

RESEARCH REPORTS

Individual Project

Project: Internal and external conceptualization of social change in North-East Nepal: the study of individuality in a traditional community.

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This study primarily concerns the individual's perspective in cognizing and handling his own culture. The focus of research is the Sherpa in three different contexts: a village in Solu, where tradition does not necessarily exclude social change (see Ortner 1990), various educational and development projects and Sherpas in Kathmandu who had migrated from the region of Solu.

A few remarks on terminology are necessary, since current usage of the concepts "internal" versus "external" might lead to a sociological bias. Internal in the cognitive sense of this study means "normative", that is a judgement as to the relative value of an object, event or attitude, putting it on a value-scale in relation to an absolute value. External refers to "substantial", that is a perspective not free of judgement but pointing to the qualities of an object, an event or an attitude as to their relationships, connectedness and transformability (see also the discussion between Dumont and Marriott). It remains to be asked whether this distinction is only the concern of anthropologists, or whether it is also found in the concepts of people themselves, reflected in the way individuality finds expression.

It was found initially that individuality has an important cultural value in oral traditions (molla, sh.), including a variety of stories (pe, sh.) of the origin of the world, of man's place in it and of social behaviour. Such oral traditions are found not only among the Sherpa but among other groups as

well (see Aziz 1985, Jackson 1984, Macdonald 1965) and thus open a way for further comparison. On a deeper level such distinctions can also be found by asking the double question (why is this present, why is that absent). For example, is the concept of the "evil" in traditional societies really something which is conceived as being outside of man? Or, could it just as well be another discourse on the same problem, a change from a normative to a substantial perspective in what (e.g. responsibility, attitude etc.) we attribute to others and ourselves? And, if it is just a different perspective, what is left aside then and how will this conceptualization be effected through social change?

Having tried to indicate that recognizing the possibility of a variety of individual perspectives also includes a setting of priorities and leaving aside other knowledge, it remains necessary to include in this "analysis from both sides" the Sherpas' concept of social units and their norms of behaviour, that are the focus of cognition and social action. For example, the conceptual division of power and purity that is found within the brahmanical cultural sphere and the division of power and purity that was also a fact in the Buddhist community of the Sherpa might seem to be equal in character, since the latter could be thought of as an effect of, or counter-part or structural adaptation to the process of Hinduization (see Barth 1969). Thus it is traceable in the history of the Sherpas that there was, as in the epoch of the formation of the Nepalese state, a series of temple foundings connected with the rise of local power-centres, whose area of influence was, as in the dominant example, not identical with that of the influence of the clerical sphere. Bringing into mind the individuals' perspectives, it has to be noted, however, that the concept of power among Buddhist communities is differently conceptualized from that of the Hindus.

There seems to be not so much an encompassment of the opposite of purity but a more direct and at the same time more inde-

pendent, reciprocal balancing relationship between the two. For example, how is modern education influencing the perspective on traditional knowledge?

NEWS

Conferences

Human Rights Violations in the Himalaya - The Domination of Elites 6-10 December 1991, Kathmandu

As a result of democratisation in Nepal and the newly gained freedom of speech, it is now permitted to discuss potentially explosive topics in public. Between the 6th and 10th December 1991 in the Hotel Vajra (Kathmandu), about 100 human-rights activists, environmentalists, politicians, journalists and scientists from all over Nepal, as well as from Ladakh, Garhwal, Sikkim, Bhutan (refugees), Tibet (refugees), Germany, England and the Netherlands met to examine critically human rights problems and the dominance of elites: the meeting was organized by NGOs, such as Nepal Watch (Berlin) and the Peace Movement Nepal, Lalitpur.

In an unusually free atmosphere there were discussions on human rights and human rights violations connected with the following topics: environment, health, peace, education, language, access to information, freedom of speech, political participation, women, children, bonded labour, religion, culture, rights of ethnic minorities, land conflicts, racism, foreign aid, foreign media and tourism. From the discussion it became obvious, how much ethnic minorities (who in some cases are not 'minorities' at all) in the Himalaya feel politically, economically and culturally oppressed. Above all, religious elites and centralist governments in Delhi, Kathmandu, Timphu and Beijing were held responsible for trans-

forming ethnic groups into aliens. As to Nepal, it is not even known how many ethnic groups there are exactly, and what percentage of the total national population the members of these groups represent. Tamang spokesmen, for example, estimated that they represented 17% of the whole population, and non-Hindus altogether about 75%. In the conference they stressed that as long as the Nepalese constitution proclaimed Hinduism a state-religion, many people would not reveal that they actually belonged to another religion: the disadvantages would be too great.

Massive human rights violations were reported anew from Tibet and Bhutan. In both cases there was no reaction from India or Nepal. In the case of Bhutan there has even been no reaction worldwide. About 70,000 Nepalese Bhutanese people here had to flee Bhutan, and it is said that 300 come each day to seek help in the refugee-camps in eastern Nepal. From Tibet also about 300 people escape monthly to Nepal, there often being maltreated, extorted and robbed.

The participants at the meeting agreed upon the following statement (interestingly the demands in connection with the situation in Tibet were not reported on by the government media).

We call on the Governments concerned to ensure equality of all ethnic, social, religious and linguistic groups, and to take appropriate measures to enable members of all these groups to participate fully in society and in decision-making processes. Surveys should be conducted to determine the size and living conditions of the various ethnic groups in the region.