

VISITING NEPAL AFTER 34 YEARS

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This brief essay is a preliminary report of a multi-year project at the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan (Minpaku), which involves the issue of repatriation as its essential component.¹ What is presented here, therefore, is mainly the objectives of the project and initial observations rather than conclusions or insights gained from the completed project. The project aims to explore a new mode of collaboration between museum and source community by utilizing the past audio and audiovisual documentation of music. As part of the institution-wide initiative for redefining the museum as a forum (Cameron 1971; Yoshida 2011), it also serves as a pilot project to explore innovative ways to utilize the archived materials, not simply to return the collected materials to source community but to imagine a mode of collaboration which allows the collected materials to connect the two parties in mutually beneficial manner.

1. Research Project in 1982

In 1982, Japanese ethnomusicologist Fujii Tomoaki assembled a team of six scholars to conduct a research project on performing arts in Nepal.² The team stayed in the central and western parts of Nepal for the period of three months (from July to October). The members of the team had various disciplinary affiliations, including ethnomusicology, anthropology, art history and comparative literature, reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of the project.³ As one of its main objectives, the team investigated a caste of strolling/itinerant musicians, then known as Gaine. Fujii's interest in Gaine music began in 1964 through his chance encounter with street musicians in the capital city of Kathmandu during his first visit to Nepal, and it was further intensified in 1968, when he visited Batulecaur village in which one of the largest Gaine settlement was located. He made a limited number of audio recordings during these two short visits.

At the time of the 1982 research, Fujii was a professor of ethnomusicology in the research department of Minpaku. Umesao Tadao, well-known anthropologist and founding Director-General of Minpaku, had argued that audiovisual documentation is just as important as collecting tangible materials for the Minpaku's collection and his assertion led to the establishment of a facility (a studio and editing rooms) within the museum and the allocation of annual budget to produce ethnographic films. Since its first audiovisual documentation overseas in 1980, Minpaku has produced hundreds of ethnographic films, many of which can be viewed at audiovisual booths at the museum. Fujii proposed to the museum that audiovisual documentation of performing arts in Nepal should be added to the Minpaku collection. Endorsing the proposal, Minpaku dispatched a professional film crew to work with Fujii's research team. Based on the footage collected in 1982, Fujii eventually produced a short film, *Gaine: Minstrels of the Himalaya* in 1985.

The team located several Gaine villages in Central and Western Nepal, but decided to concentrate on Batulecaur village in Kaski Province, which was considered the most important center for Gaine musicians (Fujii 1984). He had learned the symbolic importance of Batulecaur as many of the musicians who claimed to come from there were in fact native to other Gaine settlements (Fujii 1990). The Batulecaur village was located on the outskirts of Pokhara, the world famous tourist destination with a magnificent view of the Himalayas.

Batulecaur is a multi-caste village and each of the ten different castes had their own areas of living. The Gaine settlement, located in the south-eastern corner of the village, had 32 houses with a total population of about 170. Fujii's team selected several areas for investigation: 1) the physical layout of the village, 2) pattern of property ownership, 3) kinship relations, 4) religious beliefs and practices, 5) geographical range and period of their performance activities, 6) transmission of music, and 7) musical characteristics (Fujii 1990).

¹ The project, Reutilization and Sharing of Archival Materials on Musical Traditions of Nepal led by Minami Makito, began in 2016 and it currently has seven members.

² Fujii is best known outside of Japan by his role as general editor for the JVC Video Anthology of World Music and Dance (1988), whose English version was later distributed worldwide through Smithsonian/Folkways (1990). The members of the research team included Fujii Tomoaki (leader, ethnomusicology), Takahashi Akihiro (ethnomusicology), Suzuki Michiko (comparative literature), Baba Yuji (anthropology), and Higuchi Akira (musicology).

³ The research project Scientific Research in ethnomusicology was funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education while the expenses of audiovisual documentation was provided by the national Museum of Ethnology where Fujii served as a professor.

They conducted a door-to-door survey of all 34 households, recording biographical and occupational information of all villagers. The team recorded 81 songs with sarangi accompaniment.

2. Gaine/Gandharba

Gaine refer to a caste of strolling musicians in Nepal, who are placed at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy. They are categorized today as one of dalit (formerly “untouchable”) castes. Although used by the community members themselves during the 1982 research, Gaine is the term with strong derogatory connotations and has been gradually replaced by more respectable Gandharba which is the name for celestial musicians in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Although caste system was legally banned in 1964, Gandharba and other dalit groups continue to experience social exclusion and caste-based discrimination on a daily basis (Moisala 2013).



FIGURE 1: Map of Nepal indicating the provinces where Gandharba are concentrated

Most Gandharba live in central and western provinces of Nepal, particularly Kaski, Chitwan, Dang and Surkhet (FIGURE 1). According to the 2011 census, there are 6,791 Gandharba, constituting a tiny fraction (0.03%) of Nepal’s net population. Despite their insignificant number, Gandharba are well-known because they travel all over Nepal and even to Nepali communities in India.



FIGURE 2: *Sarangi* player

Music making is the main hereditary occupation for male Gandharba: they traditionally walked from house to house and from village to village, singing songs and accompanying themselves on sarangi (4-string short-necked bowed lute), which is their visual and audible hallmark (Figure 2). They receive small money or grains for their service. Their repertoire includes a wide range of songs such as love songs, religious and auspicious songs, and heroic ballads, songs describing experiences of Gurkha soldiers and songs including social and political criticism. As Gandharba travel widely, they have served as a source of current news from outside of the immediate vicinity, and some Gandharba even characterize themselves as “a traveling newspaper” (Weisethaunet 1997: 140) or “singing newspapers” (Moisala 2013: 17). They were also engaged in fishing when they did not work as strolling musicians. Female Gandharba worked as farmers and dancers. In some rare cases, women accompanied their husbands going from village to village as a singer.

3. Revisiting the Village after 34 years

In 2016, Minami Makito, my colleague at Minpaku and anthropologist specializing in Nepali culture, and I had an opportunity to visit Batulecaur 34 years after the research by Fujii’s team.⁴ We had an audiovisual project to document Hindu weddings in Nepal as part of the renewal of our South Asia gallery. Watching all the films previously produced by the museum on Nepal in preparation of the upcoming documentation, we conceived the idea of a follow-up visit with those who were documented in 1982. We decided to trace the people whose activities were captured in the films and to learn about the changes that had occurred to the community during the intervening years. We thought that revisiting Batulecaur would be a golden opportunity to study the long-term changes. Another purpose of the visit was to share the research result by screening the film to the community.



FIGURE 3: Welcoming music and dance at Batulecaur. The woman dancing in the middle is Mina who appeared in the film based on the 1982 documentation.

When we visited Batulecaur in January, 2016, we were first entertained with music and dance by the villagers, which began rather spontaneously. The excitement of the villagers about our visit was evident. Some remembered the 1982 documentation well (Figure 3). It took us some time to realize that the two sisters, Man Maya and Mina, who danced for us in 2016 were in fact in the 1982 films. Our cameraman was the only person from the 1982, but the villagers could not recognize the middle-age man right away, who had been a slim young assistant to the film crew.

⁴ In 2008, the museum launched a multi-year project to renew our main galleries, and assigned the curatorial team for each gallery to a renewal plan. The team in charge of South Asian gallery decided to focus on Hindu wedding ceremonies as one of the exhibition themes. By juxtaposing and comparing wedding ceremonies from different regions of South Asia, we hope to demonstrate both their commonality and diversity with materials and audiovisual footage. The museum has already produced the films on the subject from South and West India. Given the specialized areas of the faculty members, we will send the film crew to document wedding ceremonies in Nepal. Minami and I documented two contrasting weddings: one of the high-caste Bahun (Brahman) community in the middle of urban Kathmandu and the other of the low-caste Damai community in the mountain region.

In the afternoon, we first showed the film on a laptop computer, which many villagers gathered to watch with a great deal of interest despite the tiny screen and poor sound (Figure 4). To create a more congenial atmosphere to watch the films, we managed to rent a projector from the Pokhara Museum, and after dark, screened the films at the site where the community hall was in the process of construction. About 200 out of 300 villagers were in the audience, indicating the high level of their interest.



FIGURE 4: Documenting the villagers' reaction to the film.

The reactions of villagers was so enthralling and encouraging that we decided to produce a film on this experience.⁵ The villagers were excited and emotional when they found their family members and relatives at their younger ages. Some cried over the deceased members of their families who had not been seen or heard for decades while others giggled and laughed over the changes in people's appearances and daily customs. The whole evening was filled with excitement and heightened emotions, which made us realize the profound relevance of the 1982 documentation for them.

4. Changes in Intervening Years

What are the major changes that occurred in Batulecaur during the past 40 years? Administratively, Batulecaur was a village in the outskirts of Pokhara in 1982, but as the city expanded, it became a part of the city. The open land which separated the city of Pokhara from Batulecaur is now covered with houses and shops. Batulecaur is still located in the same quarter with the almost identical layout of houses. Although the houses are now built with concrete blocks with tin roofs, replacing wood and mud bricks, the Gandharba section appears considerably poorer than the surrounding area.

While in Batulecaur, we traced the lives of a few key individuals in the film. Ram, a 12-year old boy who was featured in the film playing in the streets of Pokhara, would have been 46 years old in 2016. Sadly we discovered that he had passed away at age 30. Man Maya who danced at hotels for tourists in 1982 has been working as a janitor at the airport. We also learned Ram had stopped playing sarangi around 1997 when he found a menial job at a hospital. Fujii (1984) reported of a Gaine girl who was working as low-end service person, which indicates that the availability of such an occupation had already begun. According to Parajuli (2007: 72), as many as seventy Gandharba from Batulecaur had janitorial jobs in 2004.

As more occupational options other than music-making became accessible to Gandharba in Batulecaur, many began to invest the steady income into the education of their children. As a result, a growing number of young Gandharba were not trained in their traditional occupations. While the Gandharba population of Batulecaur grew from 160 to 300, those who live on music making decreased sharply from about thirty in 1982 to only two in 2016.

During the intervening years, the sarangi experienced a major transformation in its position in Nepali society. As mentioned before, the instrument was once heavily stigmatized due to its association with despised Gaine, but it became elevated to the instrument of national pride.

⁵ The film *Revisiting Batulecaur after 34 Years: A Village of Musicians in Nepal* (in Japanese) was completed in 2017. The English version is planned for 2018.

A musician named Jhalakman Gandharba (1935-2003) and nationwide radio broadcast were at least partially responsible for this fundamental shift. Jhalakman was the first musician from Batulecaur to be hired as a staff artist at Radio Nepal in 1965. He wrote many riveting songs such as *Ama Le Sodhlan* (“If you ask your mother”), which were broadcast on radio and became extremely popular. For the radio performances, a few other instruments such as *madal* (double-headed drum) and *bansuri* (transverse flute) were added, laying the foundation for typical instrumentation of *lok git* (a genre based on folk song with orchestrated accompaniment), which later attained the status of national music. With a growing popularity of *lok git*, the stigma attached to *sarangi* gradually faded away and people from high castes became interested in learning it themselves. Even a Brahman became a disciple of Khim Bahadur Gayek (b. 1935), a Gandharba from Batulecaur, which helped erase the stigma attached to the instrument (Moisala 2013: 20).

While *sarangi* has attained the status of a “national instrument,” the old style of playing *sarangi* was disappearing fast. The profession of going from village to village and from house to house, playing songs that are pertinent to individual occasions was no longer in demand. They also found it more profitable to sell *sarangi* to foreign tourists than singing for small money, the *sarangi* playing has become secondary, serving mainly as a tool to attract tourists’ attention. The context of music making has also shifted from streets to stage with an increasing demand for *sarangi* playing at restaurants.

More recently, elders of the Gandharba community in Batulecaur are increasingly fearful of the complete loss of Gandharba musical heritage (Parajuli 2007:68). The old repertoire, playing style, performance practice were disappearing, replaced by newer counterparts. This concern was in the background for the establishment of the Jhalakman Sarangi School in 2010 at Batulecaur to teach *sarangi* to Gandharba children (Figure 5). While *sarangi* was played almost exclusively by men in the past, many girls are studying it at school now.⁶ In the same year, Jhalakman’s statue was also constructed at the entrance of Batulecaur (Figure 6).



FIGURE 5: Gandharba children learning music and dance at Jhalakman Sarangi Shool;

FIGURE 6: Statue of Jhalakman Gandharba

Young Gandharba who received higher education are also struggling with their own identity and as part of their pursuit, they became more interested in the hereditary musical tradition which they can claim as their own distinctive cultural heritage and some started learning the *sarangi* and traditional songs. Exposure to successful non- Gandharba popular music groups such as *Kutumba* which use Nepali traditional instruments also led young Gandharba to discover the contemporary usage of *sarangi* and saw the possibility of reclaiming it as part of their heritage. These factors led to the formation of an instrumental ensemble *Lakchya Band* whose members consist exclusively of young Gandharba from Batulecaur.

For Gandharba of Batulecaur, what are the potential meanings of our documentation? By watching the old film footage, the villagers observed many changes and their sense of history or passage of time was activated. A deep sense of their identity as Gandharba was also evoked by watching the films where the old

⁶ There was a belief that if a woman plays the *sarangi*, her act threatens her husband’s life (Prajuli 2007: 76).

custom of music making in the street was featured. Hardly containing his excitement, Dan Bahadur Gayek, the head master of Jhalakman Sarangi School, declared, “I felt like I could finally see our own gut which I can never see normally. I felt like crying. They were tears of hardship and tears of joy” (Minami 2018).

The sound recordings of eighty one songs with sarangi accompaniment by Fujii’s team provide a rare glimpse into the repertoire and musical styles that were once popular among the Gandharba in Batulecaur and especially for those young Gandharba who wish to construct a new identity, these recordings can serve as an important resource form which they learn their musical heritage and with which they connect themselves to the performative heritage of the bygone era.

5. Preliminary Questions on Repatriation

Both the elders and younger members of the Gandharba community in Batulecaur are interested in the once stigmatized profession of singing and playing the sarangi. The efforts for reinvigoration began in earnest in 2010 when the community music school was established and the statue of their most celebrated musician constructed as a professed pride of Gandharba musical heritage.

The research team based at the National Museum of Ethnology aims to explore the ways in which archived audio and audiovisual materials can serve as a launching pad for a collaborative effort to help reinvigorate the music culture of Gandharba in Batulecaur and at the same time to conduct a new round of research on the process of reinvigoration in the context of the heightened consciousness of their own marginalization and the appropriation of Gandharba musical heritage as national music. These two activities are so interrelated that they cannot be considered separate and in some sense we are involved in the activities which constitute the subject of our research.

Although at its early stage of engagement, the project anticipates at least several questions to be considered.

(1) Why do we repatriate?

The repatriation in the sense of returning the collected materials to the source community is widely accepted as a moral and ethical necessity on the part of the collectors. This assertion may seem indisputable on the surface, because it is essentially a corrective measure for the collectors to reconcile with the negative legacy of history, such as imperialism, colonialism, and war in the context of which materials were collected. However, one should be aware of the danger of making the act of returning as the final objective. Sharing research findings with source community was in the past, and continues to be at present, an expected responsibility of the collectors, but a copy of an academic paper or book based on research often had very little meanings or relevance for them. Although it may be a necessary courtesy on the part of the collector, it should be obvious that the act of returning alone is insufficient. We should always keep in mind for whose benefit we should engage in repatriation.

(2) Who should be the recipients of repatriated materials?

It is generally understood that no community is monolithic or unified with a single voice. If so, it is important to consider to whom repatriation is directed. There is no single right answer to this thorny question but the minimum requirement is to be aware of the make-up of the source community. Should the recordings of the past musician go to his/her family members or descendants alone, or the community to which s/he belonged? If the collection contains the recordings of a multiple number of musicians, should the collection be divided and returned only to the related individuals or to an organization which represents the community as a set?

The process of selecting the recipients of the materials (individuals, families, clans, community organizations, NGOs, government organizations) is equally important. Individuals or organizations of the community are often consulted in this decision making but how do we ensure if the decision will engender the expected benefit to the community? Power relations within the source community may influence the accessibility of repatriated materials, which may be neglected, monopolized or manipulated. The conventional wisdom is that the internal distribution should be left up to the community. While the rhetoric may seem incontestable as far as the monolithic constitution of the community is to be believed, we should be aware that the perfunctory repatriation could also create tensions and frictions within the community over the ownership and use of the repatriated materials.

The hierarchical structure of the larger society should also be considered especially when the community in question is socially and politically marginalized. Gandharba, for example, remain to be placed at the bottom

of Nepal's social hierarchy despite that the sarangi, their hereditary instrument, has been in the national limelight. The public facilities such as libraries, archives, and cultural centers that are capable of safely storing repatriated materials and making them available for the general public are frequently run by dominating castes and classes. Due to social exclusion from the mainstream society and psychological distance between castes, Gandharba are unlikely to utilize those facilities.

(3) Repatriation or collaboration?

If the ultimate objective of "repatriation" is the act of returning the collected materials to source community, the collectors' responsibility will be fulfilled when the materials are physically returned. However, the repatriation is only nominal if the source community receives no or little benefit from the returned materials. In this sense, the simple act of returning without attention to the benefit to the source community in real terms is irresponsible. Needless to mention, the wills and wishes of the source community should be respected in principle, but they are not static nor monolithic. A sustained and committed engagement with the source community is desirable to ensure that repatriated materials will be useful and beneficial to them. It is not simply the returned materials that matter the most, but their effect on the community and the opportunity that the repatriation can create to establish a renewed relationship between the community and researchers are important.

The continued engagement will involve further human and financial commitment, which will be required on both individual and organizational levels. If the source community has not sufficient facilities or resources to make use of the returned materials, should we provide the facility for them or be more involved in local culture and politics in order to create an opportunity for the source community to improve the physical environment? When Fujii's team documented the music in Batulecaur, the Gandharba community had no facility (such as cassette tape recorders) to reproduce the music.

6. Current Status

In collaboration with Fujii and his assistants, the members of our project at Minpaku are consolidating the materials collected during the three research trips by Fujii and his team in 1964, 1968 and 1982. Based on their published report and essays, fieldnotes, photos, audio recordings, audiovisual footage and related materials, we are in the process of reconstructing their research procedure, analyzing the musical characteristics of the recorded songs in comparison with Gandharba songs from other regions and preparing to build the database of collected materials. I consider all these activities to be a necessary preparation to repatriate the materials in an organized and systematic manner.

The members of the project have published an interview with Fujii and a set of six essays as an intermediate report of the project in the special issue of *Kikan Minzokugaku* (Ethnology Quarterly) on Gandharba music and life (*Kikan Minzokugaku* 163:3-62). The photo journal, published by Senri Foundation in close collaboration with Minpaku, updates the readers of the on-going museum projects, and this issue provides an overview of the project and describes the intricate coordination and negotiation that are required in repatriation with the Fujii's documentation project of Gandharba music as an illustration.

The strength of the museums lies in the fact that they have a diverse array of outlets (exhibitions, publications, filmmaking, screenings, talks and lectures, workshops and public performances) that connect various stake holders such as museums, academic community, source community and the general public. It is an important work of the museum to inform the general public and academic community that the materials accumulated at museums are not "dead objects" simply stored for posterity and that repatriation involves much more than the simple act of returning the collected materials and holds enormous potentials for creating new relationships. The heightened awareness on the potentials of the archived materials will provide public moral support and thus makes it easier for us to engage in a long-term collaboration with source community which can be labor-intensive and require resources and to imagine the shape of a forum-type museum to come.

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