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### ► To cite this version:

Gérard Toffin. Acrobatics and stilts in old Kathmandu city. European bulletin of Himalayan research, University of Cambridge ; Südasien-Institut (Heidelberg, Allemagne)., 1999, A special double issue on photography dedicated to Corneille Jest, pp.15-17. hal-00602561

HAL Id: hal-00602561

<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00602561>

Submitted on 7 Feb 2018

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## ACROBATICS AND STILTS IN OLD KATHMANDU CITY

GÉRARD TOFFIN

Corneille did not know of the existence of stilts in the Kathmandu Valley until some time ago when I showed him the document reproduced below. I took the photo in September 1993, just before the Dasain festivals, in a backyard in the neighbourhood of Tyauda, in the upper part of old Kathmandu city. I was attending religious ceremonies and *māh tahnegu* acrobatics marking the end of the *dhimay* drum and *dhunyā* pole-handling apprenticeship period for the youth of the Jyāpu (Maharjan) peasant caste from the nearby neighbourhood of Kvāh Bāhā. The short audiovisual document on the festival of Seto Matsyendranāth filmed by Corneille in the streets of Kathmandu in the late 1960s is evidence that these two elements are organically linked.

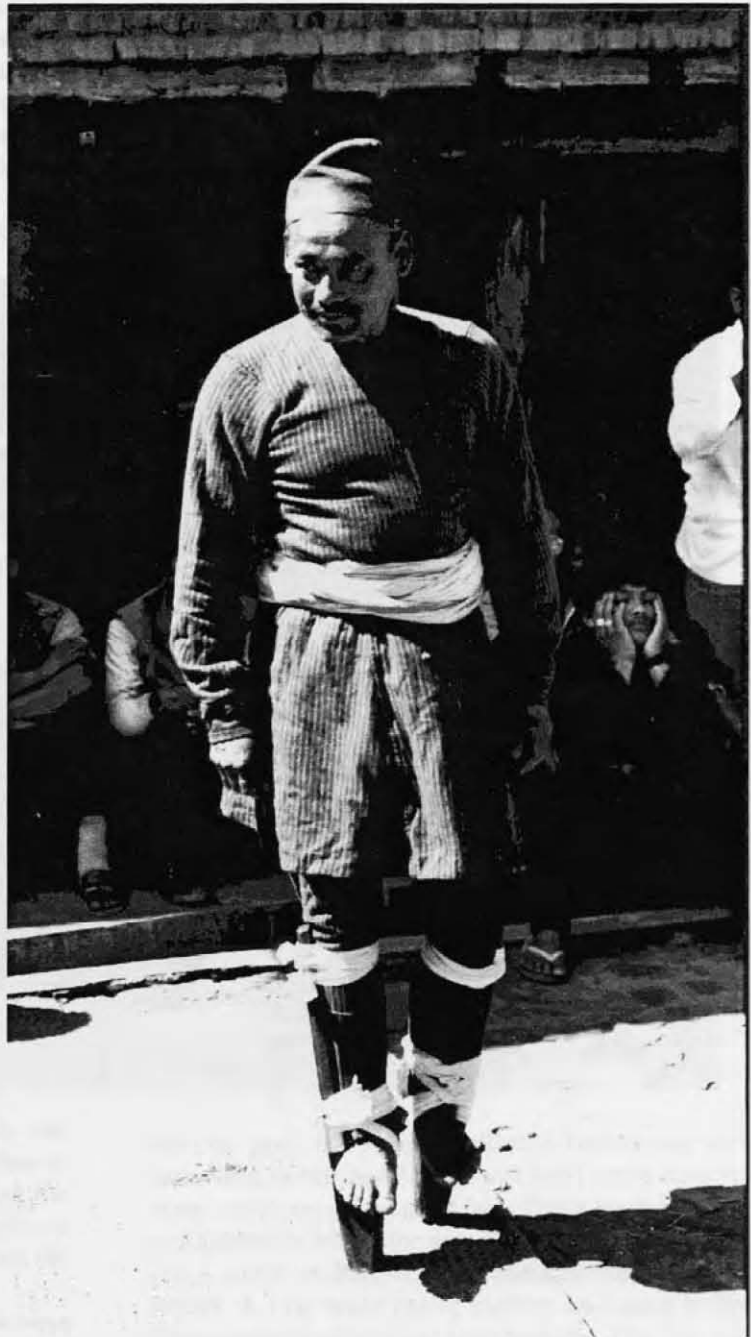
As one can see, the foot support, a simple slot, is carved in the wood and the pole is attached to the ankles and the legs by bands of white fabric. These mini-stilts, in Newari, *sim tuti*, lit. "wooden feet", are only used on this occasion. During my various investigations among the Newar, I had never seen them, neither at the close of recreational activities, nor during ritual ceremonies. As a matter of fact, in the Jyāpu neighbourhood of Kvāh Bāhā, they are only taken out of *ākhāhchen* music houses once every twelve years, during the apprenticeship of the *dhimay* drum. To my knowledge, in the other neighbourhoods, *twāh*, the Jyāpu of Kathmandu do not use them (anymore?). In the case of Kvāh Bāhā, the demonstration of *māh tahnegu* is repeated the following day in front of the group's house of music and the altar of Nāśahdyah, then in front of the *dyahchen* temple of Luti Ajima. A last *māh tahnegu* takes place at the end of Dasain, during the full moon in the month of Ashvin in Kāthasimbhu and Svāmsaphū Ganedyah.

The *dhunyā* poles that the most dexterous men of the neighbourhood handle mounted on their stilts are decorated with different colours according to the area. They must be careful not to fall while brandishing them in the air. Like the *dhimay* drums, the poles contribute to the feeling of solidarity among the Jyāpu of the same *twāh* and to identify territorial unity. There are five principal movements, each associated with a Panca Buddha. They are so spectacular and pleasant to see that it is said that Lumbini Bhagwān himself stops meditating in order to contem-

plate them.

The duodecennial apprenticeship consists of a series of acrobatic exercises (there are twelve principal ones) executed to the sound of cylindrical *dhimay* drums. The Jyāpu peasants maintain that Hanumān, the monkey-god, is on the top of the *dhunyā* pole and Nāśahdyah, the god of music, at its base. The two gods are moreover always associated during these apprenticeships and rituals.

The Jyāpu peasants whom I questioned attribute no particular religious significance to these wooden stilts. Was it initially a simple game, a ludic activity? Should



one look for symbolism? Difficult to decide. However it may be, the stilts are not exceptional in South Asia. J.P. Mills observed them among the Ao Naga in Assam

(1926 : 155) and Verrier Elwin, among the Muria of Bastar (1959 : 418-420). Katia Buffetrille recently drew my attention to them north of the Himalayan range, in Amdo, a village in Sog-ru Reb-gong District. The stilts observed during a festival devoted to local divinities were taller than those of the Newar. We still know little about acrobatic exercises in the Himalaya and the role which accessories, such as stilts, occupy. Nevertheless, acrobatics play an important part in India, and even more so in China. It is a field of investigation which is still new and challenging to explore.

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