

***Bulaki*, Nepali women, and their identity**

If I were to choose a part of a body and metal that can narrate a story of a woman of my grandma's generation, I would pick nose and nasal ornaments. My mom prefers not to wear jewelries. Even when she does during ceremonies, the stylish earrings she wears do not say much about her. On the other hand, my grandma wore a *phuli* in her left nostril and *batare* earrings until she passed away. Although I never saw her with *bulaki* in her nasal septum, I remember her mentioning that she wore *bulaki* after she got married. But along with *chandrama* (hair pin) and *dhungri* (earrings), she sold *bulaki* when she moved from the hills of Bhojpur to the lowlands of Jhapa. Now I reflect back, the nasal ornaments that my grandma and her friends wore narrate so much of their stories and desires.

Phuli, which also means floret in Nepali, is a nasal ornament made up of 0.5-1.5 g gold and worn in a piercing in the left nostril. Unless she is an unmarried actress playing a role, a woman is married if she wears a *phuli*. Depending on culture, economic background, and interest, the design of *phuli* varies.

Following the tradition, my grandma wore a *dhike phuli* after she got married. But she also loved to put flowers on her head. *Dhike phuli* has three (spherical or cuboidal) granules of around 1 mm diameter granulated on top of a stalk that goes inside a nasal piercing. On top of the center of these granules is another granule giving a shape of a flower to *phuli*. See Figure 1.

In contrast, one of my grandma's friends wore a *laure phuli* which is larger than *dhike phuli*, see Figure 3a. Her son was a *laure*, a military person often British or Indian. And her family had a better financial background than ours to afford a larger *phuli*. *Laure phuli* has a flat circular plate attached to a stalk that goes inside the left nostril. On the visible side of the plate, there are spheres granulated in concentric circles giving a circular symmetry to the *phuli*. Depending on the design, one could add a crystal at the center to contrast the color.

Together with *phuli* goes *bulaki*. *Bulaki* is also a nasal ornament made up of gold and is inserted in a piercing in septum. Usually, it extends down to the tip of the lower lip of

the wearer, see Figures 1, 3a, 3b, and 3c. Depending on the culture, generation and the wearer, the size and design of *Bulaki* differs. But it is usually made up of 2-3 g gold and is about 2.5 cm long. *Bulaki* has bilateral symmetry that respects the symmetry of the wearer. And the overall pointy shape and that of the negative space in some cases (see Figure 2) directs the eye of a viewer to the lips of the wearer.

A typical *bulaki* (see Figure 2) has three distinct parts. The upper portion consists of a circular ring with an opening that allows the wearer to insert the *bulaki* in a piercing. To add texture, wires are wrapped around the ring. In addition, the wires assure that the ring does not rotate through the piercing. However, to make it easy to insert the ring, the part close to the opening is left smooth. At the bottom of the ring, a pendant is attached with two circular plates at the joints. The plates obscure the points of contact.

In addition to hiding the joints, the circular plates have lines and represent *nanglo*, a flat woven tray made up of bamboo, see Figure 4. Many women use a *nanglo* to do their daily chores. My grandma used it to handpick stones from rice and lentils. In addition, she used to cut potatoes and spinach on top of it. She also used it to dry mangoes and radishes in the Sun to make pickles.

Meanwhile, the middle portion is egg shaped and points towards the lip. It's boundary is granulated: thin circular pieces are cut off of a gold sheet. Upon heating at right below the melting point, the gold pieces turn into granules and can be hammered to give a pyramidal shape. Then the granules are attached to the surface. In the middle of the granulation, there is a negative space, see Figure 2. The opening of the negative space has incisions which go along with the reflection of the stones that fill up the negative space.

The stones are usually red and green which are the colors of a wife as opposed to white of a widow. The crystals add a color contrast to the rosy color of *bulaki*. The rosy color is achieved by heating it up in a red mud called *geru*. Then it is polished with a brass brush in *tejab* (acid) to give a shiny finish that elevates the reflections of the stones. Further, the shiny finish resonates with a belief that a woman is the light of a family.

Finally, the bottom part of the *bulaki* consists of odd number of spikes. A spike in the

middle points to the ground and the rest point to the sides. The sink in the spikes give a sense of depth to the ornament. Although the spikes are symmetrically placed, their shape and the dynamics of pendant give them an organic shape of ripe swinging paddy which reflects the fertility of a woman.

The basics of *bulaki* remains constant, but there are variations that can be made. The circular plates in Figure 2 could be replaced by spikes or inverted bowls, see Figure 1 and 3c. The shapes of granules in the boundary of the middle portion could also vary. To change the amount of reflection, one could use spherical granules instead of pyramidal, see Figure 1. Further, the color of stones can be chosen based on the zodiac of the wearer. And in some cases, there is no negative space which increases the amount of gold used. The amount of gold used reflects the economic status of the wearer.

On the other hand, the spikes speak the caste of the wearer. Like the west is soaked in racism, the southeast Asia is drenched in casteism and so is *bulaki*. If the spikes are modeled on *trisul*, a three spiked weapon carried by religious figures like Shiva and Falgunanda (see Figure 6), the wearer is a lower caste woman, see Figure 3b. During the times of my grandma, a lower caste woman was restricted to wear a *bulaki* whose design was meant for an upper caste woman. And if she did, she would be asked to leave the village. As *bulaki* is getting out of fashion, this is not a big problem anymore. But I wish casteism went out of fashion instead of *bulaki*.

For the upper caste women, the design of spikes tell their myth. In fact, the spikes designed for Gurung and Magar are bent at the tip, see Figure 3c. The story is that their religious King was killed using a *trisul* during Dashain, a major Hindu festival. The bent in the spikes represent the bent in the *trisul* after it has been used to stab a person.

On a different note, if the spikes are straight and sharp, the wearer is from Kirat community that consists of castes: Rai and Limbu, see Figure 3a. The shape represents *trisul* with a lot of spikes that their God carries.

Despite the differences, all *bulaki* have the same spiritual purpose. There is a concept of *mukti* that a person can achieve after death. To achieve *mukti* is to be 'liberated'. In the case of a woman, people believe that, after a woman dies, dripping gold water in her

mouth helps her attain *mukti*. They view gold as a symbol of purity and a representation of the ornaments of the God. So, they think that gold water helps a woman to be with the God after death. And *bulaki* is used to drip gold water.

The reason why the spikes are pointed is because the water droplets can fall easily. Similarly, the length of *bulaki* makes it easier to drop water into her mouth. Further, the reason why the *bulaki* subtends away from the mouth is that it can't be made impure with food and saliva. It is the same reason why *bulaki* extends to the lower lip of the wearer.

And in case someone does not have a *bulaki*, they use a *phuli*. Although I could not attend the funeral of my grandma, I believe that people used her *dhike phuli* to drop gold water to help her attain *mukti*. I can't confirm if she attained it, but her *phuli* still speaks to me about her life as delicate as a flower and that she was an anthophile. I could not see her *bulaki*, but, looking at the design of *bulaki* of her well-off friends, I can imagine her spikes would look like *trisul*. The circular plates would still represent a *nanglo* and the stones would be white.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to my uncle Arjun Sunar for providing the technical details of *bulaki* and *phuli* as well as their cultural background and significance.

References

- [Dor] Oleg Doroshenko. *Portrait old women in traditional dress in street*. URL: www.123rf.com/photo_68769475_kathmandu-nepal-october-23-2016-portrait-old-women-in-traditional-dress-in-street-kathmandu-nepal.html. (accessed: April 2021).
- [Emb] Embody. *Bulaki*. URL: embodyexhibition.org/collection. (accessed: April 2021).
- [Hov15] Pim Hovers. *First day: visiting the local market in Necha*. 2015. URL: <https://www.microcarenepal.org/nl/nieuws/2015/7/21/first-day-in-necha>. (accessed: April 2021).
- [KG17] Ramji Khand and Kajal Gurung. *Nakma Jhumke Bulaki*. 2017. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wUCdtgnUvs&ab_channel=Ashishmusic. (accessed: April 2021).
- [Ras18] Rashik. *Bulaki – Somethings are never meant to go out of style*. 2018. URL: www.nepalosite.com/bulaki-somethings-are-never-meant-to-go-out-of-style/. (accessed: April 2021).
- [Shr11] Shrijana. *Jhamke bulaki*. 2011. URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jhamke_Bulaki.JPG. (accessed: April 2021).



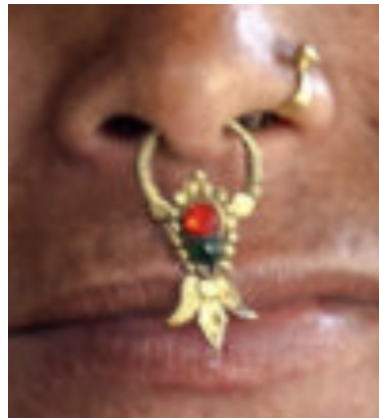
Figure 1: Bulaki and *Dhike phuli* [Dor]



Figure 2: *Bulaki* [Emb]



(a) *Laure phuli* and *jhamke bulaki* of Kirat [Shr11]



(b) *Bulaki* of dalits and *nathya* [Ras18]



(c) *Bulaki* of Gurungs and Magars [KG17]

Figure 3: Spikes of *Bulaki*



Figure 4: *Nanglo* [Hov15]



Figure 5: *Bulaki*



Figure 6: *Tandav*