



HAL
open science

The Importance of Iconographic Studies for the Rehabilitation of Nepalese Heritage Monuments

David Cornélius Andolfatto

► **To cite this version:**

David Cornélius Andolfatto. The Importance of Iconographic Studies for the Rehabilitation of Nepalese Heritage Monuments. *The Cultural Heritage of Nepal: Before, During and After the 2015 Earthquakes. Current and Future Challenges*, 2018. hal-03900994

HAL Id: hal-03900994

<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-03900994v1>

Submitted on 31 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



The main shrine of Itum Bahāl, located in the western wing of the complex. Six struts are placed below the roof. They represent six Pañcarakṣās or five Pañcarakṣās and one Akṣobhya. © N. Brizault.

The Importance of Iconographic Studies for the Rehabilitation of Nepalese Heritage Monuments

David Andolfatto

David Andolfatto is a PhD student in archaeology of the Himalayas at the Université Paris 1 Sorbonne. His studies focus on the relationship between architecture and images but also the archaeology of Western Nepal and the Kathmandu Valley. He has been a consultant for OCHSPA (reconstruction of Itum Bahāl, Buddhist monastery, Kathmandu) and UNESCO Office in Kathmandu since the earthquakes of 2015.

This paper was first meant to deal with the study of the Itum Bahāl iconography. This institution is an urban Newar Buddhist monastery whose restoration is in progress as these lines are written. With regard to the recent situation in Nepal the author decided to rather present the notion of iconographic studies as a necessary requirement in the context of an ethic rehabilitation of heritage monuments. Archaeological surveys are also considered as a must, however their practice just “re-entered” the Kathmandu Valley after a long absence¹.

INTRODUCTION

Known as the “Gorkha Earthquake”, the earthquakes of 25 April and 12 May 2015 had been expected with anxiety over the past decades. Before they occurred, heritage professionals, architects and engineers prevented their reconstruction projects from future possible collapse by following different approaches. Some projects received purely traditional materials and techniques, while others saw their structures improved by the use of modern inputs. To discuss the acceptability of the two schools is now, in the post-earthquake context of reconstruction, a great source of passionate, not to say fiery discussions. This will not be discussed here, but only considered as a starting point for the present paper.

.....

1 An international mission of archaeologists and geophysicians was organized in October-November 2015 by UNESCO Kathmandu Office and the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Nepal (DoA). Together with the DoA, UNESCO Kathmandu Office also conducted excavations on a collapsed stūpa of Swayambhūnath.

Indeed, the aim of the following lines is rather to consider the present and urgent need for the study of iconographic features of heritage monuments as a compulsory and simultaneous requirement to any basic survey. As a matter of fact adornments are often architectural elements, like the famous carved struts, and they moreover participate to a wider project. A strut does not only support an overhanging roof; it bears the image of a deity that has a role to play in a larger context. This context is mostly that of a temple (Nep. *mandir*) or a stūpa. Other monuments such as the *pattis* or *sattal* (resthouses), pillars and public fountains also present rich iconographies.

THE MEANING OF ICONOGRAPHY

As stated by Marie-Thérèse de Mallmann, iconography (from Greek *eikōn*, likeness and *graphia*, writing) “is ALWAYS the reflection or the illustration of religious notions or philosophical concepts”². It is a proper science that was commanded, in the Nepali context (but also in India, Tibet and other cultures), by a specific literature. This literature links the myths, rituals and architecture by providing and organizing the religious environment.

For Buddhist matters the texts of the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* and *Sādhnamālā* can be cited as major sources while the *Agni-Purāṇa* (along with others) describes Hindu

.....

2 “Therefore no detail is useless: measurements, colours, gestures, attitudes, expressions of appearance, attributes, etc., all have a precise meaning”. De Mallmann, 1986: p. 1.

gods and goddesses. The prescriptions deal with the appearances of deities and their locations inside a maṇḍala, whether as a painted or architectural expression of it. Among the ways of disseminating this descriptive knowledge are the still used artists' sketch-books (Blom, 1989). This easily accessible medium sometimes also allowed the Newar artists to modify the corpus at first and subsequently that of the iconographies³ just slightly. Nevertheless we may speak of iconographic canons that are combined to architectural treaties⁴.

The literary tradition hence constitutes a scientific corpus that will be used when one decides to establish a religious and/or a public monument.

WHY ICONOGRAPHY MATTERS IN THE POST-EARTHQUAKE CONTEXT OF NEPAL

The Kathmandu Valley is famous for its unique art and architecture for various reasons. The main explanation is probably the living spirit that inhabits all religious places in the Valley. When one approaches a temple or walks inside a monastery (New. *bahāl* and *bahīl*) one will undoubtedly experience the feeling of entering a divine realm. The builders and artists who conceived these monuments intended to create this impression. Both the architecture and the art (here the sculptures) follow the principles of symbolic diagrams dictated by a specific literature and function as a whole. Thus a Buddhist monastery is conceived as a maṇḍala and allows the visitor to physically experiment a philosophical concept. As for maṇḍalas, the centre of a temple or monastery is generally the most important place of the site, though it is often hidden or restricted to a specific group of persons.

.....
3 Marie-Thérèse de Mallmann nevertheless evokes that iconographic details have to be scrupulously followed so as to avoid transforming the "power of the divinity into a malefic force". *Ibid.*

4 For works related to treaties of architecture, see for example Kramrisch, Stella. 1946. *The Hindu Temple*. 2 Vol. Calcutta. And Dagens, Bruno. 2009. *Le temple indien miroir du monde*. Paris.



The courtyard of Chusya Bahāl (Kathmandu) and its rich set of struts. © D. Andolfatto.

Thus it makes sense here to consider iconographies as essential parts of the Kathmandu Valley's traditional architecture, as much as building typologies and structures.

The earthquakes of April and May 2015 brought down or severely damaged numerous monuments. Often this has meant that sculptures, paintings and carved architectural elements have been crushed into pieces or displaced. In both cases this resulted in displaced artifacts. Thus when one reflects about rebuilding or restoring these buildings it becomes obvious that the original iconographic settings have to be traced and reproduced to recreate the man-made but divine realm already mentioned.

To this regard we can cite the example of the Itum Bahāl, a Newar Buddhist monastery located in the centre of Kathmandu. This institution was damaged by the 1934 Nepal-Bihar Earthquake and rebuilt afterwards. Like most *bahāls* it consists in a central courtyard surrounded by a quadrangular building with overhanging roofs supported by carved wooden struts. But unlike most *bahāls* it has a rather incomplete appearance. Indeed, religious iconographies are meant to function as sets that can be combined with others, as one shall see.

At the nearby Chusya Bahāl we find five well-organized sets of struts. First of all, there is a group of ten Krodhas

or wrathful protectors, framed by Gaṇeśa and Mahākāla, protecting the façade of the courtyard's entry⁵. Inside are groups of dancers and musicians, the JinaBuddhas, the Pañcarakṣās (anthropomorphic spells) and the Saptavāras (seven days of the week, associated with a specific mantra). Though some struts have disappeared during the past decades, the iconographic program was nevertheless a complete one, of rather uniform style, emphasizing different concepts but articulated together.

The situation at Itum Bahāl is quite different. Four struts representing Bodhisattvas in the central part and Mahāsiddhas below are placed on the outer façade. The façades inside the courtyard have randomly placed struts representing very different styles and subjects: two Jina Buddhas, three Bodhisattvas and Mahāsiddhas, one Saptavāra and Mahāsiddha, and one Pañcarakṣā. The main shrine, located on the west wing and dedicated to Akṣobhya has the only complete iconography with six Pañcarakṣās (or five Pañcarakṣās and one Akṣobhya).

Itum Bahāl was restored at different periods of its history. The reconstruction of the eastern wing was initiated in 2013 and the building dismantled in March-April 2015, just before the earthquakes, thus preventing the wing from collapsing. The Oriental Cultural Heritage Sites Protection Alliance (OCHSPA), Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT) and the local community are funding it. An iconographic study of the monument's struts was conducted before its restoration which revealed an absence of homogeneity in both styles and subjects⁶. The hypothesis is that the

actual iconographic program is not the original one. Thus it is supposed that elements must have been gathered from various sites, following their destruction, mostly due to earthquakes or fires. Thefts and natural degradations also shape the monastery's appearance.

These observations raised the following question: what should the preservationists do with this fragmented corpus? Different options can be considered. One could decide to reconstitute iconographies from the available fragments, based on an in-depth comparative and literary study. Or it could be decided that carvings can simply remain where they were before the reconstruction and be punctuated with plain struts. The latter option will be adopted in the case of Itum Bahāl but it raises another issue: the appropriate location of the gods inside the monastery. Two Jina Buddhas are placed above the entryway to the courtyard, on the courtyard's façade. This arrangement is inappropriate as to our knowledge it is not seen in any other place in the Kathmandu Valley. Moreover, Jina Buddhas (embodiments of the Buddha's five qualities) are always found on the main shrine of a monastery (facing the entryway). These two struts would then have supposedly come from another monument or predate the nearby Pañcarakṣās on the main shrine.

.....

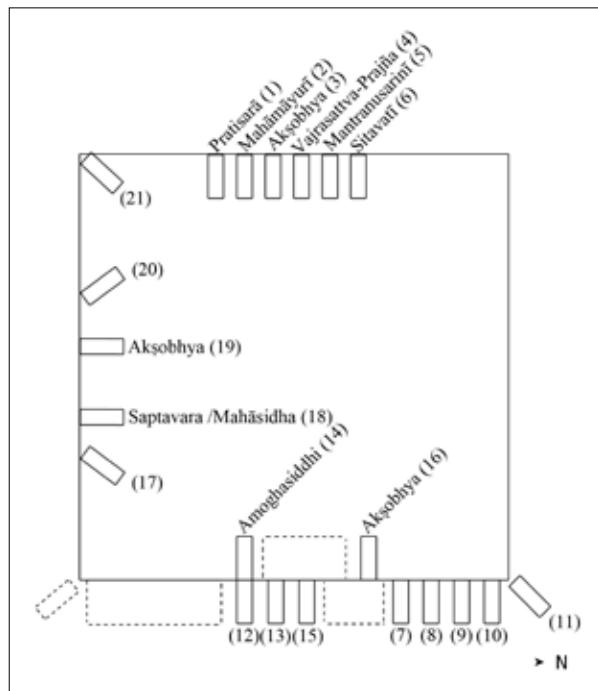
5 The location of Gaṇeśa and Mahākāla at the entry points of Buddhist institutions is a common thing. Some painted maṇḍalas also have the two Śiva-related gods as protectors of the maṇḍalas' threshold. The apotropaic role of Gaṇeśa and Mahākāla is also revealed in festivals. During the celebrations of Indrayātrā, two vehicles precede the chariot of the Kumārī. One carries a young boy acting as Gaṇeśa and the other chariot is that of Mahākāla. Van den Hoek 2014: p. 50.

A closer look at available historical sources indicates that the reformed ogress Hārītī was the former protector of Buddhist institutions in India and Nepal together with Mahākāla. Gaṇeśa later replaced her, probably by around 1800 CE, under King Raṇabahādur Śāha. This King is famous to have made images of Hārītī smashed after the tragic death of his wife and son.

6 Andolfatto 2016: Yet to be published: *Moving the Gods. The Tunālas of ItumBahāl: Iconographic Study in the Context of a Restoration Program*. The Restoration of Itum Bahāl.



The eastern wing of Itum Bahāl (Kathmandu) before its reconstruction. Carved struts used to adorn the façade before the earthquake of 1934. Five struts now remain there. © D. Andolfatto.



Scheme of the iconographies from the Itum Bahāl's struts. The numbers 7, 8, 9 and 10 indicate the locations of Bodhisattvas+Mahāsiddhas. Numbers 12, 13, 15: three stolen struts representing Śalabhañjikās. Numbers 11, 17, 20 and 21 are corner struts. © D. Andolfatto

These facts raise the question of what “re-composed” iconographies should be. One has to consider that past earthquakes had already damaged monuments considerably. And the iconographies may not have been reproduced according to literary prescriptions. Therefore would reconstructions have to reflect iconographies the way they were before the 2015 earthquakes, or do they have to re-compose “ideal” representations of a supposed original?

CONCLUSION

These two short examples of Chusya and Itum Bahāl show us that historical events such as earthquakes are major factors of modification. Some historical monuments of the Kathmandu Valley have been rebuilt over time and their iconographies were usually preserved or re-created.

Thus considering the current situation in Nepal it is hoped that the Nepal government authorities, institutions dealing with reconstruction works and local communities together will consider iconographic studies as compulsory requirements. Both structural

and iconographic aspects are crucial in the reflection process that is taking place nowadays. Multi-disciplinary approaches gathering archaeologists, art historians, historians, engineers, ritual practitioners and architects have to be organized in order to better understand such significant monuments.

Moreover, with respect to the iconographies as mentioned before, written prescriptions have to be carefully implemented (as much as possible) so as to recreate these living places where spiritual, religious and worldly realms meet.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANDOLFATTO, DAVID. Yet to be published. *Moving the Gods. The Tunālas of Itum Bahāl: Iconographic Study in the Context of a Restoration Program. The Restoration of Itum Bahāl.*
- BLOM, MARGRIET L. B. 1989. *Depicted Deities. Painters' Model Books in Nepal.* Egbert Forsten Ed. Gronigen.
- DAGENS, BRUNO. 2009. *Le temple indien miroir du monde.* Paris.
- HOEK, ALBERTUS WILHELMUS VAN DEN. 2014. *Caturmāsā: Celebrations of Death in Kathmandu, Nepal.* Vajra Books. Kathmandu.
- KOOIJ, KAREL RIJKVAN. 1977. *The Iconography of the Buddhist Wood-carvings in a Newar Monastery in Kathmandu (ChusyaBāhā).* Journal of the Nepal Research Centre. Vol. 1: pp. 39-82. Kommissionsverlag Franz Steiner Ed. Wiesbaden.
- KRAMRISCH, STELLA. 1946. *The Hindu Temple.* 2 vol. Calcutta.
- MALLMANN, MARIE-THERÈSE DE. 1986. *Introduction à l'icographie du tântrisme bouddhique.* Adrien Maisonneuve Ed. Paris.