

Cosmopolitically Approaching the Heritage Discourse in the Global South: A Relational Exploration of the Nepalese *Bhailakha* Procession's Mutability and Mobility

Shyam Sunder Kawan^{1*}, Manfredo Manfredini²

Abstract

The historic urban landscape paradigm understands cities as evolving phenomena, aligning the intangible cultural heritage perspective with the discourse on sustainable urban development. It recognizes the crucial role of collective custodianship in preserving cultural diversity. Tourism-focused, reductionist policies prioritizing economic development in cities of the Global South affected by rampant globalization profoundly challenge heritage resilience. This paper seeks to advance the discussion about sustainable development of social and cultural capital by providing evidence on the essential role of integral choral custodianship and communing for the preservation of living historic urban landscapes. It discusses a study on an endangered cultural practice of a world heritage site in Bhaktapur, Kathmandu Valley, focusing on a preeminent collective of the urban communities around a mobile and mutable cultural object: the Bhailakha chariot of the Biska Jatra festival. We describe the complex networks of relationships and spatial practices involving various human and non-human actors participating in the chariot event. We use qualitative ethnographic methodology guided by a redressed Actor-Network Theory framework. By examining the interactions between the key actors of this event, the research highlights how the Bhailakha's stable concrete and symbolic dimensions depend on its dynamic becoming in the ever-changing socio-technical conditions. The paper elucidates the processes of affirmation, negotiation and transformation surrounding the Bhailakha, revealing the indeterminate interplay between tradition and modernity, conservation and renovation, and immanency and transcendence. The findings show the relevance of sustained, pluralistic and collaborative commoning practices for resisting endangered urban landscapes with differential development. The conclusion reflects on the contribution of applied relationality theory to the sustainable heritage discourse, advocating for the institution and adoption of a framework that requires historic urban landscape preservation policies to be based on a deep understanding of the complex embedded social, cultural and concrete dynamics of the pertinent productive networks of actants.

*Author for Correspondence

Shyam Sunder Kawan
E-mail: samsung20002@gmail.com

¹Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Fine Arts, Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China

²Distinguished Professor, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China

Received Date: October 09, 2024

Accepted Date: November 11, 2024

Published Date: January 30, 2025

Citation: Shyam Sunder Kawan, Manfredo Manfredini. Cosmopolitically Approaching the Heritage Discourse in the Global South: A Relational Exploration of the Nepalese *Bhailakha* Procession's Mutability and Mobility. International Journal of Architectural Heritage. 2025; 8(1): 37–46p.

Keywords: Sustainable cities, community resilience, historic urban landscape, actor network theory, global south heritage, Bhaktapur

“This is the apparent paradox of festivals: they repeat an ‘unrepeatable’. They do not add a second and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the ‘nth’ power” [1].

INTRODUCTION

The historic urban landscape paradigm (Figure 1), aligned with the expansion of the intangible cultural heritage perspectives and the sustainable urban

development discourse, considers cities as evolving phenomena [2]. This concept extends beyond the mere preservation of architectural and historical monuments to encompass the broader socio-cultural dynamics that shape urban environments [3]. Such an understanding affirms that living heritage is inalienably tied to its stakeholder communities' knowledge, practices, and entities and serves as a foundation for individuation processes. Incorporating it into historic urban landscape conservation plans and initiatives also fosters social cohesion, enhances resilience, and promotes intergenerational and intercultural exchanges [4], ultimately enriching the urban condition and affirming the significance of recognition, inclusion and representation for a differential social, material and cultural production of the city. This phenomenon acknowledges the importance of the contribution of multiple and multidimensional human and non-human elements and networks to the character of urban spaces [5]. This perspective shifts the focus from heritage as a static entity to a dynamic constellation of embedded entities informing a *cosmopolitical* approach to relationships that recognizes the transformative embroilment of systems for a more than just everyday world while opposing acritical globalization based on abstractive *cosmopolitanism* [6].

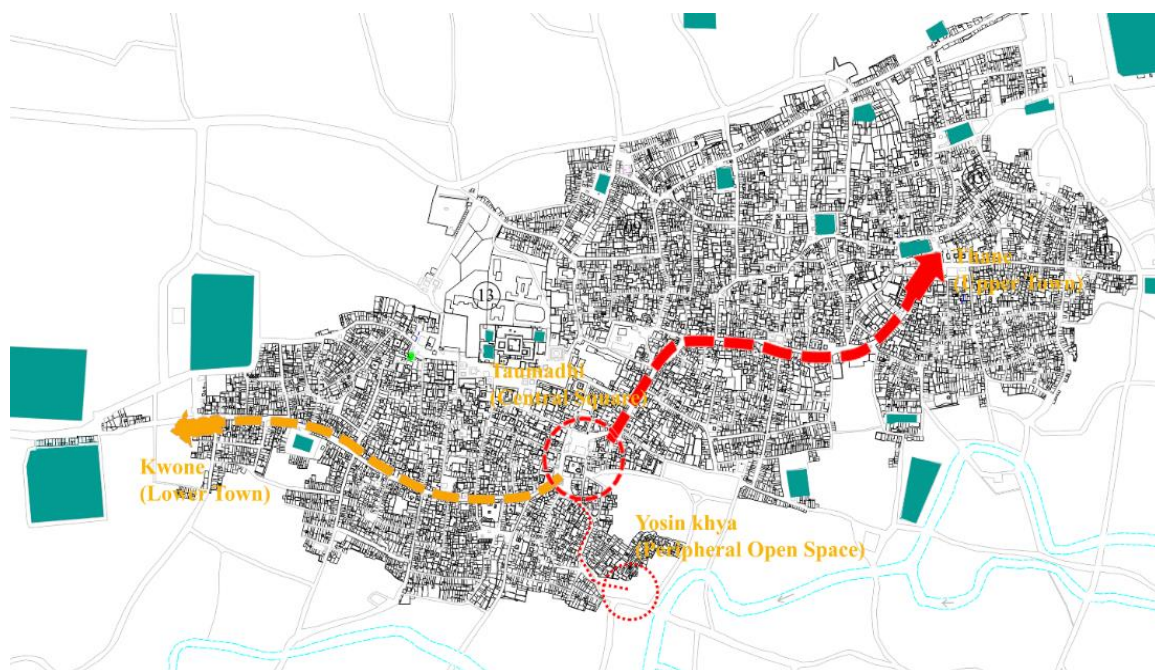


Figure 1. Map of Bhaktapur showing the procession routes of Bhailakha.

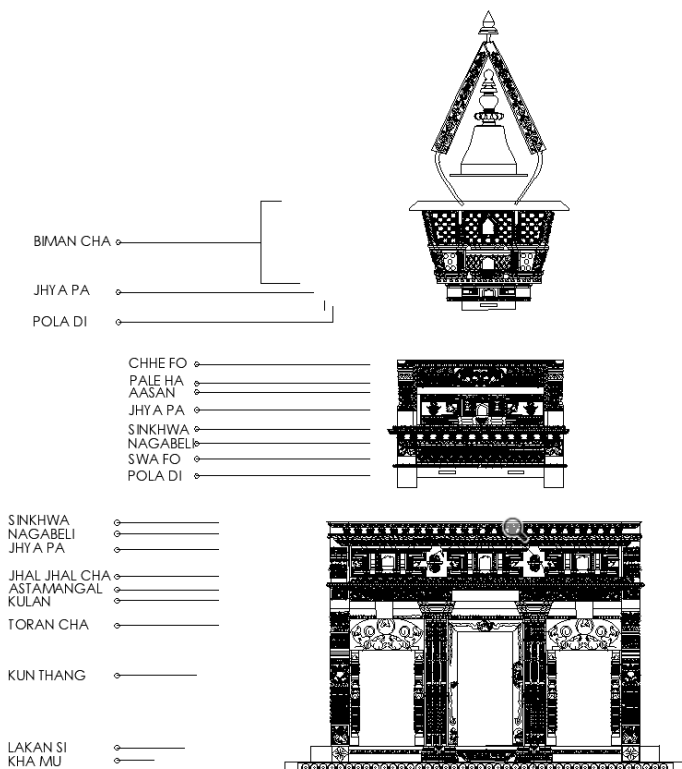
In recent years, the progression of heritage discourse in the context of uneven and differential development [7], particularly regarding Global South cities, has primarily focused on the normative theoretical translation of the new paradigm rather than developing aligned conservation strategies. In cities with recognized outstanding heritage, such as UNESCO-listed sites, the development and implementation of such strategies are often opposed by the resistance of the traditional reductionist approach that, prioritizing economic development, neglects the complexity of preserving the articulation and embeddedness of differential and situated systems of signs, materialities and practices [8, 9]. As Bonin and Moore [10] argue, such frameworks show a pronounced indifference towards the dynamic and evolving nature of cultural practices, knowledge and relations. Their focus is principally on material, tangible values, seeing them as a key asset for financially extractive operations and exposing them to depletive consumption practices that fragment and abstract their heritage values, critically endangering the development of positive conservation efforts.

We present a prominent case of endangered cultural practices in Nepal: the *Bhailakha* chariot procession. This procession is the central focus of the 9-day-long celebration of the *Biska Jatra* festival in Bhaktapur City [11], one of the main religious festivals of the Kathmandu Valley. At the

core of one of the co-listed UNESCO World Heritage sites, its location exposes it to the challenges of extractivist staging and spectacularization brought about by the tourism industry. The *Bhailakha*, the chariot of the supreme Hindu justice deity *Bhairava*, is a prime expression of a resistant collective cultural practice that involves a remarkable collective action: the fierce competition between the two halves of the city to conquer it and secure the protection of its deity. Though the origin and significance of this festival have not yet been definitely delineated, historians have established its institution and annual repetition since the triumph of the *Lichchhavis* dynasty over the *Kiratas* and outlined its cultural adaptability and continuity concerning spiritual meanings, artistic expression and community representation [12, 13]. The 8-night and 9-day festival includes four major events culminating with the New Year celebration that takes place in the most significant public space of the old city: the central celebration marking *Dyo-kwoha-bijyai-gu* ritual on the first day, the *Kha-lwaki-gu* ritual on the 4th and 5th day and *Dyo-thaha-bijyai-gu* Ritual on the 9th day. Minor events comprehend the *Nakinju-khacha* procession, the *Yosin-thaaney-kwothey* rituals and the *Dyo-swogan-bigu* rituals.

The theoretical framework illuminating our interpretation of this procession draws on Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory [14], enabling us to emphasize how the complex forms of mutability and mobility of its central piece, the chariot, are crucial to the resistance of the practice. In this perspective, the chariot, the most representative tangible item of the festival, appears as a powerful catalyst of the pluralist and multidimensional relational cultural practice informing its heritage values. It embodies the ability to traverse physical landscapes and temporal and contextual boundaries, thereby facilitating a dialogue between diverse cultural identities in an increasingly interconnected world.

The chariot’s journey illustrates the challenges and opportunities of globalization, showcasing how local traditions can adapt and resonate with global narratives while preserving their unique characteristics. By examining the chariot’s role in embodying traditions while responding to contemporary societal needs, we can uncover pathways toward sustainable practices that honor cultural diversity rather than homogenization.



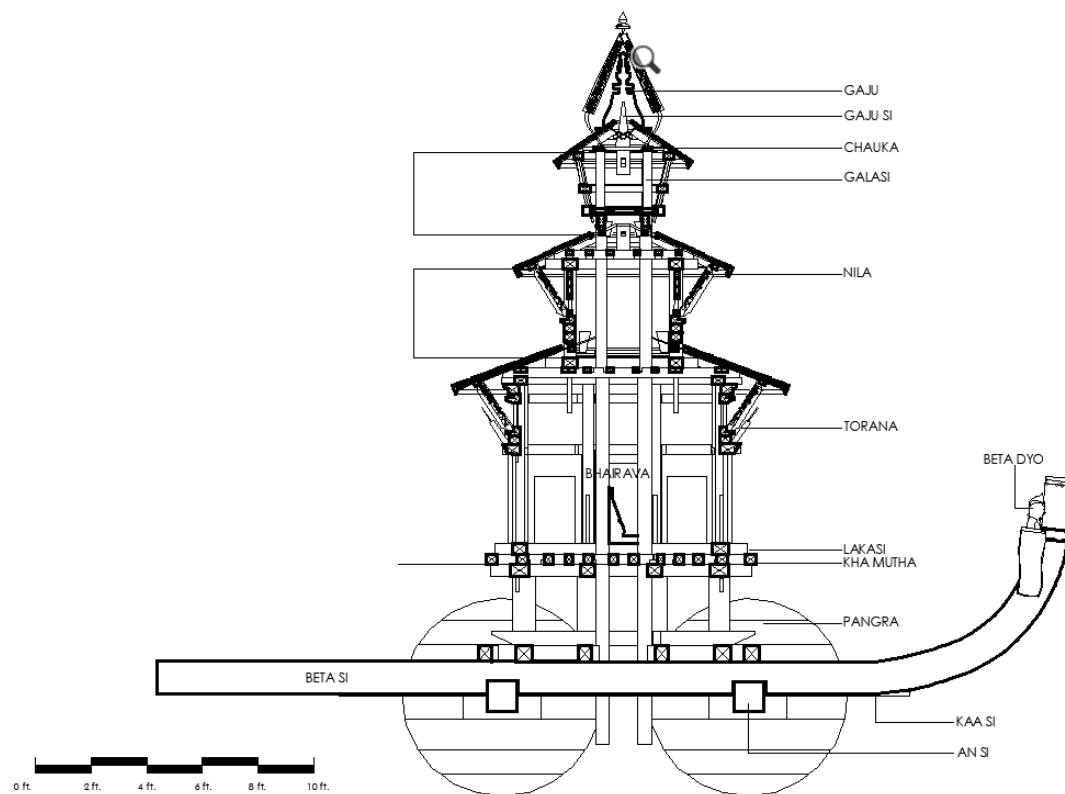


Figure 2. Showing structural and architectural details of Bhailakha.

Situating the Bhailakha

The *Bhailakha* is a significant cultural artefact (Figure 2), representing a mobile wooden temple mounted on four large wheels. It is the most prominent example of a type of processional chariot known as *kha*, which is common in the Kathmandu Valley. Unlike the fixed temples of the Valley, the *Bhailakha* comprises two main parts: the base and the temple. The base connects four massive timber wheels (*Pangra*) to two supporting timber axles (*An-si*). Above them, three elongated timber logs are laid straight. The middle log (*Beta-si*) is longer and crooked at the front tip to elevate the deity (*Beta-dyo*), while the two other logs (*Kaa-si*) flank it. A 3-tiered temple rests on a square platform hinged above this base and hosts the main deity (*Bhairava*) on its lower tier. Each tier is square in plan and supported by wooden posts. The lower tier has three openings on each side with delicately carved frames. These tiers are covered with subsequently receding slanted roofs (*Polan*) made of timber planks wrapped in brass sheets. These roofs are supported by inclined struts (*Bilampu*) and corner struts (*Kungsru*). Each *Polan* is hinged into the timber walls and fastened with laces made of *Beda-pu* and aluminium wire. The temple is adorned with mythical creatures, celestial beings, and intricate floral patterns. While its main façade and roofs are gilded, the remaining parts feature vibrant colors – blue, red, green, and maroon—that hold cultural significance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative approach, integrating ethnographic methods with participatory observation, documentation and interviews to gain a nuanced understanding of the *Bhailakha* procession. Fieldwork was conducted throughout the festival in April 2024, but its documentation spanned several years (2020–2023). The rituals, cultural practices, and interactions of the participants and the procession were observed to understand the procession’s dynamics and various roles played by the actors. The observations and semi-structured interviews, conducted with 16 key stakeholders,

including residents, local artisans, performers, community leaders and a culturalist, focused on individual experiences, reflections, and meanings attributed to both mutable and immutable elements of the *Bhailakha*. The collected data were analyzed thematically, highlighting key patterns and relationships within the cultural practices observed. This methodology allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the complexities inherent in the procession, revealing how community identity is negotiated through the dynamic interactions of its elements.

This study analyzed the *Bhailaka* as a complex *mutable mobile* network object [15]. It focuses on how its mutable elements, such as material components and performances, coalesce with its immutable components, like ritual and image. We also addressed the relational dynamics it undergoes during its procession to shed light on the significance of the immanent and relations between (im)mutability and (im)mobility for the historic urban landscape of Bhaktapur.

FINDINGS

Bhailakha's Mutability

As a concrete object, the chariot is a mutable entity (Figure 3). The mutability of the processional itinerary of the chariot, which results from the agonistic nature of the festival, is mirrored by the mutability of its material composition. During the contests, the integrity of its assemblage of “actants” (human and non-human) is often compromised. Shattered by harsh combats or weathering, the base is torn apart; the temple is debased, its parts and decoration degraded, and its portion broken. During the 2023 celebrations, for example, the wheels were heavily damaged and disjointed due to sudden acceleration and rough impacts caused by uncontrolled movements. One interviewee who took part in the festival noted:

I have never seen or heard of anything like this before in my life: not just one, but all four Galasis [inner upright posts supporting the Bhailakha] broke down on the festival's first day. I don't know how they will replace or rebuild them.



Figure 3. Dilapidated condition of the Bhailakha after the first day of the 2024 procession.

Mending, alterations and replacements are accomplished on-site during the festival and continue during the remaining parts of the year. According to the carpenter-in-chief, the usual two to three months' time and intense labor to prepare and build the *Bhailakha* needs to be increased. The worker's acknowledgement of the shortcomings in the resource mobilization might cause their inability to acquire mechanisms for appropriate repair of the chariot.

As the procession prolongs, the contest intensifies due to the enrolment of diverse actors regardless of the locals and the side they take part in. The integrity of this procession currently depends upon the persuasion of the chariot's mobility to any side, *Thane* or *Kwone* as the ritual has long surpassed the original *Dyo-kwoha-bijyai-gu* function and *Dyo-thaha-bijyai-gu* function. Several of the preceding

processions inform us about this assemblage. The participating groups are now composed of the locals and their friends, relatives and even foreigners from different places beyond Bhaktapur. Interestingly, the procession might even foresee the inverse enrolment of these actors to support their side indirectly. Likewise, is the case among the spectators.

We maintain that the *Bhailakha* is highly mutable and that this feature is not accidental but necessary. Its formal, aesthetic and structural transformations are essential to guarantee the intensity and differentiability of the festival as they are key to ensure its “*unrepeatable*” repetition that occurs with the contestation. However, importantly, these transformations preserve the essential morphological and representational qualities that enable its image and reference system to operate. We understand its *disruptive mutability* as a foundation of a form of *immanent individuation* that actively affirms the multidimensional integrity of heritage values.

Bhailakha’s Immutability

Productively, functionally, and topologically, the chariot is an immutable entity. The collaborative effort in preparing and activating the chariot is highly structured, and its organization has been consistently and regularly implemented for many years, coordinating the work of local communities. The procession is managed by a committee (*Bhailanayos*) of a core urban district (*Lakolachhen tva*) that is responsible for its planning and direction.

Worshipping functions and associated activities, including the inaugural ritual, are moderated by the leading priests of the Newar community (*Joshis*). The construction of the chariot is entrusted to two organizations: the Association of Carpenters (*Shilpakars*) for the structure and the association of decorators (*Chitrakars*) for the painting of symbolic elements. Fastening work with *Bedapu* and provision of complementary parts, such as ropes and lubricants, are entrusted to the organization of oil producers (*Manandhars*).

For the launch of the chariot, at the beginning of the festival (Figure 4), 18 selected people embark on it wearing white robes (*Jama* and *Pagadi*). They include six operators (*Bhailanayos*) who take care of the main deity, four priests who direct the rituals, four carpenters who take care of the structure of the chariot and four craftsmen (*Chaguthis*) who animate the procession. Their presence on the chariot is inaugural. They descend soon after departure, as it crosses Tamari Square, and are gradually substituted by other members of the public, as stated by one of the participants in the 2024 event:



Figure 4. *Bhailanayos* and priest in their traditional attire.

“We climb up for entertainment, as we can enjoy the fleet, observe the crowd from the high, and exhort loudly during the chariot’s embarkment. There are no other specific reasons for ascending the chariot. Only a few can do it. It needs a bit of courage and friends’ company to get up there. The space inside is dark and squeaky, and we might even get cramped in the joints when the chariot sways. However, the feeling of being in the chariot while it moves is mind-blowing.”

As noted above, the “unrepeatability” of the festival is ensured by a specific kind of mutability form and materiality of the chariot that guarantees the immutability of its formal and symbolic preferentiality. Nevertheless, the stability of its material configuration and symbolic expression enables a high order of immutability: preserving the contestation logic in the mutability of the processional itinerary. In terms of architecture, the chariot’s morphology, typology, and structure are not only permanently reaffirmed but carefully preserved during the festival and the time leading to it. They are also subject to the *Kha-swane-gu* ritual that requires the creative and collaborative engagement of the entire community for its preparation, execution and promotion. Regarding the symbolic expression through customary practices, discourses, and visual representations, the chariot is not only steadily confirmed through careful and respectful stewardship and custodianship of their intangible values but, crucially, they are collectively engaged in daily practices of narration that ensure the normativity of the *Bhairava* deity rituals.

We submit that the multidimensional *immutability* is a co-constitutive foundation of the process of immanent individuation of the chariot: the deep entanglement of *mutability* and *immutability* reciprocity introduces a process of productive repetition based on *relations of difference* that actively repeat “unrepeatable” heritage values.

Bhailakha’s Immobility

Topologically and perceptively (Figure 5), the *Bhailakha* can be understood as an immobile object. Its central role in the procession, as the leading element of the festival, is never challenged. It dominates the scene throughout the celebration symbolically, dramatically, and visually. This stability in the festival makes it the main attractor of the public. It encapsulates the essence of this festival by crystalizing the moment, while the dynamic human expressions and energies surround this cultural landmark to animate spirituality. As stated by one of the participants in the 2024 event:

“You don’t need to plan your movements; you will simply float with the crowd while holding the ropes when the chariot moves steadily on the street. This is a strange feeling.”

The chariot’s immobility is an agent of resilience, encouraging communities to engage with their heritage in innovative ways that enhance ecological awareness and promote cultural continuity amidst globalization’s pressures. We understand its immobility as a foundation of a form of *deictic individuation* that actively reaffirms the situatedness of active repetition of “unrepeatable” heritage values.



Figure 5. Bhailakha as a center of attraction.



Figure 6. On-site alteration being done by the carpenters.

Bhailakha's Mobility

The *Bhailakha* can be understood as a mobile object in Euclidean space (Figure 6). To retain the “unrepeatable” nature of the festival and procession, the chariot must guarantee the mutability of the processional itinerary. According to the chief of the carpentry team of the 2023 festival, great attention is devoted to constructing its wheeled base to ensure maximum mobility. The structural requirements are very demanding. Seven different types of timber are used for its construction. They include *Na si* (robust and fibrous essence) for the wheels to withstand the friction while they roll; *An-si* and *Gala-si* use the *Sal* (hardwood) for the lower structure to bear the substantial load of the chariot and the stress of the contest; soft wood, like pine for the other parts to reduce the overall weight. The chariot does not have fixed paths and timed routes. However, it articulates a general itinerary only when the chariot’s passage in the core area of the itinerary (*Thane* and *Kwone*) did local communities intervene to pause the contest, mainly to settle the chariot and denote the end of *Dyo-kwoha-bijyai-gu* and *Dyo-thaha-bijyai-gu* rituals and observe special rites. This also occurs when passing through the southern area (*Yosinkhya*) to fulfil the New Year rituals, the festival’s main event. As stated by one of the participants in the 2024 event:

“No matter which side the chariot embarks on, all the people on either side are desperately waiting to see the Bhailakha so that they can worship and pray to the Bhairava deity.”

Understood as an immutable immobile of the *Bhailakha* procession, it expresses the structural reliability of the procession that depends upon the durability and stability of the chariot itself. In order to foster community pride through this procession, it necessitates providing a consistent point of reference throughout the festival, ensuring resilience even amidst a changing environment. We submit that multimodal (*im*)*mobility* is a co-constitutive foundation of the process of immanent individuation of the chariot: the deep entanglement of reciprocity of *immobility* and *mobility* introduces a process of productive “unrepeatable” repetition based on *relations of difference* that mirrors that of *immutability* and *mutability* and actively regenerates integral heritage values, embodying the complexity of emergence processes in the core urban plasma [16] of resistant historic urban landscapes. This understanding makes this chariot a prime example of monuments that need urgent application of the latest heritage regeneration principles.

DISCUSSION

This paper distinguishes it from the frame of dual production conceptualized by ANT researchers. The mutability of the festival allows for mobility in terms of how the festival is celebrated, accommodating new traditions while inviting diverse participation. Conversely, the immutability of established practices and rituals can lead to a structured form of mobility where the festival is celebrated within defined parameters, ensuring that while the chariot moves, the essence of the tradition remains intact. Both mobility and mutability contribute to the immanent “unrepeatability” of the festival, allowing it to thrive and attract new participants while still honoring its historical and cultural roots. The interaction between these concepts fosters a rich cultural tapestry that reflects the community’s values and identity.

Nevertheless, the seeming conflict between maintaining and destroying this legacy is a key feature of the socio-cultural processes around this chariot as an agency and its interconnected elements. The inherent contradictions in these behaviors and activities operate as a driving force, improving social and cultural recognition, representation, interaction, and connections among the relevant aspects. The emphasis on underlying relational dynamics mitigates the impact of reductionist tendencies aimed at control and predictability, frequently connected with curated presentations and staged spectacles related to cultural hyper-consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

We recognize that the chariot procession in Bhaktapur embodies a dynamic interplay of tradition and adaptation. The procession serves as a living testament to the community’s cultural identity, where mutable mobiles, such as performances and decorations coexist with immutable elements like fixed statues and the chariot’s structure. This complex relationality enhances the festival’s vibrancy and underscores the importance of adaptability and sustainability in heritage practices. By embracing change and continuity, the *Bhailakha* becomes a powerful symbol of resilience, reflecting the community’s values and aspirations while engaging participants and spectators in a shared cultural narrative. This discourse invites us to appreciate the richness of heritage as a living process, shaped by the intricate relationships that connect past, present, and future within the community.

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