This paper gives a brief but updated account of the fieldwork carried out by ethnomusicologists in Nepal with some information on the recorded and published material. The recently-founded (1996) Kathmandu University Department of Music in Bhaktapur is in the process of establishing a sound archives for Nepalese musical traditions. The department has already published two CDs with Sherpa dance-songs from the Everest region.

CD cover: ‘Music of the Sherpa People of Nepal’ (vol.1) published by EcoHimal Little Star Records.

*Photograph courtesy Gert-Matthias Wegner.*

Newar farmers playing bansri and dhimay during Biskit jatra in Bhaktapur.

Newar farmers playing bansri and dhimay during Biskit jatra in Bhaktapur.

Photographs courtesy Gert-Matthias Wegnex
Until 1951, Nepal had been closed to the rest of the world for several hundred years. The use of the wheel was restricted to ritual purposes. The only school in the country was reserved for members of the ruling Rana aristocracy who pursued a lifestyle similar to the Nawabs of Lucknow. The unique topography of Nepal (with 20 million inhabitants) helped preserve an extremely rich variety of ethnic groups (speaking 36 languages) and their musical traditions on a territory half the size of Germany. Despite natural and imposed restrictions on travel, there have been periods of exchange with Indian musical traditions, some of which were modified to local needs and inspired the unique musical culture of the Newar people of the Kathmandu Valley which arguably is the most complex musical tradition in the entire Himalayas.

With the exception of Dutch ethnomusicologist Arnold A. Bake who visited the Kathmandu Valley in 1931 and again in 1955/56, no Western ethnomusicologist was able to record Nepalese music during the isolation of the Rana period. With the assistance of the Rana rulers, Bake was able to produce brief but fascinating documentary films of carya dance as well as sound recordings and photographs of various Nepalese musical traditions. Until then, performances of carya dance had been confined to the secrecy of the clan-god houses of the Bajracharya priests. After many years of research, lecturing and performing in South Asia, Arnold Bake went to London to teach at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. Today, his Nepalese archives remains with the Music Department at the School of Oriental and African Studies.


A CD (‘Musique de fote chez les Newar’) produced in 1989 by Laurent Aubert, mentions the 1952 Nepal mission carried out by
Marguerite Lobsiger-Dellenbach and presents a seven-minute invocation recorded by her. The remaining recordings (examples of Newar and Gaine traditions) were carried out by the producer in the course of a research trip from February to April 1973.

The most astounding collection of Nepalese music recordings was compiled by Terence R. Bech, an American Peace Corps volunteer who worked in Nepal from 1964 to 1967, then conducted the first ethnomusicological survey of Nepal from 1967–69 to be followed by ethnographic life history studies of Nepalese musicians (1970–73). This resulted in the world’s principal archives for the study of Nepalese and Eastern Himalayan border area music traditions consisting of 400 reel-to-reel tapes, 2,000 black-and-white negatives, 1,500 colour transparencies, 120 musical instruments, 41 life history ethnographies, 7,500 song texts and 2,800 musical transcriptions. A catalogue of the entire collection has been compiled by Anne Helen Ross and published in 1978 by the Archives of Traditional Music, Folklore Institute, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, where the Bech collection found its home.

In the early 1970s, the German ethnomusicologist Felix Hoerburger went to Nepal three times and published an introduction to Nepalese music (‘Studien zur Musik in Nepal, Regensburg 1975) as well as an LP with examples of various Newar musician castes.

In 1974 and 75, the French anthropologist Marc Gaborieau and the ethnomusicologist Mireille Helffer published articles on the Gaine music of West Nepal. In 1999, Gaborieau gave all his recordings of Nepalese music to Franck Bernede who presently settled in Nepal and has already worked on the music of the Damsi and other musician castes of Far West Nepal and Kumaon. Bernede’s work resulted in a CD with recordings of one of the most inaccessible areas of the Himalayas (‘Bardes de l’Himalaya: Nepal/Inde-Epopees et Musiques de Transe’ harmonia mundi). Helffer’s interest shifted to the religious music of Ladakh and Tibet. Based on her research in monasteries of Baudhika, the Tibetan religious centre in the Kathmandu Valley, she published a brilliant book along with a CD on Tibetan musical instruments (‘Mchod-rol’, Paris 1994). Her collected recordings and musical
instruments are with the Musee de l’Homme. In the early 1980s, Ter Ellingson and Linda Iltis recorded various Newar traditions in the Kathmandu Valley (audio and video). They published a few important articles. Their recordings are at the Ethnomusicology Archive of the University of Washington, Seattle.

Some research has been carried out amongst the Gurung people of Central Nepal by Lahtinen and Lahtinen in 1978 and by Pirkko Moisala in the 80s resulting in her dissertation on Gurung music (‘Cultural Cognition in Music—Continuity and Change in the Gurung Music of Nepal’, 1991).


In 1997, Hans Weisethaunet from Norway published a CD which he dedicated to the memory of the most inventive and brilliant Gaine musician of Nepal, Ram Sharan Nepali, who died in 1996.

During the late 1990s, the Montreal-based ethnomusicologist Sophie Laurent conducted several recording expeditions resulting in a CD (‘Nepal: Ritual and Entertainment’, UNESCO) featuring various Nepalese musical traditions including those of the Tharu people of the Terai, the Southern belt of Nepal. I arrived in Nepal during December 1982 and have since left the country only for brief stays abroad. During the initial eight years, the music of Bhaktapur has been the chief focus of my research, especially the drumming traditions. This resulted in several apprenticeships with local musicians, publications, articles, three documentary films, and a large stock of analog audio and DAT recordings. This work was succeeded by a three-year research project highlighting historical links between Indian and Nepalese musical traditions (focusing also on the caryfa tradition of the Kathmandu Valley). This was carried out in collaboration with two British colleagues, Carol Tingey and Richard Widdess. Copies of my recordings are with the Museum fur Völkerkunde,
Berlin-Dahlem (the sound archives founded in 1900 by Curt Sachs and Erich v Hornbostel, the very existence of which is now in question due to financial constraints) and at the Kathmandu University Department of Music, Bhaktapur, Nepal, which was set up in August 1996 as a centre for the documentation and teaching of Nepalese musical traditions. Gert Wegner’s collection is also currently being deposited at the Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology of the American Institute of Indian Studies in India.

The Department offers BA and MA courses in ethnomusicology as well as performance training in various local traditions. During the initial years, all resources and efforts went into physical facilities, staff training and conducting the courses to international standards. We are now laying the foundation of a recording studio (digital audio and video) with attached CD-production and sound archives with the necessary hardware. There is a plan to collaborate with one of the local radio stations in order to disseminate the recordings of traditional music along with competent commentaries so that the various people of Nepal will come to know each other’s music. In this way, the people will also benefit from our efforts. Despite the fact that many ethnomusicologists have done research on various musical traditions, this has had astonishingly little impact in Nepal. Foreign theses and CDs are far too expensive to be marketed there. Only my publications and one of Carol Tingey’s books were produced in the country. All the important archives with recordings done in Nepal are scattered around the globe.

It is my sincere hope that this conference will initiate a new era of collaboration among sound archives.
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Photographs courtesy Gert-Matthias Wegner.