25 groups should be recognized (it also found that two of the 59 officially listed groups did not exist). Several of these 59 groups are tiny, with some having fewer than 100 members. The main ones are large, e.g. Magar (1.8 million), Tharu (1.7 million), Tamang (1.5 million), Newar (1.3 million), Rai (0.6 million), and Gurung (0.5 a million). These sizable populations have, over the last two decades, become major players in Nepal's ethnic politics.

The major macro categories ('Khas-Arya', 'Dalit', 'Janajati', 'Madheshi' – people of the plains) and their referents are shown in Table 1. Membership in the macro categories is disputed and fluid. For people in the plains, everyone in the hills is a Pahadi: Khas-Arya, Dalit, and Janajati alike. Who exactly should belong in the Madheshi category is a highly political and contentious subject. Some Tharus (in the east of the country) are happy to be included in Madheshi political movements; others (more in the west) are vociferously opposed to being clubbed together with Madheshis. The term Janajati was fixed, for a time, by government recognition granted in the late 1990s. In 1994 Janajati intellectuals declared 'Janajati' to be equivalent to 'Adivasi' (indigenous). But as the political advantages of indigeneity became clearer, the category expanded, so that in the dying days of the Constituent Assembly's tenure, in May 2012, the government even conceded indigenous people's status to the Bahuns and Chhetris, thereby approximating Nepal to the Northeast of India where almost 100% of the population is indigenous.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Five days later the government reversed this decision under pressure from the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). On the whole history of this Bahun-Chhetri mobilization, debate over the category 'indigenous', and the collapse of the first Constituent Assembly, see Adhikari & Gellner (2016).

<insert Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 around here>

In the diaspora these larger macro categories (shown in Table 1) continue to be important but to a lesser extent than in Nepal (where, since 2008, proportional reservations for political seats and quotas for jobs in public service depend on them). Exactly how diaspora ethnic politics play out depends very much on the size of the population. Where Nepalis are few (as in Scotland or in Belgium), distinctions between different castes and ethnic groups are downplayed. Where the population is larger, internal differences begin to loom larger as well (Gellner, Hausner, & Shrestha 2014). Ex-Gurkha identity is particularly important in the UK. The salient caste and ethnic groups, and how their balance changes between different contexts, are shown in Table 2. The most striking differences are the Gurungs, who are only 2.4% of the population of Nepal but over 20% of the Nepali population in the UK, and the Limbus who are just 1.6% in Nepal but nearly 10% in the UK. These differences are due to the fact that the British Army's Gurkha brigade historically recruited young men mainly from hill Janajati backgrounds, especially Magars, Gurungs, Rais, and Limbus. Other groups (e.g. Tamangs) often managed to get themselves recruited by passing as Gurungs.

The figures for religion in Nepal are shown in Table 3. They show that Hindus constitute the vast majority in Nepal, but there has been a drop-off in their numbers since 1990, following the fall of the Panchayat regime. Some Magar and Tharu activists have campaigned for 'their' people to return their religion as Buddhist. Many Limbus and some Rais have been increasingly inclined to adopt the label 'Kirati', which was first introduced in 1991.<sup>7</sup> The ways in which the various categories have shifted with the move to the UK are shown in Table 4.

A major shift, between Nepal and the UK, is evident in the much lower proportion of Hindus. Nonetheless, if one adds up the various dual identities (allowed in the surveys, but not in censuses), Hindus still account for 55% of the UK's Nepali population. Buddhists certainly make up a much larger proportion in the UK (more like 40% as opposed to around 10% in Nepal). The reason for this is the changed ethnic balance, with a much higher proportion of Gurungs, Thakalis, and Sherpas than in Nepal. Only Tamangs seem to be present in the UK in smaller numbers than in Nepal, which must be put down (a) to the historical ban on their being recruited into the Gurkhas, and (b) (which is not unconnected) to their relative poverty and disadvantage, compared to the Janajati groups that were regularly recruited.

Table 4 has two different columns with the figures from the VR survey. One shows the breakdown of religious identification when people were simply asked their religion ('before prompt'). The second column shows the response after they were read out a list of possibilities ('after prompt'), which included multiple responses (e.g. 'Hindu and Buddhist'). A comparison of the two columns shows that about 15% of people, once made aware that they are allowed to have multiple religious affiliations, opt for two or more religions. Many people (especially Gurungs) shift from being simply 'Buddhist' to the 'Hindu + Buddhist' category.

Thus, multiple religious belonging is much more common among some Nepali groups than among others (Table 4). To the far right of the table are the Sherpas, the most strongly and unequivocally Buddhist group: they remain 100% Buddhist, even when made aware that a dual

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<sup>7</sup> See Gaenszle (2000) for detailed discussion of the term 'Kirati/Kiranti'. We prefer the form 'Kirata/Kirati' because Kirat groups themselves argue that the nasal sound is absent in their own languages.

religious identity is possible and allowed. At the other end of the spectrum are the Bahuns (Brahmans) who are 91.6% Hindu. In between, there are many different options, with the Gurungs and the various Kirati groups (Limbu, Rai, Sunuwar) particularly divided between the various options.

### **Which shrines for which religions?**

Religious identification for Nepalis is clearly not a straightforward issue. Both in Nepal and in the UK, religion rather seems a fluid and, for some, an explicitly political category. But do these various categorical distinctions, which are of so much interest to activists and religious specialists seeking to firm up their support base, matter to 'ordinary' lay people? In their daily practice do they observe any of the boundaries that census-takers and surveyors seek to describe? Can shrines help us to answer the question about affiliation as far as people's daily practice is concerned?

Fifteen per cent of the 300 households surveyed had no shrine. In fact for most of the categories the figures were lower (under 10%) with three notable exceptions: of those who classified themselves as Kirati nearly one third had no shrine; of Christians, nearly two thirds had no shrine; and half of the 'non-religious' (three out of six respondents) had no shrine. That Christians should put more emphasis on the Bible than a visible altar and that the 'non-religious' should lack a shrine is hardly surprising (the three cases of 'non-religious' household heads who none the less had a shrine in their house, we take to support the frequently gendered distinction between public affiliation, of interest to the male household head, and actual daily practice, by his wife).

The fact that significant number of Rais, Limbus, and Sunuwars (the Kirati groups) did not have a shrine at home reflects the fact that they have a distinctly different attitude to shrines and icons. As a tribal religion, based on oral scriptures, self-conscious adherents of traditionalist Kirati religion are aware that properly the Kirati tradition is aniconic. As one informant put it:

Kirat people just need three water pots and some Titepati leaves to worship [the deities] Him Mang, Yuma, Theba, and Tagera Ningwaphumang. Once worship is over, these will be cleaned [and put away]... We Kirat do not have photos of our gods and goddesses. No one has seen the true likeness of God. Statues and pictures of God and Goddess are all imaginary. (Limbu, Kirati religion, Plate 10)

Thus, those who chose the 'Kirati' identity were much more likely not to have statues in their shrines. Only 40% of Kirati-identified had statues; whereas the figure for all other categories (Christians excepted) was 68% or more.

It may be that what we are seeing here is the fluidity of the Kirati religious label and a clear demonstration that one cannot read off any particular practice from a given census category. It may well be that the 40% of Kirati-identified who possessed statues were making a political point, by claiming their religion as Kirati, when in fact their practice was a mixture of Hindu and Kirati (often Hinduism for daily worship, Kirati tradition at birth and death). A Gurung, active in the Gurung cultural organization, Tamu Dhee, admitted as much: "In fact I am both Buddhist and Hindu. I practise both religions in the real situation. But I tell people that I am Buddhist because we perform birth and death rites in the Buddhist way." And indeed this informant had a

main silver shrine with Hindu holy men and divinities, with Buddhist images (clearly actively worshipped) placed right next to it (see Plates 17-19).

The simplest shrines are made on a shelf in the sitting room or bedroom, or a cupboard shelf in the kitchen or storeroom.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes even a small corner shelf on the staircase or landing may serve the purpose of creating an altar. A few posters or small framed pictures with a space to put offerings in front of them are all that is necessary; a bell, and vessels for water and coloured powder may be added. Sometimes a box with a door (such a bread bin) may be used to provide a complete enclosure.

Much more elaborate shrines are of course possible, when a whole room, or, as in one case, an entire garden shed, is devoted to creating a sacred space. These more elaborate (and relatively rare) cases tend to be found where the person concerned is wholly committed to one or other religion, usually Hinduism or Buddhism. Some committed Nepali Christians turn the whole home into a sacred space in the same way. Whether or not one does this depends partly on religious inclination, but it also determined by constraints such as how long they have been settled in the UK and whether or not they own their own house.

79% of the 300 households surveyed had photos or posters of gods, 78% holy objects (excluding photos, statues, and texts), 64% had statues, and 33% had holy texts. The average number per household of all holy items kept in the shrine was 11, and that of posters was 3.34, of statues 2.14, of religious texts 1.03, and of other holy objects (such as flasks bells, or oil lamps) 4.98. Of total posters in the shrines of all responding households, 81% were Hindu, 14% Buddhist, and 5% 'other'.

The inclusive nature of Hinduism, the fact that Hindu gods are part of the pantheon and cosmology, whereas the Buddha is rarely very present for straight Hindus, was clear in the from people's shrines. Thus, 99% of posters in Bahun household shrines were Hindu and only 1% were Buddhist. Among households who identified as Buddhist, 42% of the posters in their shrines were Hindu. Likewise, in the shrines of those who identified as both Hindu and Buddhist, 82% of the posters were of Hindu gods. The equivalent figures for those identifying as Kirat, Kirat and Hindu, and Kirat and Buddhist were 84%, 88%, and 67% respectively. The position of Sherpas as strictly Tibetan Buddhist was clear: not a single Sherpa household had a Hindu poster, whereas 96.4% had Buddhist posters.

A similar pattern is found with statues: Hindus are much less likely to have Buddhist statues than Buddhists are to have Hindu ones. Thus only 10% of statues in all Hindus households were related to Buddhism, but 36% of such items of all Buddhists households and 71% of them at the households of all those identifying as both Buddhist and Hindu were Hindu statues. A similar pattern was also found among Kirat *dharma* followers: 77% of statues at the shrines of Kirat followers were related to Hinduism, as were 78% of those who were both Kirat and Hindu, and 64% of those who were both Kirat and Buddhist.

Taking all this variation into account, we propose a model as shown in Table 5. We borrow the term 'congruence' from Mark Chaves (2010), who argued, quite rightly, that "attitudes and

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<sup>8</sup> One young couple in Scotland dispensed with the need for any material object or space: they had a picture of the god Ganesh saved on their laptop and called it up to worship whenever they want to; which they justified as more environmentally friendly, as well as politic, since their landlord might not like them burning incense. Sometimes they also participated via Skype in rituals back home.



behavior correlate only weakly, and collections of apparently related ideas and practices rarely cohere into logically unified, mutually reinforcing, seamless webs ... This is true of culture in general, and it is true of religious culture in particular” (Chaves 2010: 2).<sup>9</sup> In particular, it is naïve of scholars to expect that people will always hold consistent beliefs, that their actions and their beliefs will always be consistent with one another, or that what they do across different contexts will always be entirely consistent. Consistency may occur, but it is rather more unusual than inconsistency. In particular, the idea that everyone should have one and only religious identity is relatively new in the South Asian context and its arrival there has to do with the introduction of modernity, however mediated. Many Nepalis are starting to accept that each individual should have one and only one religious identity so that they feel nonplussed or defensive when they do not. Even more than this, many of them seem to assume that each ethnic group ought to share a single religious identity that is authentically and originally theirs; hence the fierce debates about religious identity that are particularly characteristic of Limbu/Kirati and Gurung groups, but also to be found among the Magars. (Interestingly, Newar intellectuals seem to have simply accepted that Newars have different religions, and on the whole, one or two apart, do not attempt to excavate any ‘true’ Newar religion.)<sup>10</sup>

<Insert Table 5 here>

Thus, there are many Nepalis in the UK who do try and sometimes succeed in being ‘congruent’. On the whole, religious specialists tend to be purists who try hard to be consistent in their practice, and it is no surprise to find them being so (Plates 1-2). Some examples of lay people who are also congruent in this manner are shown in Plates 3-10. We have noted already that there are many Nepalis who claim a unitary identity, usually for reasons of ethnic, cultural, and/or religious politics, while their practice remains multiple (e.g. Plates 11-12, 17-18).

There are also those who accept a multiple identity and practice multiply (though the descriptor may be contested: Hinduism is usually a happy label for such inclusivist attitudes) (see Plates 13-16). Others accept the dominant unitary identity expectation, and realize that their own practice contravenes it. One man, a Magar and a Hindu, with no shrine in his house, but a Hindu shrine in his shop, said:

Actually I am in ‘confusion’ as to which dharma I observe. In my opinion perhaps I follow two religions: Buddhism and Hinduism. Because I observe all the Hindu festivals like Dasain and Tihar. And I go for *darshan* [sacred vision of deities] to both [Hindu] temples and [Buddhist] *gompas*. But when we die, we have to make use of Lamas. I myself do not do any scripture recitation, nor do my wife or sons.

Here we have a self-conscious exploration of what it means to identify multiply, and to practise multiply, in the context of a modernity that assumes singularity and congruence. There are also those who solve the problem by giving each individual a free choice. Nepaldhan Rai, a Roman Catholic, whose wife is Hindu (see Plates 20-22 below), explained the situation as follows:

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<sup>9</sup> The ideas here – the distinction between (census) category and (everyday) practice; and the difference between being multiple vs. being unitary in one’s religious identity – are examined in Hausner & Gellner (2012) and Gellner & Hausner (2013).

<sup>10</sup> For a brief description of the ideas and writings of one Newar intellectual, Baldev Juju, who has tried to argue for a single ‘Newar religion’ underlying the apparent division into Hinduism and Buddhism, see Gellner (2011).

There are no restrictions on religion in my family. They can become Buddhist, Muslim, Kirat, and so on. I want to see their happiness just like me. I am a happier person since I became a Christian. I would not stop my son becoming Muslim if he believed that it was for him. In my opinion, we do religious practice to feel happy. My wife feels happy when she does Saibaba *bhajan* [hymn-singing to Sai Baba]. So, I do not stop her doing this and I do not like to take away her happiness. This is my philosophy (*darshan*) of life. I do believe in democracy and I want to see democracy in religion as well.

## Conclusion

To what extent are individual lay shrines congruent with people's categorically asserted religious identities? As we have shown, sometimes they are and sometimes they are not. Geertz would appear to have been uncharacteristically naïve here: "Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing, sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other" (1973: 90). He had, perhaps, forgotten internally pluralist or highly diverse societies, where the politics of religious identification will likely mean that one cannot simply read identity from symbol. The presence of the goddess Sarasvati or Durga on someone's shrine does not necessarily mean that that person is Hindu: he or she could be Buddhist, Bon, Kirati, or some combination of all these categories.

Sometimes, it turns out, religious images are just that: symbols that evoke religiosity writ large; the content of what they convey or their standard identifying category (Sarasvati and Durga as 'Hindu' goddesses, for example) is less important than that they symbolize devotion and divinity. Having a shrine is more important in these instances than the specific objects or images that may be in that shrine. A religious category may be asserted, but equally, multiplicity may be the underlying semantic message of these collage-like altars. Still others may be 'cabinets' or collections of religiosity: simply being a holy symbol – from any so-called world religion – is sufficient to constitute an object's worth in an altar. Conversely, in some cases, as we have seen, refusing to display or use icons may also be a statement of religious intent.

Shrines are a different way in to the problem of religious identity and practice: they may reflect a person's articulated religious identification, or they may demonstrate a different leaning. They are an articulation or assertion of religious identity, a means to express devotion to a particular deity or multiple deities. What we have stressed here is that they are private, religious spaces in one's own home as compared to a public showing or attendance at a collective event, and as such speak to personal or soteriological religion rather than to collective religion, or religious affiliation as demonstrated through group identification.

When an individual or a family is publicly associated with a given religious organization or an activist movement that depends on religious identity, shrines at home may go further to confirm that identity. But this congruence is not always found: some activist members of religious organizations who might be thought to position themselves in opposition to mainstream religiosity have personal shrines that actually reflect a dominant soteriology. Shrines may reflect a spoken category or resist it. They may be consonant with a category, or they may constitute a practice – whatever worship, prayer, or thought that emerges from its owner's encounter with the icon or holy object – that is at odds with the articulation of the owner's category. That incongruity may remain unresolved, or a new more encompassing category may emerge. What

had seemed incongruent is no longer so, from the new more encompassing point of view. Multiplicity is not aberrant in South Asian religions: a new form, a new adaptation, a new divergence works just as well as attempts to consolidate or unify in the name of purity and reform. It is a different mode of religious change, one where proliferation is not anathema to the very tenets of religiosity.

Personal religion is capable of evading the sharp lines and clear articulations of public or collective religion, since there is no one questioning the category: shrines are a way – or better, a place – to be religious without being obliged to narrate religiosity. There is thus a striking contrast between the ecumenism of many personal shrines, on the one hand, and, on the other, the public campaigns to establish new temples in the name of particular religions in the UK. Although some Nepalis had thought that it might be possible to have a Hindu temple with a Buddhist *caitya* (small stupa or monument) attached, as is frequently found in Nepal, in practice this goal has so far proved impossible, and separate religious sites are now planned for Hindu and Buddhist organizations.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, plans for a temple in Ashford, Kent (the greatest centre of Limbu settlement in the UK), that was originally envisaged as a shared space for both the reformist Satyahang movement and the traditionalist Kirati religion, had to be abandoned.

A final remark is in order about the possible pitfalls of a focus on diaspora: as far as personal shrines are concerned, no clear differences between what people do in diaspora and what they do in Nepal are apparent (with the sole difference that some people in the UK are constrained by the premises in which they live to have smaller, less elaborate shrines). Nothing we have found stands in opposition to religious trends in Nepal. Diaspora in this instance is a red herring, except to indicate that people's religious views and practices inside the home remain remarkably consistent across space.<sup>12</sup> Arguably there is a sharper distinction between public and private in the diasporic religious context, such that the tensions we see in building public religious spaces reflect a more consistent unitary religious positioning, while multiplicity remains a frequent symbolic discourse within people's homes.<sup>13</sup> This possibility, if borne out by further research, would confirm what South Asianists have long suspected: that the distinctions so prized in the West between the public and the private domains do not have the same weight in South Asia. For Nepalis in Britain, shrines remain a place of multiple and sometimes incongruent religious practice, while public spaces have started to become places of unitary categorical assertions, in keeping with modernist views of religion and the position of the national census that one may have one and only one religious affiliation.

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<sup>11</sup> The planned Non-Resident Nepali house in London is intended to have a Swayambhu and a Pashupati shrine side by side. In this more political and less religious context, this may prove acceptable.

<sup>12</sup> More than half of those surveyed did, however, say that they did less religious practice than in Nepal (one third said they did the same amount as in Nepal).

<sup>13</sup> This difference, at least, would be consistent with the trends for greater compartmentalization and more self-conscious alignment with global or world-religious models in the diaspora, as summarized by Vertovec (2000).

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