This paper is not a micro-study of a particular ritual or set of rituals and the changes in their performance. Rather, I want to share some more general observations regarding recent shifts in religious, particularly ritual, practice in the Newar Buddhist tradition of the Kathmandu Valley. My starting point is a brief overview of the ways in which Tibetans and Newars have interacted over the centuries when renovating the Svayambhūcaitya, the most sacred shrine for the Buddhists of Kathmandu. I will argue that while the patterns of sponsorship of these renovations changed in significant ways, this does not apply to the rituals performed in their course, starting with the deconsecration of the dilapidated structure and concluding with the reconsecration of the rebuilt caitya. By contrast, the sociopolitical transformation of Nepal since the opening of the country in 1950 has had a profound impact upon Newar Buddhism. I will examine the changes that as a result have recently begun to emerge in ritual practice. I do this because many of the forces and mechanisms at play here are not particular to the Newar

1 I use the term ‘renovation’ in a broad, non-technical sense. I prefer this to committing myself to a more specific term such as those used to identify the seven “levels of intervention” that James Marston Fitch (Historic Preservation, 1982) distinguishes “according to a scale of increasing radicality,” namely “1. preservation; 2. restoration; 3. conservation and consolidation; 4. reconstitution; 5. adaptive reuse; 6. reconstruction; 7. replication.” As I explain below, the ‘renovations’ of the Svayambhūcaitya were major affairs, involving the replacement of the central wooden axis and the dismantling of the entire superstructure above the dome as well as its reconstruction with new materials. They were hence rather radical forms of “interventions.” Since none of the seven terms as defined by Fitch adequately captures the case of Svayambhū, and since I am not aware of another technical term that would do so, I chose to use instead the unspecific term ‘renovation’, rather than opting for a more precise, technical term that would not fit accurately.
situation, but illustrate more generally how a premodern form of Vajrayāna Buddhism struggles to adjust to modernity, a struggle that surely forms also part of the changes Tibetan ritual practices have undergone since 1959.

As archaeological finds of Kuśāṇa art bear out, the Kathmandu Valley, that is the historical Nepal, has for at least two thousand years been under the influence of Indic culture and civilisation. This influence includes its religious traditions, that is, since the latter part of the first millennium CE, Vajrayāna Buddhism and tantric Śaivism as well as other Hindu traditions. However, because of its location on the very periphery of the Indian mainland, Nepal was until 1950 (when the country opened up to the outside world) shielded from many of the momentous changes that occurred in mainland India. This does not only apply to the transformation of India brought about by British colonialism and the independence movement, but also includes the prior penetration of India by Islam and the changes of the religious landscape this entailed. As a result, many forms of religious practices survive in the Valley that have long since disappeared from the Indian mainland. In addition to Buddhism this includes archaic forms of Śākta Śaivism, such as the secret cult of the tantric goddess Kubjikā.2 It would, of course, be a fiction to conceive of Nepal as a static place immune to change. The mentioned Indic religious traditions were shaped by autochthonous forms of religiosity and adapted to Newar society. Moreover, coexisting side by side in constrained urban spaces, Buddhism and the Hindu traditions deeply influenced each other—often blurring distinctions—and have many resulting commonalities. A good example in the sphere of ritual practice is the near-identical set of life cycle rites through which Newars of ‘pure’ caste pass. Furthermore, Nepal was not only exposed to Indic influences, but also to the cultures of the neighbouring people on the southern flank of the Himalaya, such as the Tamangs. Finally, reflecting its location along one of the major trans-Himalayan trade routes, there is a long history of interaction with Tibetan Buddhism.3

* * *

3 For an historical overview of Newar-Tibetan relations see Todd Lewis (1989).