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From Heavy Beads to Safety Pins: Adornment and Religiosity in Hindu Women's Pote Practices

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**from heavy beads to
safety pins: adornment
and religiosity in hindu
women's *pote* practices
megan adamson sijapati
and tina harris**

ABSTRACT

This article examines the object of the beaded necklace worn by married women in Nepal – called *pote* – and the ambiguities and layers of meaning surrounding *pote* in the lived worlds of the women who wear them. The ways women understand and use *pote* offer a view of religious belief as constituted and enacted through lived practices, surrounding and taking place through material objects. To illustrate this, this essay focuses on the ways that knowledge about the *pote* is transmitted and the spatial practices of *pote* wearing. A new generation of upper caste Hindu women of the Kathmandu valley are negotiating socio-cultural norms in an ever-shifting socio-cultural landscape characteristic of modernity, yet unique to Nepal. *Pote* practices offer a window into these women's shifting worlds revealing creativity, agency, and re-invention of new modes of practice informed by traditional codes of women's religious behavior.

Keywords: belief, Nepal, Kathmandu, beads, women, adornment, modernity, Hindu

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Kamala's Story: "Belief" in *Pote*

"I had a very bitter experience about this *pote*," began Kamala. A distinguished, elegant woman in her fifties, Kamala invited us to her office in the school she directs in a bustling area of Jawalakhel, a town in the Kathmandu valley. As we sat down she gestured to us to drink our coffee, which had been brought to us by the school staff, and she immediately began talking about her life and the *pote* (pronounced "poe-tay"). She had been married at the age of 16 and from the day of her marriage she wore the *pote* – her strand of marriage beads – consistently. She had believed, as a pious young wife, that the *pote* should always be worn, and if not worn, then tragedy could befall her husband and their family. One night when she was a young bride, her husband, who was a pilot, was away from home and she had a peculiar and haunting dream. There was a plane flying overhead and she saw papers falling from the plane. She suddenly woke up to find that the *pote* around her neck had broken. Hundreds of small glass beads were scattered about her bed and floor. She immediately replaced her broken *pote* with a new string of beads around her neck. The very next day, she learned that her husband had died in an airplane crash.

"After going through the trials of my life," Kamala explained, she now thinks of the dream and the broken *pote* as "sheer coincidence." But at that time, she told us, she believed it was true that the broken *pote* was linked to the death of her husband. That was what everyone whispered around her. As a young widow Kamala faced a difficult early life, though much later in life she remarried, which brought greater social ease for her in Nepal's Hindu society as it dictates roles for women based on their marital status. However, her decision to continue wearing the *pote* after her husband's death but prior to remarriage brought about the admonition of others who believed that the *pote* should have been burnt on her first husband's funeral pyre, or at the very least, not ever worn by her again at all.

In this article we explore *pote* practices among upper caste women in Kathmandu's transforming socio-cultural landscape and the ways in which belief is mediated – and transformed and complicated – through materiality. Through practices both inherited and invented surrounding the wearing of these beads, contemporary Nepali women navigate through a very different world than their mothers and grandmothers once did, and than their daughters are likely to. The essay argues that despite *pote* being the form of bodily adornment most uniquely representative of traditional Nepali Hindu women's roles and identities as wives in and outside the home, the *pote* today takes on, through women's con-

temporary practices with it, a new multivalence as an object. With *pote*, women can practice innovation and even subversion of normative behaviors required in the role of the Hindu wife in Nepali culture called for by the increasingly changing socio-cultural environment of contemporary Kathmandu.

In 2012 we interviewed a small group of upper caste Hindu Chhetri women (Chhetris are the second highest Nepali Hindu caste) in the Kathmandu valley of Nepal about their experiences with and thoughts on the ubiquitous *pote*, a thin beaded necklace worn by married Hindu women in Nepal and in other Nepali-speaking areas in India and throughout the Himalayas symbolizing marriage and *stridharma* (the Hindu notion of *dharma*, or duty, for women; Figure 1). In our travels and fieldwork in Nepal over many years we have both long observed women wearing *pote* and heard simple explanations for its importance. The standard explanation of the meaning behind *pote* and the social expectation for married women to wear it continuously is that in the act of continually wearing it a woman ensures the long life of her husband. In Hindu society marriage is a lynchpin of caste, society and culture, and traditionally also of women's prosperity, identity, and religious duty. To the women we interviewed, when they say they "believe" in *pote*, they seem to be saying that that if one stops wearing it one's husband is in danger (and the family is in danger by extension). This would suggest that a woman is not committed to the prosperity of the family and hence not a good wife and not upholding her sacred duty. From an orthodox, or Brahmanical, Hindu perspective a woman would be seen as failing to uphold her locally-determined *stridharma* were she to not wear *pote* continuously from the day of her marriage when her husband gives her her first *pote*, to the day of his or her death. To not wear *pote* as a married woman is seen by society – and particularly the husband's family – as a meaning-laden and reckless act.

FIG 1

Single-strand *pote* for everyday wear.

Yet, in the contemporary Kathmandu valley, where socio-cultural norms have dramatically transformed in the last twenty years, some women who wear the *pote* in this traditional way – that is, consistently after marriage – also say that they “do not believe” in the *pote*. When women say they “do not believe” in the *pote*, they seem to be saying that they do not believe in the power of the *pote*, when worn continuously through a woman’s life, to protect the husband. But they still wear the *pote* continuously and they describe feeling – sometimes inexplicably to themselves – that it is morally (or rather, *dharmically*) wrong to go without it even if the husband does not believe in the *pote*’s efficacy either. They themselves even ask why this is the case. Is it more than a religious requirement, more than just adornment? If so, where is its meaning located, what is the nature of it? And what is this meaning if that upon which it is predicated – the belief a husband’s long life is ensured by his wife’s wearing of *pote* – is regularly subverted with verbal claims of non-belief? What do they believe, and what compels women to wear it continuously, if not that it protects their husband’s long lives?

We argue that the *pote* can be seen as a tool with which to mediate, negotiate, and construct belief (and to some extent, non-belief) at a bodily and personal level despite, and perhaps in part because of, the fact that *pote*-wearing is a decidedly social and relational act. “Materiality,” David Morgan has suggested, “mediates belief ... material objects and practices both enable it and enact it” (Morgan 2010, 12). In the following pages we examine mediation processes through two specific realms: transmission of knowledge and spatial practices. We examine how intergenerational ways of teaching and learning about when and how to wear the *pote* become part of a woman’s embodied knowledge, and how women contribute to changes in *pote* practices in very specific spatial and temporal contexts. Through the lens of *pote* practices, we aim to attend to “the sensuous and material routines that produce an integrated (and culturally particular) sense of self, community, cosmos” (Morgan 2010, 8). Here we document these practices, which, to our knowledge, are the subject of no scholarly work to date and yet raise important questions about religiosity in changing socio-cultural environments. Such an approach – focusing on material practices involved in the processes of mediating “belief” – is useful for general interrogations of belief, materiality, and material culture.

Pote: Background and Practices

The *pote* is worn by married women mostly of Chhetri or Brahmin backgrounds, from Nepal or other Nepali-speaking

areas. When a high caste Nepali Hindu woman marries, it is an affair involving an extended network of kin and an elaborate series of religious rituals requiring ritual implements, from devotional offerings, to foods, to special coins and grasses. As with matrimony in many cultures, high caste Hindu Nepali wedding rituals require that the bride receive certain gifts that will serve her as a new bride and designate and display her status as a married woman (Bennett 1983). The marriage, most usually arranged by the families, is an agreement between the bride's and groom's families, humans and the gods, and the bride and groom. Material items symbolize these forging bonds and expanding networks, but they also work to constitute the marriage act itself, as we will aim to demonstrate in this essay.

At the wedding, the groom gives the bride a thick, long, multi-strand green *thulo pote* (large *pote*) and smaller red and yellow *pote* as part of the *saubagya ko saman* (wedding items; Figure 2). A large gold ornament called a *tilari* is strung in the middle (in economic terms, the more gold in the *tilari*, the more the *pote* is worth, and hence signals the wealth of the family). The *pote* is part of a set of material items – including the sari, *chura* (bangles), *sindhur* (vermillion for spreading into the part of the hair), and nose ring – that symbolize a Hindu married woman in Nepal. *Pote*, *tika* and bangles are worn together as signs of womanhood, and to varying degrees, of marriage. Though unmarried women wear bangles and *tika*, they nonetheless take on an enhanced significance on the body of a married woman. All three are signs of her marriage to a man and are believed to be connected to her husband's well-being, but the *pote* – as an object that is worn daily and exclusively by married women (unlike the Indian *mangalsutra* which may not be worn daily) – can take on new meanings as women's lives as wives transform. In urban areas, women wear

FIG 2

Long green *thulo pote* (N., "large *pote*") and smaller red, yellow, and green *pote*.

smaller versions of the *thulo pote*, usually just a few strands or a single strand of beads (see Figure 1) to signify their married status.

In the Kathmandu valley, many of the *pote* are sold in the “*pote bazaar*” near Indrachowk, and in Patan’s Mangal Bazaar (Figures 3 and 4). Nearly all of the *pote* shops are owned by Muslim men whose ancestors travelled between Ladakh, Kashmir, and Nepal as traders in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Later the practice of wearing *pote* spread to other ethnic groups, such as Newars and Gurungs, who “found the glass beads as an alternative to heavy and expensive red coral necklace[s]” (Shrestha 2011). Beads are purchased in weighed packets of individual beads to be strung at home, or by special *pote* threaders at the bazaar, or in pre-strung strands of 6, called *lachhi*. According to the traders in the bazaar, the high-

FIG 3

The *pote* bazaar in Indrachowk, Kathmandu.

7

FIG 4

Selling *pote* in Indrachowk, Kathmandu.

est quality glass beads have come from the Czech Republic for at least several centuries; however, today, the high quality beads come from Japan, and the lesser quality beads from China or India.

In our interviews and observations, we found that within *pote* practice there is considerable variation in the ways it is worn, handled and cared for and in the ways the *pote* and its meaning are understood. Most women say it is to be worn day and night following marriage. Young girls may handle *pote*, touching it and even mischievously trying it on while playing dress up with their mothers' bangles and *bindi* for example, but they are not to wear it. Many women recall their mothers telling them when they were younger that they couldn't wear it because they weren't married yet. And even after marriage, with the exception of *Teej* (a festival for women, where they typically fast, dance, and then fast again in order to ensure a fulfilling married life), *pote* are not to be given to women from their mother's side – only from the husband's side. When a woman dies, her *pote* is not passed to the daughter even if the daughter is married, but rather to her son's wife. This is the only piece of jewelry that cannot be passed down to a woman's own daughter. If the husband passes away before his wife, she has to remove her *pote*, which one woman described as the requirement to "offer this *pote* on his chest."¹ Some women say that the neck "must never be empty" (i.e. bare) and so the *pote* is to be worn even while bathing, though some women we spoke with said that they take it off when they shower. One explained that "it's a different time [now]," and some women feel free to take it off when bathing, not believing that it could do harm to have their necks bare for a few minutes. Some women only remove a *pote* from their necks after first putting on another one, so that their neck is never without a *pote* for even a moment.

Belief, Practice, and Materiality

"Belief" is a term frequently deployed in studies of religion and culture, yet it is such a polysemic one that its use can often obscure the particulars of the phenomenon one is trying to describe and understand. This is particularly the case with lived religious practices, which may be motivated or understood by religious actors in terms quite distinct from "belief," but nonetheless described by scholars as motivated by belief. For the purposes of interrogating *pote* practices, we approach "belief" in this essay as Morgan conceives it: as something that is practiced or lived and often in and through material objects, coming into being and gaining salience in and through material practices, and in this case, bodily adornment. Belief, in this sense of the word, is central to Nepali religious and ritual worlds, of which *pote* practices

are a part. To Morgan, “forms of materiality – sensations, things, spaces and performance – are a matrix in which belief happens as touching, seeing, hearing and tasting, feeling and emotion, as will and action, as imagination and intuition” (Morgan 2010, 8). The notion of belief and its centrality in discussions of scholarly religion stem from Western, post-Enlightenment conceptions of religion and can be insufficient for the study of religious practices, discourses, and meaning systems. Nonetheless, “belief” is the English term used consistently by the women we interviewed to describe the matrix of practices and emotions from the “traditional” to the “modern” in which the *pote* is embedded. With the exception of the oldest woman we interviewed, who used the Nepali term “*biswaas lagchha*” (to feel, believe, or have a conviction), they use the English word “belief” in reference to *pote* in all of our interviews – with the phrase “I believe in the *pote*,” or “I don’t believe in *pote*.” As Stacy Pigg has explained in her ethnographic work on villagers’ beliefs in Nepal, both the Nepali term “*biswaas*” and English term “belief” have several meanings, including trust in another person and conviction in an idea (Pigg 1996, 166). According to Pigg, the use of the word “belief” in Nepali cosmopolitan (as opposed to village) discourse is used more to describe the conviction that a set of ideas is true, and to “convey something about the believer’s identity by saying something about his or her state of mind” (Pigg 1996, 190). In such usage, the women we interviewed, who engage in such discourse as they move through Kathmandu’s emerging cosmopolitan culture, seem to mean it as Morgan describes it: “the felt expectation that the world works in a particular way” (Morgan 2010, 8).

Religion takes place and becomes intelligible through material expressions (Arweck and Keenan 2006), and materiality can be engaged as a lens through which to understand religious experience and religious practices that may have no language apart from the material practices themselves. While *pote* practices may not be overtly religious, they are embedded in a larger context of intricately related religious practices and meanings undergirding the institution of marriage, which itself forms cultural practices and codes of womanhood in the Hindu context. In this sense, *pote* wearing can be seen as a religious practice insofar as it is a tool in the constitution of the religious institution of marriage and family in the Nepali Brahmanical Hindu world. In classical Sanskrit texts, the religious life of men was described through the roles of caste (*varna*) and stage in life (*ashrama*) and the attendant rites of passage of the latter, whereas for women, religious life was circumscribed by expectations of the wifely duty, elaborated as *stridharma*. This paradigm remains central in Hindu culture in contemporary Nepal, where the cultural practices of

women *as wives* often constitute their religious roles and communicate their identities and status as a “good” wife within the patrilineal family. The patrilineal and patrilocal family structure of high caste Nepali Hindus dictates that women’s lives as wives and mothers involve extensive day-to-day interactions with mothers- and fathers-in-law – and that women meet these family members’ approval if they are to fulfill this *stridharma*. Indeed, this is reflected in the practices of *pote* wearing and the stories that women tell about their experiences and feelings about *pote* and themselves as women.

Context and Methods

The Kathmandu of the present day has undergone significant changes since the birth of the women we interviewed. It is decidedly a space in which modernity is experienced and being continually worked out through local, daily practices of households, individuals and institutions simultaneously shaped by and imbricated within global movements. The ten women interviewed for this piece were mostly middle-aged, upper-caste and upper-class, and living in (or until recently living in) multi-generational patrilineal households as is the custom for Hindu families. All of the women were between their early forties and early sixties. They thus came of age through a tumultuous political period in Nepal, from the Panchayat to the first People’s Movement (Jan Andolan I) in 1990 that led to a coalition government, to the massacre of the royal family in 2001, to the second People’s Movement (Jan Andolan II) and King Gyanendra’s abdication of the throne under Maoist pressure in 2006, to the transition of the state from Hindu monarchy to secular federal republic, to a Maoist-majority-led Republic in 2008.

The women we discuss here were educated at elite Nepali English-medium schools and they have the option now to work outside the home. With the exception of the oldest woman, all of the interviews were conducted in English, with occasional phrases and words in Nepali sprinkled throughout, such as religious or colloquial terms. We went through the interview transcriptions multiple times in order to uncover overlapping thematic patterns. In general, if more than two or three women mentioned similar concerns or experiences with *pote*, then we highlighted these issues in the analyses in this article. Admittedly, we worked with a small pool of individuals, and such a sample will certainly never be representative of all middle-aged Chhetri women in Kathmandu. However, we are much more interested in detailed descriptions of women’s experiences with *pote*. Furthermore, a number of our informants are the extended family members of one of the authors, and we are both women. Despite some of the methodological drawbacks of doing ethnographic research as “insiders,” this

status meant we were able to take part in very personal conversations paired with many years of observations. This, we argue, is a unique perspective that is crucial for research on such an intimate and embodied practice as *pote*-wearing.

The majority of the women are familiar with what could be considered a cosmopolitan lifestyle, interacting socially with other upper-middle-class or elite women, and having spent much of their life in urban Kathmandu. Their husbands hold stable jobs in the government, non-profit and business sectors, sometimes working abroad. A greater number of women are in the workforce and government now than ever before, and a number of the women we interviewed held jobs outside the home post-school and prior to marriage. Several are still employed in the education and retail sectors. They are currently witnessing changing – some of them might say deteriorating – conditions of employment and education within Nepal. Some of the women have sent their children to schools in India and abroad for a better future.

A number of the women were raised in conservative, orthodox households in which freedom of movement, adornment, and identity was limited. Wearing the *pote* was not to be questioned, and women often felt strongly that it was indeed linked to a husband's well-being. Now these women have daughters who dress in non-traditional clothing, wearing mini-skirts and high heels at times, who go out in the evenings, who may even drive a car, and who use social media. Their daughters, while yet unmarried, may not wear *pote* when married. How do these women feel about such transitions within their own lives? And what do the lived worlds of the *pote* tell us about these women's lives and the role of belief as it is mediated by this material object?

Across South Asia there is a shared culture of ornamentation attending and marking the life stages of women and symbolizing women's status. These practices are often firmly rooted in tradition and custom, with social rules governing how, when, and what women wear, but they are also fluid and can be sites for the expression of women's creativity, personal expression, and agency (Maggi 2001, Shukla 2007). Beads play a specific role at times of marriage, too. Among Kalasha women of the Hindu Kush, for example, beads are given at the time of marriage by the new marital family (Maggi 2001). The beads represent to others a woman's wealth, but they can carry immense emotional meaning for women on a personal level far beyond their symbolization of wealth. Even if a marriage ends, a woman may keep her beads, and they carry no sense of protecting the husband the way that *pote* or the Indian adornments of the *suhag*, the *bindi*, and *sindur*, do. In Hindu India, the beaded necklace called *mangalsutra* is part of the marriage accoutrements (the *suhag*) but are not

worn daily by married women the way that *pote* are in Nepal. Women's adornment practices in varied settings across South Asia bear similarities in the prominence of beads as sources of beauty but also as social signifiers, and as signs of one's marital status, circumstances, and definition of self. These take on particular salience in the newly globalized capitalist and consumer context of a rapidly changing urban setting such as Kathmandu.

In the contemporary Nepali context, Liechty has suggested that young middle class women use public space to perform "modern" consumption practices such as fashion and adornment (Liechty 1996). In our research into *pote*, which are worn by an older generation of women than Liechty's subjects, we found that women are not performing modern consumption in Liechty's sense, but rather negotiating, through practice, the feelings and commitments of their private domestic worlds with the public performance of high caste womanhood. This, as Liechty notes, involves complicated issues surrounding perceptions of respectability in the public sphere (Liechty 1996, 2002). They do so in ways that can take into account conceptions of fashion and familial relationships and expectations, particularly vis-à-vis husbands and in-laws. The majority of the women's husbands did not care if they wore the *pote* or not, and some even asked their wives to not wear the *pote*, as they considered the "belief" – the wearing of it and what it signifies – as "old-fashioned." In this context, women face unprecedented opportunities and challenges as they navigate the strictures of tradition with the possibilities of a more open society. It is also possible that modern *pote* practices may open new possibilities for class mobility of women as they make adornment choices that *hide* caste and marital status in order to *highlight* values of independence and mobility in the public sphere, and economic strength. Though we are well aware that class, caste, capital, and consumerism are crucial debates from which to further frame the practices of materiality in Nepal, our focus here is on the more intimate level of women's personal *pote* narratives and practices.

Transmission of Pote Knowledge and Practice

Women who wear the *pote* consistently may do so for reasons not necessarily aligned with what high caste Hindu culture and society ascribes to the *pote* and the wearing of it. How then do *pote* come to have meaning for women, and what are these meanings? First, women describe learning about the *pote* primarily through observation, and less so through explicit verbal explanations. This method of learning familial and larger social values, inscribed and re-inscribed through practice, can be seen as a form of religious habitus (Bourdieu

1977). Women may embody religious practices by watching their mothers prepare in front of the mirror and observing that they participate in festivals such as *Teej*, an occasion that is highly dependent on creative participation which in turn shapes the nature of the performance itself (Holland and Skinner 1995, Ahearn 1998). However, such embodied learning does not only occur in festival or ritual situations, but also in everyday and even seemingly mundane practices. For instance, in his research on Quaker meetings, Peter Collins has stated that participants do not always participate in rituals, nor do they always strategize for cultural or spiritual capital (as in Bourdieu's sense), but that embodied religious knowledge is comprised of more "everyday" methods, such as learning how to arrive at the meeting, how to adopt specific sitting postures, and to notice that sneezing loudly is discouraged (Collins 2002, 149). In addition, sensory experiences and the aesthetics of practice – such as handling and playing with the *pote* as young children – also lend a crucial hand to the formation and reformation of meanings of religious experience (Meyer 2006, 23).

Chhetri households are typically close knit multi-generational units in which young girls have the opportunity day in and day out to observe their mother's, aunts', and grandmother's daily activities. In the household, practices surrounding the *pote* are constantly on view to young girls as their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers wear, change, store and handle them. In this way, knowledge about the *pote* – and its relationship to a woman's body and identity – is transmitted through the performance and observation of women's wearing of it. Even the reprimanding of the young girl who tries it on, which is a scenario recounted by a number of the women with whom we spoke, is a lesson. Through this one verbal lesson a girl learns in clear terms that it is only to be worn by married women, although she may only later come to know that it *must* be worn when married. Women's stories about when they were young and observed the married women of their households with *pote* reveal a certain type of mystique surrounding the *pote*.

Sangita is in her late 30s with two young children, runs her own international school and usually dresses in non-traditional (i.e. Western-style) clothing. She recalls how *pote* came into her awareness, and she emphasizes the act of observation in this process: "It started with observing my mother obsessing about it [laughter], but my parents are quite modern and they never said "you have to do this" or "you have to do that," so how I ended up interpreting that is I do it for respect of the family ... They never told me anything, just observation only." Her mother, she explained, would insist on not taking it off ever, even when she would bathe, and

would insist on having a bangle on each wrist. Neither piece of jewelry could be removed until the replacements were first put on. The child's act of observation here doesn't just result in the receiving of instruction about how and when to wear the *pote*, but also in the development of a narrative of meaning surrounding the practice and the object. For Sangita, as she describes it now as an adult reflecting on these early years and now also wearing it herself, the *pote* is meaningful because the wearing of it is an expression of respect for tradition and family. She further explained that for her the wearing of it came to be a means to "keep harmony in the house. I mean, not to create trouble. It's more that than anything else." Sangita wears *pote* only inside the home, as a way to show respect for her mother-in-law and to "go with the flow," though she doesn't see a need for it and her husband, she says, "doesn't believe." She will even tell her mother-in-law that she is wearing *pote* sometimes when she is not. Her mother-in-law doesn't check to verify this, accepting as she has that her daughter-in-law is, as she herself explains it, "not too good with all this. I guess she has accepted [it]." In this sense, her explanation of why she wears the *pote* – as familial respect, as "going with the flow," as not causing trouble – acts as almost a buffer between what she would see as her mother-in-law's belief and her own practice.

The deep impressions made on women by years of observing their mothers wear *pote* is seen in other ways. For some, years of observation in everyday life ingrained in them an indelible sense of responsibility for wearing it consistently. It also resulted in narratives of meaning – described as "belief" in the *pote* – as essential to a wife's personal, bodily, and familial practices and identities. It is "complicated," Sarita shared, "because I do love my husband...and we have to do [things] for him, so we do everything for him. Even children, even parents, his parents, everything just to make him happy." She is in her mid-forties and lives with her in-laws while her two children are in school in India, and her husband works abroad several months out of the year. She, like many of the women, noted the complexity of their feelings and thoughts about *pote*. Speaking of *pote* she says:

My husband...is least bothered by these things...but there is still an unsettling feeling of "oh I'm not wearing *pote*," even when I'm wearing crystal also, I feel that I have not [worn] *pote*, but actually it's not that. I don't know why, but we have to wear *pote*.

(Long stringed necklaces of crystal-like beads have been popular in recent years. They have the look of *pote* but are different in shape and material). She feels like she is missing something and that she is not herself, not a woman located in a family, when she is not wearing the *pote*. Over the years

of her marriage she has grown increasingly strict about her *stridharmic* practices such as *puja* (household devotions and prayers) and *pote* and bangle wearing. Its meaning has grown more complex, and more pervasive and important with time, and in fact, not wearing *pote* may serve to actually strengthen and nuance these meanings.

Sabina is a schoolteacher who has lived with her husband in the USA and Thailand, and has daughters attending college in India. She explained that she had seen her mother wearing the *pote* and that her mother had taught her that it is only worn after marriage, “that you should never leave your neck [i.e. unadorned] because this ... makes our husband’s life long.” In both households she came to appreciate the significance that tradition bestowed on the *pote*, but it was in her new home of her in-laws (where she moved according to custom when she married) that a greater urgency was imparted to her. She, too, indicated that her belief in the *pote* is complicated. Sabina explained:

So we believe, actually I *know*, there’s no, like, fact behind it, that my husband’s long life and wearing *pote* [are related], but we still believe that. Because this whole thing we have seen since childhood, no? My mother has been doing it, telling me, saying, so I believe that.

She further explained that if she has to “go to a party also, whatever I am wearing, I go with it on, I never chance, because in some way I feel that it might like harm my husband.”

Teaching their daughters about *pote* is a central concern, but again this teaching is done primarily through display. These now adult middle-aged women were young girls in a different Nepal than their daughters are. Their formative years in the 1970s and 1980s were before India’s liberalization of the economy and before Nepal’s resultant influx of foreign goods and media. Their daughters’ formative years have coincided with the drastic opening of the global market and exposure to ways of life for women outside the paradigm of the traditional Chhetri household. Both Sabina and Supriti wear *pote* regularly, but say they don’t “believe” in *pote*, and explained their motivation for wearing it as didactic: they want their daughters to learn about it and be best prepared to be a good wife in whatever type (conservative or not) of households they end up married into.

Kamala, for example, does not want her daughters to be so “modern” that they are ill-equipped with Nepali life if they marry into a strict family:

It’s not like in your country, not everything is equal. Here the parents’ role is [more] important than the – I think that’s the main problem. Because I’m also afraid you know, my daughter, look at

them, they just take a car and go out, they watch a movie, they do whatever they want. And we can't stop them from all this, but after they go to their in-laws, then they'll have [a] problem.

Her sister, Supriti, whose children also study at boarding schools in north India, felt the same about the importance of exposing her one daughter to the traditional practice of *pote* wearing as preparation for an unknown future: "I don't know where my daughter will get married, in which type of house you never know that." But in terms of herself, Supriti explained that she does not believe in the *pote*. She lives in a strict household and her father-in-law requires her to wear a sari (the most conservative dress for women for its perceived modesty) in the house, but her husband doesn't believe in *pote*. Her own mother, however, will immediately remark if she sees her with a "bare neck," i.e. without *pote*. And she, too, feels that that something is not quite right if she is not wearing it. While she does not want to force her daughters to do any particular ritual practice, she wants them to know about it. Demonstrating *pote*-wearing is therefore also about adequately preparing daughters for any type of marital situation, meaning any type of husband and mother-in-law they may end up spending their lives with. Women wear *pote* largely so that their daughters *will observe* it and learn about it through this observation. Their wearing of it is in a way a performance of what *pote* is supposed to mean, according to their tradition. They model the wearing of it for their daughters instead. The knowledge of *pote* is thought to be best conveyed through demonstration. It may be that the importance of their wearing *pote* in front of their daughters is strengthened by the fact that their daughters do not – and might not – ever wear *pote*. This is a very future-oriented practice, but mediated through the present.

Spatial and Bodily Practices

At one point during our conversation with Sangita at the school she runs, we realized that even as we were discussing her *pote*-wearing practices, she was not actually wearing a *pote*. When we casually mentioned this to her, she laughed and said that she never wears it when she is working in the office or outside of the house. In fact, she said, she only wears it at home, which is where she lives with her in-laws. What, then, are the links between spatial contexts, practices of wearing (or not wearing) *pote*, and "belief?" Bourdieu's approach to material life as it relates to practices remains a useful framework for addressing this question, insofar as it demonstrates how the consumption or use of material things has the *potential* to enable the social, economic, and religious classification of people in everyday life (Bourdieu 1977, Myers 2001, 30). This is not simply about decoding the internal logic

of people's beliefs as they relate to materiality, but it is more about grounding ideas of "belief" in actual practices involving material things (Bourdieu 1977, 114). Although Bourdieu's example of how the arrangement and use of objects and items in the Kabyle house reinscribes the gendered dichotomies of social life, the study of materiality itself is not simply based on objects, artifacts, or things. It is part of a much wider field of experience that includes the attempt to transcend the apparent dichotomy of objects and subjects, especially in religion (Miller 2005, 2).

Following Miller, we wish to underscore the importance of the interrelatedness of materiality and immateriality when it comes to practices of "belief." In other words, immaterial or intangible goals (such as ensuring the long life of one's husband) can be reached through the wearing of a material thing such as the *pote*. When the *pote* is absent, nothing is there to mediate or challenge belief, and in fact, the absence of the *pote* around the neck may make its very meanings even more significant for the wearer and/or her kin and peers. In this section we intend to show how women's practices of *pote*-wearing are partly delineated by specific social expectations and spatial contexts, such as the gaze of the mother-in-law in the house, or in the space of a formal party. Wearing the *pote* in different spaces in turn produces other, new kinds of embodied spaces of belief, "where human experience and consciousness take on material and social form" (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003, 2).

Although social expectations can place limits upon actions such as when and where the *pote* can be taken off, these very limitations can also lead to the creation of new kinds of *pote* practices. Wearing or not wearing the *pote* in different ways thus makes living and dwelling in different spheres – such as the home, the gym, or the office – more comfortable or even possible. Moving from one kind of social space to the other – from the home to the office or vice versa, for instance – is a kind of border-crossing activity. Borders are often seen as the sites of negotiation over the definitions of things, as anxious spots where definitions are contested and subverted, or where different systems of value meet (Myers 2001, 11). Focusing on moving across a threshold from one kind of space to another – as opposed to dwelling in a single social sphere – places the emphasis more on the mobility of the women and their ability to make certain spaces habitable (Tweed 2006). Highlighting what a woman does when she is about to leave one space for another – taking the *pote* off when leaving from home to go to a party, for example – goes beyond dichotomous notions of public versus private, outside versus inside, or male versus female spatial realms, and allows

for more agentic scenarios, though still limited by the specific constraints of their situations.

As mentioned earlier, the mainly Chhetri women with whom we spoke are part of a particular educated generation and class who came of age when it began to be more socially acceptable for Nepali women to leave the household and work outside the home. In our interviews, several women discussed how they wore *pote* as part of a contemporary, mobile, urban lifestyle, such as when they spent time at the workplace. Sabina highlighted the stark contrast between the heavier, more elaborate *pote* of the older generation and the more “practical” *pote* of her own generation:

We cannot wear that [heavy one] every time we roam around, so instead of that we start wearing that small thin one. Which is easy for us to walk around ... and the older women, they put some gold and wear, they wear because those old women don't have to go the office, they sit home, and they are fond of wearing. But we go here and there, we have to go to the office and all. It is not possible to wear all that gold and walk, so we wear thin one.

In this case, a large *pote* with a heavy gold *tilari* is seen as physically burdensome to wear in the office, as it might get in the way of typing on a computer, dealing with customers, or other activities. Accommodation of marriage-signifying adornments to the necessities of modern lifestyles is seen among Indian Hindu women as well (Shukla 2007). This kind of practical form of the *pote* as a thin, single strand of beads – the “short form,” according to Nima, a school teacher married to an army officer and mother of a teenage daughter and son – was also mentioned in relation to an increasingly busy lifestyle, where women didn't have time to go to the temple or *puja kota* (a room or separate space in the house dedicated solely to *puja*), but just said a quick prayer in the morning before they set out to do errands or go to work. Although we are not certain of exactly when the transition from the large *pote* to the single strand versions came about, this very moment of transition seems to be understood through an imagined history of sorts, in which they set themselves against other women – those who are older, more rural, more traditional, and who do not spend much time outside the home. It is these other women who are often seen as those who “believe” more strongly in the *pote*.

Although the glass beads for *pote* can also be made into brooches, rings, bracelets, and other accessories, many of the women were insistent that those items were “not *pote*.” The question of “what is and isn't *pote*” elicited several different ideas, ranging from “any bead” to “they must be part of a string of small glass beads – only glass.” The crystal beaded *pote*, many said, can be worn even if one becomes a widow,

and yet it is also worn by married women as a *pote* (Figure 5). Around this was some confusion, though: “they say it’s like a *pote*,” Sangita explained. Most women wear a single strand of colored beads, often in the colors of red and green, but in a large variety of other colors as well, in order to match one’s *kurta salwar* or *sari*. Different styles have been popular over the years, from thick choker-like necklaces that were trendy in the 1980s, to single strands in pastel colors in the 2000s (Figures 6 and 7). The recent popularity of pastel beads and even white *pote* (a color traditionally only worn by widows) points to a kind of modification of the *pote* that overlaps with a perception that *pote* should only be red, green, or yellow. Other significant modifications to wearing *pote* include “shortening” the *pote* for busy lives; no longer is it convenient for most urban women to wear the *thulo pote*. For instance, Kamala said:

So nowadays the modern women like to wear fancy necklaces and sometimes this [the *pote*] is a hindrance. So what they do is they just pin two or three [beads] of *pote* in a safety pin and put it under their blouse.

Sartorial choices, always context-determined, are linked to what type of *pote* is worn when and where, but the ways in which the two are together practiced are not always straightforward. Women wear *pote* with all types of clothing, from the more formal and traditional *sari* to the still traditional but less formal *kurta salwar*, to even jeans and other newer forms of non-originally Nepali (but now thoroughly appropriated as Nepali) fashion, such as leggings and long shirts or sundresses. But some women prefer to wear more innovative, non-traditional types of *pote*, such as the beads on a safety pin hidden inside the blouse above, when and if they are wearing less traditional clothing, so that there is a kind of match between one’s clothing and the *pote* and the message one sends to the outside world in the wearing of them. For younger women it seems that matching with their style of clothing, i.e. modern with modern or traditional with traditional, is particularly important. Regarding general social expectations, Sangita explained to us that:

you’re supposed to wear *tika*, *pote* and bangles. And *tika* also, if I’m wearing a *sari*, it looks ... appropriate. If you wear a *sari* without *pote* and *tika*, it looks bland also ... But with Western clothes, I find it a bit ridiculous to wear *tika* and all that.

It is as if the message of the *sari*, and the way one embodies a *sari*, requires the presence of *pote*, whereas the wearing of newer global fashions call into question the traditional ideas and performance of womanhood that the wearing of the *pote*

FIG 5

"Crystal" beaded *pote* strands, *pote* bazaar, Indrachowk, Kathmandu.

FIG 6

Choker-style *pote* that were popular in the 1980s, displayed on a table during an interview in Patan.

evoke and reify. She does not like to wear the *pote* and often goes without it, explaining that she typically wears it only to show respect to her in-laws and to avoid creating problems. But there are disjunctures in the linkage between traditional

FIG 7

Pastel-colored *pote* strands, popular in the 2000s.

clothing and *pote*, and non-traditional clothing and non-*pote* wearing, too, for she further explains: “if I [am] wearing an open dress, where my neck is really looking naked, then I wear it. If it’s covered, I don’t wear it.” So the *pote* offers a kind of symbolic bodily coverage, which is of immense importance to women in public spaces where they can be the objects of male gaze and victims of “eve teasing” or harassment.² It thereby enables modesty, even though it is but a string of beads and doesn’t actually cover much of the body at all. The *pote* expresses modesty, chastity, fidelity, particularly when new global fashions which are more revealing of a woman’s body and skin are being worn. There is also the distinction for some women between the home and the public space outside the home: they may feel they cannot go out without it, but then they choose for varying personal reasons not to wear it at all inside the house: “subconsciously it is always there, that I can’t go out without *pote*.”

Another example involves Supriti who finds it inconvenient to wear the *pote* while she is exercising, yet struggles with what to do in this new situation:

When I exercise at home I'll be wearing this *pote*, and then like when I'm taking shower it just goes, off, and then like according to our culture they say if it goes off it's so bad! But every time you know the hand is going there or you're jumping on a treadmill or cross-trainer ...

Here we have an example of someone whose usual practice is to wear the *pote* inside the home, but with the introduction of a cross-trainer inside her home, the practice of wearing the *pote* becomes more inconvenient and cumbersome. She worries about taking the *pote* off for comfort during fitness inside the home, a practice that stands in tension with the belief or knowledge that taking the *pote* off is unacceptable. These kinds of material crossings are not simply about moving from inside to outside or home to office, but more about creating new embodied spaces of belief *within* existing spaces, such as the home. Wearing *pote* on a safety pin under a blouse also exemplifies the production of these new kinds of embodied spaces of belief, separate from the more performative action of publicly wearing *pote* to demonstrate social status.

Many Chhetri women go to live with their mother- and father-in-law after marriage, and sometimes these women feel like they must wear the *pote* at all times inside of the home lest they face the scrutiny of their in-laws. Sabina explained how her mother-in-law subtly reminded her that she was supposed to wear the *pote* at all times in her home:

When I was first married, I didn't know. I had very nice, nice designed *pote*. I always used to take it off and take a shower. And one day I forgot and left it hanging on the tap. And then forgot to wear also. Mua (her mother-in-law) came and Mua saw that *pote* hanging and she said, see, that *pote* is not very expensive, you can get it with 15 rupees, but this will make your husband's life long, so do not [take] it off ... And Mua was very smart. Mua saw my *pote* hanging on the tap and she immediately came and ... from that time onwards I have never, like, kept my neck empty.

It is worth noting that only her mother-in-law is so insistent: her husband does not share this kind of insistence about the *pote*.

Kamala covers her head with her cotton *sari* every time she is front of her father-in-law at home but wears whatever she chooses when she goes out in the evening, "even dresses and shorts." She says:

if you tell me, 'let's go out,' the first thing I do is I go and put *pote*. That is inside me. Because at home, because of this. And the first thing I do is my lipstick, because my lips are dark. Whenever I am going out, the two things are like *pote* is there, and lipstick is there.

By saying that it is “subconscious” and that it “is inside me” she relates back to her own embodied practice of learning about the importance of the *pote*, that somehow not wearing the *pote* would make her feel incomplete. However, her husband states with no hesitation that he does not care if she wears it or not. Although Kamala faces strict adornment and modesty expectations at home from her father-in-law, such as always covering her head in front of him, she puts her *pote* on when she leaves the home, as opposed to some other women who only put the *pote* on when they are inside the home.

Conclusion

In this article, we hope to have shown that the wearing of *pote* in its specific social and spatial context mediates belief, or at the very least some sort of conscious relationship with the *pote* that is inextricable with the feelings women have about being wives, women, mothers and conscious agents of both traditional practices and a new modern sensibility. The *pote* is caught up in the uncertainties of social action and requires interactions to maintain (Keane 2001, 70, 75). Crossing from one space to another – from the home to a party, for instance – is a practice that maintains the salience of the *pote* as something that is consciously (or subconsciously, as stated above) “always there.”

As we have attempted to demonstrate, despite the *pote* being symbolic of traditional Hindu women’s roles as wives, women’s creativity and complexity of feelings surrounding *pote*, expressed in the *pote* practices documented here, serve to constitute the *pote*’s multivalence as an object. And in particular, as an object that mediates belief in a highly ritualistic world in which belief is rarely the compelling factor undergirding longstanding religio-cultural practices. In the context of *pote* wearing, belief is seen as *not* necessarily having an object, but rather as being an embodied process enacted through practices of materiality. It is a process that takes place repeatedly through iterations across generations and spaces; in this case with practices of adornment in a particular religious context, inherited by women and repeated, challenged, modified, or re-configured.

The ways that women wear *pote*, talk about *pote*, and express ambivalence about *pote* in both of these realms, demonstrates that *pote* is a kind of a tool with which to mediate, negotiate, and even interrogate belief at a bodily level, as the body is both individually and socially constituted. Particularly in the transmission of knowledge (such as knowledge about how *pote* is worn and what it means) and in spatial practices (such as the wearing of certain types of *pote* in certain spaces and not others, or innovating new forms of *pote* in new social spaces), we see how *pote* embodies women’s

knowledge and how the *pote* serves as much more than an object, but rather as a living medium for both constructions of “belief” and the creative negotiation of tradition for women.

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notes and references

¹ This would be the gold ornament, *tilari*, but only the threads are offered, and the gold is kept (there was some uncertainty among the women we interviewed if the beads are kept, too).

² Shukla (2007) notes how for Hindu women in India, bodily adornments symbolizing marriage are felt to provide protection in public spaces, warding off harassment or “eve teasing.”

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