This article utilizes ethnographic methods to study Nepalese national identity as represented by and through official and everyday accounts of a building. The building—the former royal palace—was recently converted to a museum and opened up for public access. Official accounts represent the museum as a site for unity and breaking down of barriers between the public and the state while aspects of the recent monarchy, such as its role in deploying the army against the Maoists during the recent civil war, are silenced and the most recent monarch is invisible. Everyday representations draw upon these meanings but reformulate the museum (and the past) as a site and time where the relationship between the monarch (as representing the state) and the citizens was better off than today. As such, the state’s representations and silences themselves have facilitated space for challenging official meanings about the museum and the monarchy.

Introduction

On 18 December, 2009 I visited the Narayanhiti Palace museum in Kathmandu, Nepal for the first time in my life. Despite having spent half my total number of years in Kathmandu, Nepal, where the museum is located, this was the first time I had entered the palace grounds. My family lives within walking distance of the building and we all had, at different times in our lives, walked around it, taken photographs of it (when this was allowed) and talked about it. However, I had never been inside it. Trips to the ‘National museum’ from my high school meant going to a small museum situated on a hillside overlooking the Kathmandu Valley. It did not mean visiting Narayanhiti, the building which was (and is) situated centrally in the
city, at the head of what is called ‘Durbar marg’ (or ‘Palace way’). It had also formerly housed the Nepalese royal family.

The Narayanhiti building had been converted to a museum earlier that year. This meant locals—like me—and foreigners alike could easily visit the site where the royal family had lived in the past. It was also within this same compound that the former King Birendra and his family had been shot and killed in June 2001, an incident about which there still remained more questions than answers (See, for example, Bell 2009; and ‘Nepal royal massacre plotter arrested’ 2009). Now, with the permission to enter Narayanhiti, we could wander around the rooms in the palace where visiting heads of state had stayed and where the daily tasks of royalty—such as they were—were conducted. We could look at the rooms of former kings and queens, princes and princesses and see where they read, ate and slept. We could also roam the palace grounds and examine the site where the royal family had been killed. While the building where the killings occurred had been torn down by the succeeding king, the grounds had a large signboard with a map of the grounds which indicated where each member of the royal family had been shot. Since the area is spread out over the palace grounds, the process of finding where each person was standing when they were shot turns into an exercise of community participation as different groups of people attempt to find the exact spot where the sign (with markers for where each person was standing) corresponds to. On my first visit, a group of schoolchildren were turning the process of discovery into a competition, running around and attempting to match the signpost graphics with the layout of the grounds as quickly as they could.

A few years ago, none of this would have been possible. For most of the population, the interactions and the lifestyle of the king and his family were accessible only through media reports. One rare occasion that people were allowed an audience with the king was during the festival of Dasain and, even then, people lined up to receive tika from the king and immediately left the palace. They did not have any opportunity to explore the rooms of the building apart from the basement room in which they briefly met the king. It was a matter of going in, getting blessed by the king and leaving. Today, the only barrier to entry is the ticket fee to the palace, which is set so that locals (especially students) pay the least.

So, what were the implications of this shift of the identity of the building from a royal palace (with little to no access for local citizens) to a museum (with open access to all)? In this paper, I study the building itself as a site where representations of the nation are produced and describe how visitors to the museum orient themselves to these representations. I argue that there was a shift in how the Nepali government during the first year of the post-monarchy republic wanted to represent itself and this museum is a site where this shift—and the subsequent presentation of a ‘new’ Nepali identity—can be noted. As they moved from being external to the political system to
becoming part of it, the Maoists (and other political leaders) linked the opening up of the Narayanhiti palace to this newfound openness and social equality that the Maoists had promised. However, meaning-making is never one-sided and, despite the government’s aims, people’s responses to the Narayanhiti palace and its conversion point towards some of the challenges that still remain in post-conflict societies especially in terms of presenting a unified ‘national’ identity. Thus, there is a tension between how the ‘new Nepal’ is understood—at the government or official level and at the popular, everyday level as official meanings are contested by those who visit the new museum. While this may seem commonsensical, the palace-as-museum itself stands at a crossroads of how official representations of the past have been cemented and questioned. In other words, the state’s attempts at constructing a specific past through the spaces, stories and artefacts in this museum are themselves challenged by the meanings of the public who visit this museum.

Informal interviews conducted during my three visits to the museum in December 2009 indicate that people’s understandings of the palace and of the ‘new Nepal’ is not in line with official communication about opening up and straightforward access. Indeed, there is a significant amount of nostalgia for an (idealized) past when the monarch and his family safeguarded the country. However, it is not the most recent king that remains in people’s memories but the king prior to him—King Birendra. Birendra was the king who, along with his family, was killed in July 2001. This everyday remembering is reinforced by the decorations and artefacts within the palace museum as there is little to no sign of there having been a king after Birendra when the visitor moves through the rooms of the palace. On the whole, government-promoted representation of the royal palace as a symbol of the past and as a site for how future relations between leaders and the people could continue has been difficult to stabilize. Instead, my conversations with fellow visitors (and with sightseers who remained outside the palace) indicated a willingness to forgive the royal family for its transgressions and a pessimistic view of the future of the country, with political parties and leaders held to blame. If the conversion of the building from a palace to a museum was supposed to indicate the symbolic breaking down of barriers between leaders and the people, everyday meaning-making does not draw upon these representations.

This paper will explore some of these issues, looking at official representations of the building and also at the everyday meaning-making that the visitors to the newly-established museum are performing. What do visitors’ interactions with the museum say about how they make sense of the building itself and its role in society? What does this say about the image of Nepal itself? Taking the palace and its representations as a lens from which to view the changing relationship between people and the state in terms of national identity, this paper describes how the building signifies Nepal’s changing role from a monarchy to a folk-led democracy (ganatantra). However, at the same time, everyday meanings of the palace draw upon its past
as a symbol of royalty (and exceptionality) and as the site for the massacre of most of the royal family. The argument here is that the state’s representations of the building have opened up space for people to contest these official meanings and, as such, become a site of resistance to official meanings.

This paper is organized as follows: The following section will briefly describe the research methods used here, especially on accessing meanings of spaces and buildings. These serve as useful theoretical tools for understanding how representations of architecture are tied into identity-constitution. The focus will remain on how the building itself was made sense of (and is being made sense of). This will be followed by a section describing the history of Nepal in the 20th century to establish the context in which the building has shifted from a residence of the royal family to a museum. Government and official representations of the building will form Part III of the paper. Part IV will look at everyday representations. This will elaborate upon how the palace itself is a site for and a symbol of nationhood to those who visit it today. A short conclusion follows, drawing attention to the building as a site for contested national and everyday meanings.

Space and Place: A Note on Data Collection and Stake Establishment

To examine the process of representation—both at the official and popular levels—I adopt a rhetoric-based approach and utilize the linguistic mechanism of stake management (Potter 1996). Stake management is the active task where accounts of what occurred or reports are constructed as being authoritative and factual. It is how people attribute blame or responsibility and this is what is commonly called ‘stake’. Managing stake would then involve describing specific groups as threats and the reasons given for doing so. It also involves the assignation of specific interests to various actors. For instance, by saying it is in the interest of a particular group to use (or not use) violence, actors, often the state but also other levels of society, try to assign blame and responsibility to each other, thus constituting legitimate, respected and authoritative subjects versus illegitimate, illegal and non-authoritative threats. Stake management, thus, is explicitly about categorization and boundary-production as state/threat identities are legitimated. While Potter discusses the process of stake management by actors (Potter 1996, pp. 187-94), I am also interested in the simultaneous process through which stake management during the process of representing (the Nepali state’s identity as represented via the Narayanhiti building) produces specific identities of self and others. Attributions of blame and responsibility in the process of stake management provide legitimacy for actors’ courses of action and are the foundation for how meanings are produced and communicated.

In order to get at these meanings, I adopted an ethnographic approach. Textual ethnography—with news media as data—was the method used for explicating official meanings. For everyday
meanings, I visited the museum myself and talked to visitors. I also talked to people who congregated outside the building. Indeed, the small area outside the gates of the building was a site for people to gather and look at the building while talking about it. Thus, here, the building itself and its design acted as settings from which different articulations about the palace/museum could be made. But before outlining some of these official and everyday meanings, a discussion on the role of the monarch in 20th century Nepal is useful to set the context for the subsequent analysis.

A Brief History of Nepal in the 20th Century: The Monarch as Symbolizing the State

A brief history of Nepal in the 20th century serves to illustrate how the official representation of nationhood shifted from a 'Zone of Peace' in the 1970s-1980s to a counterterrorist state during the 2001-2007 period. This shift serves as the background for succeeding meaning-making regarding the status of the former royal palace in Nepali society after the end of the civil war. During much of the 20th century, the monarchy remained central to government and the visible sign of power. Indeed, the King was seen as having divine powers and as an avatar of the god Vishnu by many Nepalis.

In terms of outside interest in the country, Nepal remained mostly closed to the outside world until the 1920s, when George Mallory’s expeditions to climb Mt Everest generated interest, at least in the British/Indian world. Formal diplomatic relations with the United States were only established after World War Two, in 1948. After Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary climbed Mt Everest in 1953, Nepal became more prominent in overseas news and representations of Nepal as ‘the Himalayan Kingdom’, ‘Shangri-la’ or ‘the top of the world’ became common and still continue today. For example, in the majority of foreign media accounts about the Maoist insurgency of 1996-2006, the country’s name ‘Nepal’ was qualified by ‘the Himalayan Kingdom of’. Other common adjectives used in these international representations of Nepal were ‘picturesque but poverty-stricken’, ‘one of the poorest countries in the world’ and ‘underdeveloped’ (Hutt 2004, pp. 1-20).

In the early to mid-20th Century, while Nepal itself remained closed to outsiders, it was not high on the agenda for the international community either. As Whelpton writes, ‘Despite its geo-strategically important position in the Himalayas between India and China and its popularity as an exotic tourist destination, Nepal has not normally loomed large in the consciousness of the average educated person in the English-speaking world’ (Whelpton 2005, p. 1). The international community was more concerned with the two World Wars, anti-colonial struggles and communism. Nepalese soldiers fought all over the world for Britain (and, later, India) in many of these conflicts. Unlike the country—which continued to be represented as a lost paradise and/or a socioeconomically-disadvantaged state (but with
If this was the external world, at the domestic level 1951 meant the beginnings of democracy. An armed movement led by the Nepali Congress party had led to the overthrow of the regency of the Rana dynasty and was followed by Nepal's first-ever elections. These elections were won by the Nepali Congress and, for the first time in its history, Nepal had a democratic political system with an elected government. However, within two years of the establishment of democracy, in 1961, King Mahendra dismissed parliament and established the Panchayat (or 'village council') system. Under this system, heads of the Panchayat would report to the king and the king would be in direct control of the government. State authority, therefore, rested with the king. The king, of course, lived at Narayanhiti so the palace itself was the site where the head of state lived. However, local people had little or no access to the palace and to the king except during the king's travels around the country.

The absolute monarchy system continued until 1990. From the mid-1960s, the Nepali Congress began an armed rebellion against this one-party, monarch-led Panchayat system. The rebellion was small-scale but attacks upon village councils and government offices were common. However, there was limited popular support and so the armed rebellion was short-lived. For the next 25 years or so, the king remained the central figure of authority. In 1990, the Nepali Congress passed a resolution calling for 'a country-wide peaceful mass movement' in favour of democracy. During this pro-democracy movement, 50 or so civilians were killed (the actual number remains unknown) as protesters clashed with state security forces. 'Multiparty democracy' was established and the monarchy gave up its absolute authority and transformed into a constitutional monarchy. The term 'multiparty democracy' was used to distinguish this system from the Panchayat system which had represented itself as a democracy led by the king and one (his supporters’) party. During this entire time, Narayanhiti remained mostly closed to the general public. The king, too, was not easily accessible. The only time the palace's doors would be opened to the general public was, as I described earlier, during the festival of Dasain (around September or October each year) when the king would offer his blessings. While some people (government officials during the Panchayat period, for example) were required to go get blessed by the king, others travelled for miles and lined up outside the palace gates for hours to get their blessing. While the requirement ended after the establishment of democracy in 1990, hundreds if not thousands of people still continued to line up to receive blessings from the hands of the king.

In terms of self-representations, during the Cold War period, Nepal's security policies had a theme of non-alignment to both sides and, in the 1980s, Nepal promoted itself as a 'Zone of Peace'. The Zone of Peace formulation was introduced during King Birendra’s coronation.
in 1975 and heavily promoted thereafter by the king and his government (Garver 2001, pp. 149-50). In relations with its neighbors, Nepal publicly constituted itself as not taking the part of either India or China during their conflicts in the 1960s and afterwards. This neutral positioning continued as Nepal joined the non-aligned movement. This movement was described by its conveners as a way to stay out of the bipolarly constructed politics of the Cold War period. Thus, in the Cold War era, the constitution of Nepal's public identity was very much along the lines of neutrality and non-involvement in others' affairs as the Nepalese state positioned itself as uninvolved in and separate from regional and global tensions.

Alongside this Zone of Peace representation was that of other subjects in the international system as potential allies and friends. Nepal was represented as having no enemies except poverty and a lack of development (Shah 1983). The construction of others as allies or potential allies was seen in the case of Nepal's continued relations with both India and China and with the United States and the Soviet Union, opposing sides during the Cold War period. Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king who joined many smaller kingdoms into a unified Nepal in 1768, had described Nepal's situation as 'Nepal is a yam between two stones' (Brown 1996, p. 5) and this representation of being a weak and smaller (and potentially crushable) entity between two big, tough actors formed part of Nepalese security repertoire (and its self/other constitutions) since. By representing itself as a neutral, peaceful area, non-aligned to any side or ideology and by representing others as friends and allies (no matter their Cold War identities), Nepal's representations of other actors in regional and global arenas attempted a delicate balancing act, similar to the image of a yam between two stones. In this formulation, security threats to Nepal were from poverty and underdevelopment, not from either side of the Cold War since Nepal was a (potential or actual) ally of all sides. The king himself promoted this Zone of Peace identity and remained central in representing Nepal as an area of peace (Shah 1983; Savada 1993).

After 1990 and the end of the Cold War, the bipolarly-constructed international system ended. But even then, elections were held frequently in Nepal, starting from 1990’s establishment of multiparty democracy, and there was a multiparty contestation of these elections. Within global security representations of the time, Nepal was merely another small state at the periphery of the international system which had now become democratic in the post Cold War wave of democratizations and its people were exercising their democratic rights. There were frequent changes of government in the next decade and, by 2000, there had been nine changes of government in ten years.

When the Maoist rebellion started in 1996, the rebels were not very numerous and their activities were described (in domestic and regional representations) as being that of a small group of dissatisfied
people who would not be supported by local people. They were not seen as serious threats to Nepal. Instead, Nepal's formulations of its identity drew upon themes of lack of educational and economic opportunities as leading to poverty. In February 1996, six years after the establishment of a multiparty democracy in Nepal, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched its *janayuddha* ('People's War'). Their stated goal was to establish a People's Republic of Nepal in place of the existing monarchy but they also had a 40 point list of demands, which included calls for increased social equality and an end to ethnic and gender discrimination. In the period from then to November 2001, their use of violence gradually increased, especially outside the Kathmandu valley. Descriptions of Nepal in the international media continued to draw upon representations of poverty, lack of socioeconomic development and the need for industrial growth, rather than on security or terrorism. This did not mean violence had stopped. By mid-2001, almost 2000 people had been killed (Hutt 2004, p. 6). There was also the practice of reciprocal killings, with the Maoists killing people and then the police retaliating (or the other way around).

In 2001, violence escalated with over 70 people killed in the first week of April alone. Then, there was news which suddenly brought international attention on Nepal. On June 1, 2001, King Birendra and his whole family were killed in a massacre which occurred within the royal palace. Official reports assigned blame to Crown Prince Dipendra who was said to have been thwarted in his choice of wife and then killed his family. Birendra's surviving brother Gyanendra was crowned king on June 4. However, there continued to be numerous rumors about whether Dipendra was really guilty with popular suspicion even placed on Gyanendra. During this time, there was a curfew in Kathmandu and public demonstrations were frowned upon. On June 6, the Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai wrote a column in a popular Nepali-language daily *Kantipur* alleging that King Birendra had supported the Maoists' goals (and inferring this was the reason for his killing) (Bhattarai 2001).

At this time, descriptions of the Maoists in official security discourses were as a threat, which could be dealt with without using the Army. In the weeks following the killings of the royal family, the Maoists increased their calls for a republic but received little public support, especially in urban areas. There was also a change in government and the new government declared a ceasefire. The Maoists followed suit, with peace talks starting in August 2001. In the months that followed, the peace process would falter and violence would continue. At the end of November 2001, a state of emergency was declared.

After November 2001, the Maoists were declared 'terrorists' by the Nepalese government and the army was deployed against its own people for the first time in Nepal's history. Drawing upon newly formulated counterterrorist legislation, the state banned public protests and gatherings and curtailed rights to speech and media.
After some changes in government, in February 2005, King Gyanendra took over direct control of government, claiming the elected political parties had been weak in their response to Maoist terrorists. Gyanendra’s sole control of government continued until April-May 2006, when popular protests led to the resignation of the king as head of government. In April 2006, the Nepali Congress’ Girija Prasad Koirala was appointed as the prime minister. A peace accord was signed in November 2006, ending the decade-long civil war and Maoist leaders entered parliament from June 2007. Within a few months, the new parliament agreed to end the monarchy, the Maoists won the most seats in nationwide elections held in April 2008 and Nepal became a republic in May 2008. Maoist leader Prachanda became the new prime minister in August 2008, as he headed a coalition government. King Gyanendra and his family were told to vacate the royal palace.

During the 2006 popular protests which led to the giving up of power by King Gyanendra, the royal palace had served as a symbol of authoritarianism with people protesting outside it as they called for democracy over authoritarianism and for Nepal to become a republic instead of a monarchy. For much of the 20th century, the Narayanhiti building served as a symbol of the royal family. The monarch was the absolute leader until 1990. Even after that, he occupied a visible position with frequent appearances during religious festivals and, especially, with Narayanhiti’s location in the center of the city. From 2005, when the king once again took over direct control of government, the palace had a dual identity. One, it was central to the notion of ‘Nepal’ and to the (counterterrorist) actions of the Nepali state. Two, it was a symbol against which popular protests and criticisms of the king and his actions could be directed. As such, in the post-2005 period, while the palace symbolized the continuity of the king’s role in setting and maintaining the counter-Maoist policy of the Nepali state, it was also a site where resistance could be targeted. The king (and his hand-picked government’s) actions served as a location where the identity of Nepal as a counterterrorist state fighting against Maoist ‘terrorists’ could be challenged, and its possible future—as a republic—could be proposed. Situated as it is in the centre of the city of Kathmandu at one end of its widest street, the palace was a contentious symbol, a site where the past, present and future merged. The next section of this paper will examine the various meanings of the Narayanhiti building. I will first describe my own experiences in visiting the museum and use that to reflect upon the politics of (national and everyday) representation in which the building itself participates.

Narayanhiti: From Palace to Museum

Let me begin by describing how the Narayanhiti palace museum is organized. As I walk in the side gates (the main gates are only open for official vehicles), I reach the ticket counter. The ticket counter clearly specifies the different rates for students, other Nepalis, people
from SAARC countries\textsuperscript{8} and China, and then everyone else. Here, as in other tourist sites around the city, the hierarchical fee structure is to encourage (and make it possible for) locals to visit while not discouraging the foreign tourists who pay five times as much (this still ends up being only around US$5 for the tourists from non-SAARC countries). After getting the entry ticket, I am asked to deposit my bag/backpack at a room nearby. There is a sign saying no photography is allowed inside the building’s grounds and in the building itself. The man at the bag storage room specifically asks me if I have a camera (I do) and to leave it there. However, there is no provision made for mobile phones, many of which are equipped with a camera these days. During a subsequent visit, a staff member joked I could easily take pictures if I wanted ‘with your mobile’.

A quick security check, including a body sweep (to ensure cameras and other ‘potentially harmful material’ are not carried into the building’s grounds, I am told) and then it is time to enter the main grounds. This is done through a small entrance that lies beyond the security people. Again, security staff says this is to ensure ‘full surveillance’ of everyone who enters the inner (main) palace grounds. Once in, there is a driveway which winds around a circular garden in the centre and leads up to the main steps of the building. This front garden is closed off to the public. The steps itself are lined with carved structures (statues), with the palace doors inscribed with Nepalese carvings. Inside the doorway, the first room the visitor sees is the main \textit{baithak}, or visiting room, which is dominated by a throne. Behind the throne and surrounding it are animal skins and animal trophies. A double flight of stairs leads upwards. There are no signs indicating which direction to walk towards. While I tried to go towards the stairs, however, one of the museum staff politely steers me to the left, into a small corridor which then leads to a series of rooms. Apparently, there is an established route which has to be followed in my way around the former palace and, by trying to go up the stairs, I had stepped away from this route. Even in a seemingly-neutral setting such as the interior of a building, there is an attempt to produce the visitor’s body as having to see (and experience) the lifestyle of these former monarchs while, at the same time, the visitor is disallowed from experiencing the exhibits ‘out of order’. Any disruption of this route led to the museum staff, usually invisible, explicitly making it clear that going outside the route was not allowed.

The first room on the left is a state meeting room. It contains paintings of assorted Nepali birds on its walls. The cabinets (floor-to-ceiling in height) are covered with photographs of various heads of government who have visited Nepal. Almost all the photographs are from the pre-Gyanendra era (pre-2001). This absence of the final (and only surviving) monarch from the museum is reinforced by the walls of the corridor outside this room. One wall of the corridor is lined with pictures of a diverse group of world leaders meeting with Nepali monarchs. Except that almost all the pictures are of King Birendra and his wife Queen Aishwarya meeting other heads of government. There is no indication that the monarchy continued for seven years after the
death of King Birendra or that, during this time, the king was responsible for deploying the Army against other Nepali citizens (the Maoists and their allies).

After this, there are a few bedrooms. Signs indicate these were where the guests and their families stayed during their visits. Following the bedrooms is a library (with books ranging from Western philosophy and science to mysteries by Agatha Christie). During my first visit there, a museum staff member pointed out a portrait of King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, which had been made using (human) hair. The staff claimed it was one of the former monarchs’ favourite pieces and had been a gift from China. All the rooms were decorated with gifts from various countries but, again, there were very few labels to indicate where the gifts were from. Each room, however, was clearly labelled as ‘room of visiting heads of state’ or ‘family room’. However, museum visitors were not allowed to venture beyond a roped boundary in each room, meaning many of the artefacts in the rooms could only be observed at a distance. The information cards were difficult to read so a major feature of the museum ‘tour’ was the speculation from visitors about what some of the pieces were. Sometimes, one of the museum staff came over to provide information about the artefacts though this was not always common. Often, the staff sat on a chair and did not get involved with visitors except to tell people not to get too close to the boundary ropes of each room. Once again, this emphasized the notion that the building was expected to speak for itself, as it were, with the rooms and routes laid out to facilitate memorialization of the monarchy as a figurehead of Nepal.

The building’s upper floor was also open but visitors had to use the back stairs to access it. Upstairs is what is probably the most impressive room of the palace. It has soaring ceilings and large pillars with scenes from Hindu mythology painted on them. Again, the scenes are too high to make out their depictions in detail and only the stark white of the pillars and the colours of the paintings can be clearly seen. The former king Tribhuvan’s library follows this room—quieter and in muted brown colours, filled with his trinkets (including family photographs in the wooden cabinets). Then, visitors can make their way down via the large stairs I had tried to use when I first entered the building. This time, the bottom section is roped off and the route goes through to an area where there are more bedrooms, including those of the king and queen.

After this, I make my way down to the basement, which is just one enormous room. Here, medals of various stripes are displayed in glass cabinets as are other curios. A doorway at the far side leads outside to the back gardens. The museum staff person sitting by this doorway seem to be the busiest based on my brief observation. They tell me that many people (including myself during my first visit) ask about the site where King Birendra and his family were killed. The staff directed me (and others who asked the same question) to the
grounds outside the building and told me to follow the signs. A staff member tells me that this is the most common question she has heard since the museum opened up to the public. When I ask if it gets boring directing people in the same direction several times each day, she laughs and answers, 'I think many people would go directly there if they could'. This indicates her understanding that the main attraction of the museum is the site where the former king was killed, not the rooms which are meant to showcase the day-to-day tasks and life of a monarch. It is not his living days that we are interested in but his death. However, to get to the site of his death, we first have to go through the building which showcases him as a benevolent leader.

While these were my observations when moving through Narayanhiti, official accounts of it focus mostly on the external and on the value of Narayanhiti as a national symbol of the past and of the future. The newly-established museum represents a site where the new Nepal can understand the old and where the old monarchy has been replaced by a new folk/people-led democracy. The uniqueness of Nepal is one of the main themes that has been emphasized in accounts of the building’s changed role. Here, I lay out three themes that official accounts have put forward, starting with the role of the (Nepali) people and their relation to the state.

I. The People as Reasons for the Changing Identity of Narayanhiti (and Nepal)

In government accounts, the people were invoked as the reason for which Narayanhiti had changed from a palace to a museum. Their role in creating and establishing history was often repeated. In 2008, then prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala, when proclaiming the establishment of the museum, claimed that the Nepalese people had participated in ‘a historic event’, that of the transfer of power from a monarchy to a republic, without any bloodshed. Nepal was thus an example to the world, in his words. Koirala also articulated his own position as being one of the ‘common people’ as he said that it was the hands of ‘an ordinary man’ who had lifted the national flag at the former palace. Indeed, the conversion of the palace into a museum was clearly expressed as ‘fulfilling the aspirations of the people’ and heralding a ‘new era’ for Nepal. When the building was finally opened to the general public as a museum (in February 2009), then prime minister Pushpa Kumar Dahal (the former Maoist leader Prachanda) said, ‘this is not just the opening of a museum but the culmination of the struggle of the Nepali people against feudalism and a beginning of victory’ (‘Site of royal massacre opens as museum in Nepal’ 2009).

Here, there was a shift in the building’s identity, from the location of the monarchy (and separate to the people) to a symbol of the ‘struggle of the Nepali people’. At stake in these descriptions was the identity of Nepal as a country where an ‘ordinary man’ could accomplish change, and where the fight against feudalism could be memorialized. Maoists and non-Maoists were united in this representation.
The rhetoric of ‘the ordinary people’ as the centre of this shift in identity was repeatedly invoked in accounts of the building and used to describe its new ‘open access’. Media reports described the establishment of the museum as a victory for the ‘ordinary people’. ‘Ordinary people’ would now be able to see the area where the former King Birendra and his family had been killed. It wasn’t just the people of Nepal but the ‘whole world’ could see where ‘the mysterious events’ of the royal massacre had occurred (‘Narayanhiti opens as museum’ 2009). The building shifted in its meaning from being a site where the royal family was isolated from society, an arena which remained closed off to the people to a setting where the people were encouraged to visit. It was now opened up, just like Nepal was opening up was the implication.

The shift in the role of the building from the location of power and from where decisions were made to a memorial to the past was made clear by the Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai. When asked how he felt about being present at the site from which many of the anti-Maoist decisions had been made, Baburam Bhattarai said that it was not a palace anymore and it was a building that belonged to the people (‘Site of royal massacre opens as museum in Nepal’ 2009). Narayanhiti, then, had changed from being a building which gave little or no access to the general public to a symbol of a new Nepal, which was established because of the wishes and actions of ‘the people’. This was articulated in other accounts as well. For example, attending the museum’s opening ceremony, the Norwegian ambassador to Nepal said, ‘they [the Nepali people] can get a look inside’ (‘Site of royal massacre opens as museum in Nepal’ 2009).

Looking at this in terms of strategies of governmentality, the new post-monarchy Nepali state attempted to reformulate the monarchy. The monarchy was represented as symbolic of Nepal’s past, as old, feudal and past its time. Hence, the building—formerly a palace—was symbolic of how ‘ordinary people’ and their relationship with the state had changed. At stake was the future of Nepal and the identity of the ‘new Nepal’. By positioning himself as an ‘ordinary person’, Koirala linked his own experiences with those of everyday Nepali people and (symbolically) broke the barriers between the leader and the people, a barrier that the building-as-palace used to stand for in the days of the monarchy.

Overall, the concept of governmentality is a useful tool to understand the production of national identity because governmentality is a concept (and an understanding of political organization) that concentrates on spaces and power relations inherent in the practices of governing. It thus focuses attention on a concern with state identity-building. Looking at the museum’s descriptions in official accounts draws attention to the mechanisms of power relations by which the state established itself as a particular kind of state (Foucault 2007, p. 381). This could be a counterterrorist state as in the days before the peace agreement in Nepal or a state that is a ganatantra...
as in the days after the end of the monarchy. This approach de-centres previous studies about the state in that it shifts our gaze from taking for granted the state’s identity transformations to questioning how that identity was produced and established in the first place.¹³ I see this as a double displacement—shifting from the perspective of the state to a perspective on the state to note how state/society relations emerge, shift and become normalized. Governmentality is therefore an analytical perspective which allows for a gaze on the state, within the state, examining statist accounts to study how practices of relating to others were constituted. Applying that perspective to the example of Narayanhiti allowed for exploring the shift in the role of the state and its citizen as official accounts emphasized how the people now had access to a previously closed setting, linking this to the openness of the ‘new Nepal’. This would become more evident in the official articulations about the Nepali flag and it is to those that I turn next.

II The National Flag as a Symbol of Togetherness

The change in meaning of Narayanhiti from a palace to a museum that emphasized openness was also exemplified by the taking down of the royal flag and its replacement by the Nepali (double-triangled) flag. During popular protests in 2008, people demonstrating in the main street outside the building often called for the Nepali flag to replace the king’s flag which, until the king’s departure, used to fly in front of the palace. Thus, one of the first tasks the prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala did when announcing that Narayanhiti would now be a museum was to refer to ‘the people’s wishes’ and their calls for the national flag to replace the existing flag. The Nepali flag was said to be a ‘symbol of concession, agreement and unity’ (‘PM Koirala hoists national flag at Narayanhiti Palace’ 2008, translation by author). Koirala added, ‘may this flag, which has been raised by the hands of an ordinary person today, never bend down, never fall on the ground and may we never surrender our independence to anyone’ (‘PM Koirala hoists national flag at Narayanhiti Palace’ 2008). This move away from the monarchy to a united, independent Nepal was reinforced by the Army band playing the new national anthem during this inauguration ceremony: the new anthem that does not mention the king or the monarchy.¹⁴

The Nepali flag here is linked with the Prime Minister Koirala (and with ‘ordinary people’) and established as a symbol of national unity. Similar to the reference to ‘ordinary people’ and their now being able to access the palace, the flag was described as an explicit symbol of unity and independence. Indeed, the flag not only symbolized the unity of the Nepali people but it also symbolized the continued unity and independence of the Nepali population. The corollary here is, of course, that unity and independence may be challenged during this transition to a republic. Since the establishment of the republic, there have been calls for Nepal to become a federal political system, with different ethnic groups calling for their own rajyas (or ‘kingdoms’, a
term which draws upon the days of the pre-Shah era). Hence, at stake in official accounts was this link between a united populace and (continued) independence of the nation. Thus, official processes of stake establishment, both Maoist and non-Maoist, combined together in representing the Nepali flag not just as a shift from the monarchy to a republic but as symbolic of national unity, a unity that should not be threatened.

III Memoryin
g What?

In official accounts, the museum was not just established to memorialize the past but to point towards a new and different future. The past mainly became important in that it symbolized an old way of behaving (and old state-society relations). The future was a ‘new Nepal’, when an ‘ordinary man’ (Koirala’s words describing himself) could lift the flag outside a former royal palace, the symbol of monarchy. As such, the identity of Narayanhiti as the palace and as the seat of the royal family was firmly moved to the past, while the future of Nepal as a new, united and independent country was foregrounded.

However, the spatial organization of the museum itself indicated a memorialization not of the recent past but of the time during which King Birendra had ruled (and been shot dead). Indeed, the lack of mention of the last monarch—Gyanendra—suggested that his memory (and his actions, which included officially labelling the Maoists as ‘terrorist’) was not the subject of memorialization. Indeed, he was mentioned only—and very briefly—as someone who had given way for the ‘new Nepal’ to emerge. Koirala said, ‘The republic has been established’, and added, ‘The king helped the process by understanding the desire and expectation of the people by voluntarily moving out to live an exile-like life’ (Girija Koirala, quoted in ‘Nepal’s former royal palace now public museum’ 2008).

The past was characterized as a long list of dead Shah kings, all of whom had larger-than-life-sized portraits lining the entrance to the palace. The site of the murder of king Birendra was one of the biggest, if not the biggest, draws of the museum. As I wrote earlier in this paper, even though the building itself had been demolished, the exact area where each person was killed was clearly marked and signposted. The incongruence of reading about the deaths of the king, queen and their children while standing in the midst of a garden in the crisp winter air did not seem to occur to many visitors. Young children ran around the ground, playing games and shouting. What was being remembered, therefore, was not the recent past when the monarchy ordered the Army to kill thousands of Nepali citizens. Instead, the past that was being commemorated represented the centre of monarchy (the building which had housed them) as where state visits from world leaders had occurred and where these leaders as well as the Nepali royal family had stayed. In the museum, therefore, there was an attempt to domesticate the political space by
turning it from a site from which government decisions were made to a site where the royal family lived their everyday lives. They ate, slept, read, watched performances, gave out medals and met with other heads of state.

The years from 2001 (when the massacre occurred) to 2008 are thus missing in the process of memorialization within this museum. As such, the role of the monarch was represented as greeting visiting leaders and participating in medal-giving ceremonies.\textsuperscript{16} There was little or no mention of the monarchy’s role in deploying the army against the Maoist ‘terrorists’ and in taking over the government. Indeed, King Birendra’s death is represented as something to investigate further and reveal the truth of. Prime Minister Dahal made this clear in his speech when opening the museum up to the general public as he said,

\begin{quote}
Nepal has entered a new era. The meaning of the opening of this museum to all Nepalis and ordinary citizens is not just that it is the opening of a museum but it is a symbol of the Nepali citizens’ fight against feudalism. This is a new symbol of the victory of the Nepali people. On this historic occasion, with my authority as the first people-elected (\textit{jananirwachit}) prime minister of a united folk-led republic, I wish to express one wish—we talk about conflict in Nepal. The biggest conflict started here. There will be a full investigation of that, truth will be revealed and put forth in front of the citizens. It is the citizens’ rights to know what happened here and who was the real culprit and this right will be fulfilled. (‘Narayanhiti opens as museum’ 2009)
\end{quote}

Here, once again, ‘the people’ (the citizens) are represented as deserving to know the truth. But it is not the truth of the Maoists or the Army’s actions during the decade-long civil war that Dahal is calling for. Instead, he is calling for the investigation into murders that are (according to how the museum is organized) of the ‘old’ Nepal. Hence, the ‘new’ Nepal may be independent and united, but it is not willing to discuss the role of the monarchy (or even Dahal and his Maoists) during the civil war. For local visitors to the museum, however, the museum’s organization serves as a reminder of the days of King Birendra and it is his death, rather than the crimes committed by the Army and the Maoists during the civil war, which will be investigated. That this opens up conversations about how life was during the days of King Birendra (rather than the time after his death, when the monarchy deployed the Army against Maoist ‘terrorists’) is something that official articulations encourage. Everyday meanings about the building thus draw upon this idealized version of the monarchy while challenging the notions of a ‘new’ Nepal.

\textbf{Everyday Meaning-Making: Nostalgia for the Past and Pessimism for the Future}

In the days following the 2006 announcement by King Gyanendra that he was giving up his role as king, people’s views about the change
were mostly positive. In media interviews with protesters outside Narayanhiti, many people said they were happy that peace had been established, were looking forward to increased freedom and rights, and welcomed the change. Some expressed thankfulness for peace while others said they had been waiting for a long time for this change to occur (‘Finally national flag flies at Narayanhiti’ 2009 and ‘People protest demanding to hoist national flag at palace’ 2009). This had changed by December 2009. During my visits to Narayanhiti, I informally talked with fellow visitors and, a few times, with the museum staff and security personnel. The general consensus then was that Narayanhiti represented a past which was preferable to the present. While the young people were mostly interested in my own background (and expressed their wish to go study abroad, a common theme in Nepal), the older people shared their memories of the times when the monarchy was in power. For most of these older people, too, talking of ‘the king’ meant King Birendra. Indeed, Birendra was almost always given the honorific raja (king), while the few times Gyanendra was mentioned, he was not given the honorific.

Two things can be inferred here: one, the official organization and representation of the museum as a memorialization of a specific monarch (Birendra) and monarchy (fairly benign with the king and his family’s tragedy centralized) was similar to how many of the people I talked with made sense of the building. However, secondly, these conversations also challenged the official stake of a ‘new Nepal’ being independent and united. This was indicated in that one of the major concerns expressed by the visitors I talked to was their fear that Nepal would be broken up into different areas and the possibility of increasing inter-ethnic conflict. The optimism expressed in official accounts of there being a ‘new Nepal’ one that was open and moving towards a (brighter) future was not exhibited by the people. Instead, the people viewed the past and the time of King Birendra as a time when Nepal was safer, united and under a leader who cared for them.¹⁷

Another theme that almost everyone discussed was how daily life was ‘easier’ and ‘more convenient’ (sajilo) in the Birendra era, with foodstuffs more easily accessible (and cheaper). People mentioned they used to feel more secure, with security defined as having enough to buy basic goods and being able to travel.¹⁸ The issue of security was a major theme that was brought up with people claiming it was much safer to travel around Nepal in the past. It remains fairly common to hear people in Kathmandu claim they could not go back to their villages because of insecurity and the potential to be kidnapped or disappeared. Others, when I told them I was researching the meanings of the conflict, told me about people they knew who had disappeared or left Nepal to prevent being conscripted by the army or the Maoists. Again, the general consensus here was that post-conflict Nepal would find it difficult to deal with these issues.
Conclusion: A New Nepal?

Taking representations of the museum as symbolic of how national identity has been understood and transformed after the end of the civil war leads to three main conclusions. First, official accounts represent the change from a palace to a museum as the beginnings of a ‘new’ Nepal. This new Nepal has thrown off the shackles of the past feudal monarchy and is moving towards a united, independent future. Second, the past that is being memorialized in the museum is not the recent 2001-2008 period, a time when thousands of citizens died during a bloody civil war. Instead, it is the pre-2001 past that is actively remembered and the deaths of an earlier monarch and his family that are commemorated. Indeed, the last (and still surviving) monarch is mostly invisible in the museum. Thirdly and on a related note, official representations of the museum (and of the ‘new’ Nepal) silence the complicity of the monarchy in deploying the army against its own citizens. They also silence the role of the Maoists in the conflict as the discussions of a new Nepal by government officials did not include investigations of wartime atrocities or the fate of the many who disappeared during this period. The search for ‘truth’ here is about opening up another investigation into what happened to King Birendra and his family, not about what happened to the many who are still missing or whose deaths remain unexplained from the time of the conflict. Indeed, there is no mention of the conflict in the Narayanhiti palace museum, despite the monarchy’s role as head of state during the years of the civil war.

If these are the official representations of a new Nepal, then public representations are similar and yet different. While there is an acknowledgment that the palace now represents the past, this past is remembered as a time when things were safer and better for Nepal. There are acknowledgments of the costs of the conflict, including being displaced from one’s home and worries for the future. As such, the idea of a new Nepalese national identity as represented in official accounts is continuously challenged not just by the memories of the visitors to Narayanhiti but also by the obvious silences in the organization of the museum itself. These silences—which make the recent monarchic past invisible—cannot be avoided when talking about a new Nepal. The museum itself provides a public space for discussing these silences, hence challenging official descriptions of it.

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Notes

1 On this point, see also Caplan (1995; 1991). Recent discussions about unfair pay/citizenship rules for retired British Gurkhas also drew upon these tropes.

2 A Nepali Congress supporter, informally interviewed by the author in December 2009, said the Nepali Congress and its activities at this time were labeled atankakari in the 1960s when they began their first pro-democracy activities (atankakari is directly translated as ‘revolutionary’ but has been used to mean ‘terrorist’ in recent times). Nepali Congress supporter, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, 10 December, 2009.

3 This ‘Zone of Peace’ formulation was not officially recognized by India.


5 When I was in Nepal in December 1998, there was not much mention of the Maoists as a problem to community-based management practices. Indeed, at that time, Nepal’s community management programs were well-known for being successful and were seen as an example to other countries.

6 Kotparba was a massacre in Nepali history that occurred in 1846. Hundreds were killed and it led to the 104-year-long Rana period. During this period, the Rana family was in charge of governing the country, with the monarchy occupying a symbolic role. However, the Ranas performed their tasks in the name of the monarchy so the monarchy remained tied to (official) national identity.

7 While this designation was dropped in Nepal in 2006, the US government still had the Maoists in its list of terrorist organizations even in 2009.

8 SAARC countries are the countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. There are eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan.

9 Koirala, of the Nepali Congress party, was the prime minister in 2008 when the decision to turn the palace into a museum was made. Prachanda, the former Maoist leader, was the prime minister in 2009 when the palace was officially opened as a museum. Part of my argument in this paper is that both these men, despite being from different parties, used similar rhetoric to describe the building’s role in Nepalese history.

10 As pointed out earlier in this paper, Koirala was one of the original members of the Nepali Congress party. He was not a Maoist. His family is one of the most prominent political families in Nepal. His brother—Biseshwor Prasad Koirala—was Nepal’s first democratically elected leader in the 1960s.
For my analysis, I draw upon Potter (1996) but specifically on Yanow (1998), Sylvester (2009) and Luke (2002) to study how museums are made sense of in the discipline of International Relations (IR). Yanow, in particular, was invaluable in terms of incorporating the body-as-experiencing space (during my visits to Narayanhiti) into the overall concerns of discursive production of self (whether individual or that of the state). Outside IR, of course, there has been a flourishing literature on the study of museums. Some illustrative examples there are Hetherington (2002) in which the British museum and the ‘Parthenon frieze’ form objects of analysis; Duncan (1995) looks at the type of subjectivity produced within the space of a public museum and Hooper-Greenhill (1992) examines how museums participate in the production of a specific type of knowledge.

This is Foucault’s view in the early conceptualization of ‘governmentality’, one that my project follows up on. His later views point towards a more general understanding of governmentality while also limiting its analytical focus to a ‘police state or liberal minimum government’ (Foucault 2007, p. 388), a task which, while useful, moves attention away from all states’ practices by creating an exceptional state (and exceptional practices) which uses such techniques of power.


The flag had been raised earlier when, after a day of popular protests and clashes between protesters and the police, the palace’s officials had changed the king’s flag for the national flag on 29 May, 2008. However, it was officially raised on the day on which the palace was inaugurated as a museum by Koirala.

Though some of the people I talked to mentioned that even the noise of people talking could not take away the sadness they felt there. Since the area is further away from the palace building itself and includes a small shaded pool (near where Queen Aishwarya was shot), there is an impression of solitude amongst the crowd of museum-goers. Also, depending on timing, it may well be that there are only a few people visiting. My second visit was just before closing time and there were only two other people in the gardens while I was there.

The basement showcases many of these medals in glass display cases.

More than one visitor expressed their respect for King Birendra and talked about him as someone who would never have let the civil war escalate.

My second visit to the Narayanhiti palace museum was during a day in which a ‘Nepal bandh’ had been called. On those days, almost all shops are shut and there are very few cars and public vehicles on the streets.

A recent Human Rights Watch report summarized the problems faced by the families of people who were disappeared or unlawfully killed in their search for answers (Human Rights Watch 2009). The report’s summary can be read here: http://www.hrw.org/en/node/86019/section/3.
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