Close-Up and Wide-Angle.
On comparative ethnography in the Himalayas – and beyond.
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When I arrived in Nepal for the very first time on March 10th 1965, I stayed a few days in a stucco palace on Kantipath, hidden behind a curtain of palm trees, – in the former Royal Hotel of Boris, before I moved to the thatched huts up in the eastern hills where I remained for the next six or seven months. These huts were in fact solid stone houses with wooden shingle roofs, built by the Sherpa of Solu Khumbu. Here, I collected data for a demography of the area and for a study of the local clan system. By chance I came across a number of historical documents, partly written in Tibetan, partly in Nepali, which were to shed new light on the migration of Sherpa ancestors from Kham in the eastern part of the Himalayas to their current dwelling places; on the subsequent segmentation of their clans; and on their relationship to the new Nepalese State. For the translation of the texts written in Nepali (on *kāgat* and on copper plates), I was led – after my return to Kathmandu – straight to Mahesh Chandra Regmi, who, for a reasonable fee, translated them offhand into English.

I was impressed by his one-man-show efficiency and his lively curiosity. He went about his scholarship like a stockbroker. However, I was impressed by his ability to put the historical documents I had found and considered unique into a serial context. They were, for the most part, *lāl mohar* decrees, stamped with a royal seal and dealt with land-taxation in the early 19th century, with *hulāk* porterage and transportation services, trade grants, the appointment of state intermediaries and tax collectors (*mizhār* or *pembu*), and with *kipaṭ* and *raikaṛ*, the systems of customary communal landownership and state landlordism. Moreover, they contained moral admonitions from the top of the crown down to tribal subjects during a period before the legal code (*Muluki Ain*) came into force, – documents, as Regmi had stored them by the dozen in his archives. This encounter with Regmi came to me as a sobering and clarifying shock: no matter how original you might find your discoveries yourself, they are in fact part of others made by others elsewhere. The Regmi experience was also a lessonto me. Whatever your findings as a researcher – at one point you have to see them from a wider perspective.

More than a decade later, I set out for a second field experience, this time in the northwestern part of Nepal – among the Kham-speaking Magar of the Dhaulāgiri region. Before I took off for the hills and my

companion, Charlotte Hardman, returned to her people, the Lohorung Rai in the upper Arun valley, we invited Mahesh Chandra Regmi one evening for dinner, to the house we had rented for a month in Chauni. We had bought a pound of shrimps and a bottle of white wine for the occasion in the hope of pleasing our guest. It was a disaster. While we had no difficulty in shelling the crustaceans with both our hands, poor Mahesh tried his best using only his right hand. It took him five minutes to peel a single shrimp, while ten more of the things lay waiting on his plate; he sweated and suffered; and we in turn suffered at his suffering. Yet, while we turned to the Burgundy to dissipate our unease, Mahesh asked for water and so helas he himself found no release. Our bookish knowledge of Robert Hertz and Rodney Needham notwithstanding, we had simply neglected the impact of left and right symbolism in its most mundane application. Even the best anthropological background had not prevented us from making a grave mistake. While we felt like silly hosts, Regmi remained hungry for the rest of the evening. As you know, he did at least survive his ordeal. Encounters of this kind must not end in a clash of cultures; they can be funny, food for anecdote or they can be food for thought.

50 years of local studies

If you take a synchronic bird's-eye view over the last fifty-odd years of Himalayan studies, which happen to be also the *first* fifty-odd years of such research, – you can easily make two observations: one, a lot has been done, – in unequal density over the geographical range; and, two: the great majority of the work have has been local studies. By unequal density I mean that certain areas – and the people living in them – have received considerable attention, while other regions have been comparatively neglected. I shall not try to sort out the various reasons for this fact, but my hunch may be voiced: I suspect that researchers – especially foreigners – have preferred spectacular (and pleasant) places as their domain and have claimed them as their own. I am tempted to call this the Mountain Resort Syndrome. As for the number of fieldwork studies, the late Sixties to the early Eighties seem to have been the most fruitful decades.

Now, observation number two: the preponderance of local studies. This can be explained in various ways. One may begin with physical conditions. A long, uneven row of white teeth rising up into the sky divides the Himalayan landscape: to the north a huge, high-altitude plateau spotted with gentle cones; and a folded, rugged terrain on its southern and eastern fringes with high ridges, deep valleys, countless veins of downstream riverbeds, – many secluded biotopes. Such climatic and topographical conditions have caused nature to bring forth an astounding diversity in fauna and flora; and on a human level they have

also provided challenge and shelter. These many local biotopes in the Himalayas have favoured the emergence of – if I may say so –numerous localized sociotopes.

And here are the results: In the rugged folds of the Himalayas an immense variety of local cultures did come to the fore attracting, as soon as this country was open to foreigners, scores of anthropologists, who grasped this as their unique and unexpected opportunity in the second half of the 20th century. At first they were few and could be counted on a single hand; then on two hands; and soon they came flooding in in great numbers. It was like a goldrush – the promise of a lucky dig almost guaranteed for everyone. At one point there were so many foreign anthropologists that they were counted as the 42nd tribal population of Nepal. Today, there are other foreign groups populating the country: Foreign Aid –, NGOs –, the World Bank –, and the various Cultural Preservation tribes. Indeed there were many blank spots on the ethnographic map of the Himalayas to be filled: so many local cultures, unknown, unstudied; and in each locality local knowledge abounded, waiting to be registered, classified, translated and contemplated.

You may wonder why I put such emphasis on the expression *local culture* rather than on labels such as *ethnic group* or *tribe*. In my opinion, this term is a useful one, for it stresses geographical rather than racial, caste or ethnic criteria: limited geographical entities as boundaries of cultural membership. And due to the relative isolation, even seclusion of the ground on which these cultural micro-units came to flourish, it is the place more than the ethnos that constitutes them. Moreover, a spatial definition of a small cultural whole is more flexible than other such definitions: it is open to fluctuations between neighbouring cultural units, open to minimal variations from one valley to the next. This does not preclude further use of conventional ethnonyms such as Tamang, Gurung, Magar and so on, names the practical usefulness of which, as well as their arbitrariness and fuzziness, need no further discussion.

The expression *local culture* has not had the same success in academia as *local knowledge,* even though the latter presupposes the existence of the former. The latter was propagated in the Eighties by Clifford Geertz who put *Local Knowledge* (1983) even on the cover of a book of his, confirming his fame for popularising anthropological catch phrases. The former term had been coined half a century earlier, by the German sinologist Wolfram Eberhard, who spoke of *Lokalkulturen im alten China* (1942), denoting by this title the minority groups on the western and northern borders of Han-China, outside the Great Wall. Some of these were Himalayan local cultures, situated in the Sino-Tibetan marches, and of some interest in the later course of my talk.

The comparison of the anthropological rush into the Himalayan region with gold-diggers comes to mind not only because there were rich mines to be tapped, but also on account of similar attitudes between the two types of researchers towards the soil. Once an ethnographer had completed his or her reconnaissance trip and chosen a particular location as suitable, the place was soon considered to be his or her own property. Such possessive behaviour might even lead to raising invisible fences around the appropriated research area with a "no-trespassing" sign stuck in the ground. This fantasy was silently tolerated, because it was generally shared by other researchers in regard to their own claims. Absurd as this may sound to the outsider, the effect was that most ethnographers – and in particular those who carried out extensive field-work – transformed their plot of land into a closed universe, inside which they were the sovereign, whereas other local universes that sprung up around them, did not concern them, as they belonged to other sovereigns outside. These fences produced blinkers. And so we have, after 50 years of Himalayan ethnography, many disconnected small universes with numerous local accounts, but there are few glimpses over neighbouring fences.

The advantage of this state of affairs is that a good number of the reports coming out of these 24 Little Kingdoms are very detailed, very specific, rich in views and perspectives from inside – in short, they provide local knowledge. Ethnographies of this kind constitute the indispensable basis for any higher aspirations, –be these middle range or general theories or clear-cut comparative studies. The disadvantage is that most of these sovereigns over village worlds in all their industry to assemble the thousand snippets of detailed local knowledge, have neither had the time nor the intention of seeing beyond the end of their nose or – as the Germans say – "to look beyond the rim of their plate" *über den eigenen Tellerrand zu schauen.* The time has come to do this, and thanks to the elementary research carried out by ethnographic prospectors, the prospects to get somewhere are not too dim.

Realms for comparative ethnography

Before I touch upon two specific comparative domains I shall name some realms within ethnography, which in my opinion seem particularly suitable for such studies.

But first: What do I mean by comparative ethnography? Comparative ethnography in its simplest understanding signifies putting the facts of knowledge of one local universe side by side with those of other such local universes in closer and wider vicinity to one another. The facts to be assembled and held against each other should belong to the same kinds of things: apples to apples, pears to pears. The primary task of this exercise

would be to find similarities and differences between comparable sets of facts in the local universes thus confronted and, perhaps, to suggest reasons for such differences and similarities. A second step would be to sort out to what degree these local cultures confronted might be considered related within the framework of the things compared. And a third, optional step might be a speculation on how to explain such kinship between a series of local universes, i.e. a theory on interrelation.

As for the realms in which I think comparison might bring some promising results – or rather has already brought such results, I must warn you that their list depends totally on my own orientation and predilections and is, consequently highly partial. Everyone is invited to enlarge the list according to his or her orientation, expertise and gusto.

In the large sector of material culture (which I understand as material*ized* culture, as cultural production mirrored in physical things), comparisons "beyond the rim of the plate" might be made between artefacts: tools and objects of daily use; and objects and paraphernalia of religious use; in architecture, which combines physical shapes with immaterial concepts, such as the symbolic ordering of inhabited space; and in fields of aesthetic production with less apparent practical services, such as painting or sculpture, both in regard to style and meaning.

Other realms of cultural production such as dance, musical traditions, verbal arts such as folksongs, myths, legends and other narrative matter, as well as ritual practices which I gather under the general heading of Performative Culture, offer ample opportunity for comparison in view of content and form. Even culinary culture, which is both material and performative and offers insight into ways of thinking, provides with its rules of etiquette and food taboos solid ground on which to draw overregional comparisons. The greatest challenge for comparative studies lies perhaps in the immaterial realm of what, since Mauss and Durkheim, anthropologists have called collective representations. To these belong all sorts of classification systems, taxonomies, cosmological concepts and worldviews; and in particular social classifications, which mould the shape of social groups and determine the behaviour within and between them. Among such sociological concepts and practices I would particularly emphasize alliance systems generated by marriage rules, lineage systems and social stratification systems. Finally, there are the languages, by which material things are named and immaterial facts and significations are connected and expressed. For a long time historical or conjectural interrelations between languages, within language families and between branches of language families, were considered to be the absolute basis, the ultimate legitimation even, for any kind of cultural comparison.

Let me now turn to some examples of comparative ethnography selected from the fields previously mentioned which I happened to take

part in. As you will notice, the impetus to compare accrues, more often than not, right out of local research, – as a consistent next step. When I went to the northern Magar in the Dhaulāgiri region, I was attracted, first and foremost, by their ramified, rich and vivid shamanic traditions, and my film *Shamans of the Blind Country* (1981) tried to document this. But soon I realized that no matter what the people up there were doing, their conduct was channelled by social regulations which gave a particular hue to each and every one of their actions – religious, economic, festive or leisure.

Alliance systems

These social codes could be traced back to a single marriage rule: that a man must marry his mother's brother's daughter (or a classificatory equivalent of hers). When regularly followed over a period of time by all descent groups in society, this rule leads to the formation of fixed matrimonial alliance partners, whereby one group is always wife-giver to a second group and wife-receiver from a third such group. In order to function as an exchange system based on marriage, at least three such groups are consequently needed. Principally in such a system, any number of participating groups above two could be integrated into a single, matrimonial exchange circuit.

   This system of social organisation is not a feature only typical of the Magar; it is, in fact, quite widespread over a vast expanse, stretching in various degrees of completeness, from the Amur region in eastern Siberia down to the east Indian frontier territories, and, leaving aside China, to northern Burma and even further south into the Indonesian Archipelago. Nowhere, however, it is in reality as close to the ideal model and as rigorously minimalist as among the Magar. If one compares both mythological and historical sources with contemporary demographic facts it can be stated that the Magar have always preferred exchange circles composed of three partner groups only. In the beginning, there was just one such triple-alliance; now, there are about 30 such independent circuits in a single village of about 2,000 inhabitants. This means that on average a present-day triple-alliance is composed of no more than 70 individuals, with each partner group including 20 to 25 persons.

   The multiplication and transformation of triple-alliances result from a small number of effective mechanisms which are applied, when defective or worn-out circuits need remodelling. These mechanisms taken from the "emergency kit" differ according to the consequences they generate: One, called "breaking the bones" (*hāḍphorā*), results in bisecting a patriline; another separating houses (*zimla zimla cāhine*) leads to the spatial separation and split of a previously cohabitant descent group; a third one,

participating in a single milk line (*nui*) called *nagar bhāi* is enacted, when two sisters are married to men of different alliance groups, the result of which is the merging of two exchange groups; the same happens, when a man marries the widow of someone belonging to a different exchange group than his own: the children from both of the woman's marriages will be part of a single exchange unit, and this is called "teat brotherhood" (*cuci bhāi*); a forth one inverting the direction of exchange (*ulte cakra*) turns the fixed relations between wife-givers and wife-receivers upside down; and a last one forming a tie of blood-brother-sisterhood (*mit-mitni*) results, if the partners of such a blood-friendship are of the same sex, in the proscription of matrimonial ties in subsequent generations, and, if they are of the opposite sex, in the creation of new mutual marriage options for their grandchildren. All these mechanisms to transform existing alliance circles, resulting in fusion, fission, participation or inversion, are final. They are applied only in emergency situations, when, under demographic pressure or irreconcilable feud, a triple-alliance is threatened with collapse. In positive terms, these measures, forbidden under normal circumstances, are antidotes: to repair, maintain and perpetuate the one and only rule – to marry mother's brother's daughter within a small circle of triple alliances.

The mode of alliance, the bond of union between different kin groups arising from this marriage rule, has been referred to in various ways by different authors: a system of unidirectional exchange, of indirect, delayed, circulative or asymmetrical exchange, depending on the characteristics they have wanted to stress. In his epochal study: *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949/1967) Claude Lévi-Strauss called this system, based on prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, generalized exchange, juxtaposing it, after a world-wide comparative survey of marriage rules, with two further and different basic modes of alliance, isolated by him: with restricted, direct or symmetrical exchange, based on bilateral cross-cousin marriage; and with a discontinuous type of exchange, based on patrilateral cross-cousin marriage.

According to Lévi-Strauss and the sources available at the time, the patrilateral type of prescriptive alliance, although a logical possibility, was practically nonexistent in an undiluted form, the reason being its supposed lack of integrative qualities, whereas the matrilateral type had gained wide distribution for its sociological potential of integrating several, if not all exchange groups of a local society. The bilateral type of direct exchange, for its part, had its stronghold in the aboriginal societies of Australia, in ancient village China, and in tribal societies of South America and Indonesia.

The indirect mode of exchange was characterized by Lévi-Strauss as an open, yet risky structure, a Vabanque game, a sociological adventure even,

arguing that a specific group A that gave its daughters to group B would never be sure of being compensated by a group C or X with an equivalent set of women coming back into its own group. This speculative theoretical assumption can be tested by looking at how the Magar system actually works. No Magar wants to take risks, especially not where his/her most vital interests are at stake: the reproduction of the own group. What is sought, on the contrary, is some reassurance; and this is provided, according to their own experience, when matrimonial exchange circles are limited to no more than three partners and when participants are close neighbours. And this is why all their exchange circuits in past and present times are small and triangular. These qualities are the safest way to guarantee control over how the system functions, safer even than in a system of direct reciprocity. Indeed, in an arrangement with three exchange partners, there is – in any dual transaction pending between a wife-giver and a wife-receiver – a third party present keeping watch as arbitrator. In the next matrimonial transaction, this arbiter will be cast in the role of wife-giver or wife-receiver of one of the two other groups, leaving his function as arbitrator to one of the two partners who is not immediately involved in the actual exchange deal. In a direct exchange, on the other hand, the role of the impartial third party, is missing; consequently it lacks any supervision.

Seen in light of the security and risks involved in the system, the stark contrast between direct and indirect exchange, between the restricted and generalized modes of alliance that Lévi-Strauss had drawn in his early opus, seems obsolete, when confronted with Himalayan test cases. Both modes, in a different fashion, serve the same purpose: to ensure the unimpeded rotation of the social wheel.

Kin classification

In the pioneering book referred to, one chapter bore the title *Bone and Flesh.* In it Lévi-Strauss assembled a good number of Asian societies that made a distinction between relatives of bone and relatives of flesh, bone referring to those on the father's side and flesh to those on the mother's. He considered this distinction to be an unmistakable symptom, a leitmotiv in the presence of a generalized exchange. Indeed, in a system of generalized exchange, two exchange groups form a fixed pair of opposites, where one is exclusively "bone" to the other and the other exclusively "flesh" to the former. In a society with restricted exchange, on the other hand, the distinction would be a contradiction, as each of the two alliance partners would be both "bone" and "flesh" to the other. In other words, his central point is that the conceptualisation of bone and flesh makes sense in societies that favour the practice of matrilateral cross-cousin

marriage; whereas in those that prefer the patrilateral or the bilateral type, including all others that have a form of symmetrical exchange, a differentiation between relatives of "bone" and relatives of "flesh" would serve no distinctive purpose. I will now put this proposition to an empirical test by confronting it with a number of cases from ethnographic data collected in the Himalayas and not yet known at the time *Les Structures* were written.

Let me begin with the Magar, whose alliance system I outlined before. In this society a triangular relation between three exchanging partners is superimposed by three dual relations of a fixed nature, each patrilineal descent group being wife-giver to one and wife-receiver to the other of the two matrimonial partners. In this fixed dual relationship the local term for the patrilineal descent group, *rus* or bone automatically takes on the meaning of wife-receiver. Accordingly, the expression for the descent group of a woman, *sya* or flesh, (also alternatively called *nui* or milk) extends to the meaning of wife-giver. The double expression *sya-rus* consistently designates the unit of prefigurated dual alliance partners: the wife-taker /wife-giver pair. In other words, the Magar case fits in perfectly with Lévi-Strauss's assumption.

The Tamang of central Nepal are divided into a number of patriclans which they call *rui* or bones. Bone can be characterized by the following features: by patrilinearity, by patrilocality, by a strict rule of exogamy according to which any breaking of the bone (*hāḍphorowa*), i. e. sexual union inside the own clan, will be pursued as incest; by the existence of clan-owned territories (*kipaṭ*) and by the worship of clan-specific deities *rui-gyi-pho-lha*. Membership to a clan is inherited through the bones of father's body, *na khru*. Tamang kinship terminology is predominantly symmetrical: parallel cousins and cross-cousins are separated by different denominations; cross-cousins on both sides, however, form a single category, whereas parallel cousins are grouped together with brothers and sisters. Sister-exchange with symmetrical modes of reciprocity is frequently practised and is preferably repeated in subsequent generations. Sister-exchange is locally called *depa* = swap or barter. This expression is used, when the Tamang refer to cross-cousin marriage of the bilateral type. According to Lévi-Strauss, all this should be incompatible with the distinction between bone and flesh-relatives.

The various Kiranti tribes of eastern Nepal also use the metaphors of bone and a complementary substance for affinal relatives. They call relatives on the father's side *hāḍ* or *hādnāta*; those on the mother's side are called *dudh* or milk. Bone or *hāḍ* are the agnates, milk or *dudh* the uterine kin. In their kinship terminology, cross-cousins are usually paired with sisters. Sexual joking between cousins is prohibited which indicates that marriage between them is not valued at all. Unions between agnates are

considered taboo for a period of seven generations, those with matrilateral kin for three. Once the taboo period of seven generations for bone relatives has run out, intra-clan marriages are not only tolerated, but intentionally sought. Such a marriage between agnates is termed *hāḍphora* or breaking the bone line. A single intra-clan connection of this type leads immediately to clan fission. What has been a solid exogamic clan group up to this moment is now split up into two separate marriage units, between which, henceforward, marital ties will be contracted intentionally. The members of the two newly-established clan segments receive different magical clan names. The institution of marriage does not promote outward communication. Instead, people prefer village endogamy and endogamy within those branches of clans that have split up by the breaking bone mechanism. This obvious tendency for endopraxis leads to an atomization and localization of society and may, according to Charles McDougal, have contributed to the fact that the Kiranti as a whole have split up into numerous tribes and subtribes to a much higher proportion than other hill people of the Nepalese Himalayas.

Even if cross-cousins of any kind are prohibited as marriage partners, the Kiranti nonetheless uphold one particular form of direct exchange as their ideal: classificatory sister-exchange. By thinking and acting this way, they join what Lévi-Strauss would have found incompatible: the division of kin into bone- and milk-relatives with a tendency to direct matrimonial exchange.

The kinship system of the Naxi in northwestern Yunnan is based on the assumption that the paternal relatives supply the bones of an individual and the maternal ones the flesh. Fathers are bone (*o*), mothers are flesh (*na*); sons are bone, daughters are flesh. Women are like trees, men like rocks; just like trees root on rocks, women take root on the bone of men. Coming from the bone-line of their fathers, women bring flesh into the bone-line of their husbands. Marriage within the bone is frowned upon and considered as incest to be punished severely by the people of one's own bone. Relatives of the flesh can be both wife-givers and wife-receivers to the bone-line of a person. This follows from the logic of the preferred marriage rule which recommends taking home as wife the daughter of one's father's sister. In other words, the Naxi practice, at least in ideal circumstances, patrilateral cross-cousin marriage, which strongly contradicts the structural conclusions made by Lévi-Strauss to be drawn from the division of kin into bone and flesh.

The social organisation of the Sherpa is based on strong patrilineal and patrilocal clans – at least up to the time before they became an ubiquitous lot of city-dwellers. Their clans are called *ru* or bones. The complementary substance *sha,* flesh, designates relatives on the female side. There is nothing peculiar about this; it confirms the expected pattern, followed by

many Tibetan and other local Himalayan cultures. Two things, however, make this a special case. As can be reconstructed from their historical documents, all today's existing clans and subclans, more than 30 in number, go back to four original protoclans. Although each of the split up subclans adopted a new clan name and some even acquired new clan territories, they all continued to operate matrimonially, as if they had never split up, following those rules of exogamy that were fixed long ago by the four protoclans. In other words: Sherpa clans are extremely solid – the bones may split or branch out, but they cannot be broken. This conspicuous feature of strict exopraxis over long periods of time – supported by long written genealogies – may be seen in the light of another characteristic of Sherpa social organisation: they have never adopted any elementary form of marriage alliance – neither matrilateral, nor bilateral, nor patrilateral cross-cousin marriage. And yet, they distinguish between bone-relatives and flesh-relatives. For them, this distinction has nothing to do with restricted or with generalized exchange; it is just a reminder to the bones to import flesh – once and for ever from the descendants of one of the other protoclan bones.

The last Himalayan case to be presented here – that of the Nyinba in the upper Karnali – introduces an additional element: stratification by rank. This local society of Tibetan origin builds, as Nancy Lévine has conclusively demonstrated, a complex genetic and social philosophy on the concept of *rü* or bone and its complementary substance of *t'ag* or blood, sometimes also referred to as *sha* or flesh. In Nyinba thought *rü* covers three meanings: bone, clan and membership to a social rank. As bone, *rü* refers to a corporal substance to be found in man and animals alike. As clan, *rü* describes people who share descent from a common agnatic line of acknowledged ancestors. The third meaning of *rü* (or *rigs*) hints at a social stratum to which one belongs by birth. All three meanings interlap. The Nyinba believe that the substance *rü* is transported from father to offspring via the male sperm, the white colour of which is associated with the white of the bones. The soft, fleshy and red parts of a child's body, however, come from the bones of its mother and are transmitted by her uterine blood, or *t'ag*. No *rü* without *t'ag*. But *t'ag* is only complementary to *rü*, for the primary component for the production of uterine blood of a woman is the *rü* substance that she inherits through her father. Maternal relatives are collectively called *t'ag*-relatives; agnates are termed *rü*-relatives. Parallel cousins on the mother's side are referred to as *t'ag pun* brothers and sisters by blood, whereas the children of brothers are spoken of as *rüpa pun* or brothers and sister by bone. Cross-cousins, on the other hand, are collectively called *nyen* affines, as they are considered possible marriage partners. In fact, marriage between real or

classificatory cross-cousins (no matter which side) is upheld as an ideal connection.

Social stratification

Nyinba society is divided into two social strata: higher-ranking *dagpo* landowners and lower-ranking offspring of former *yogpo* slaves. Only members of the upper stratum belong to established clans or *rü* with separate clan names; those of the lower stratum do not have clan names at all. Clans with names do not intermarry with clans with no name. Thus, one does not marry outside one's own stratum. The norms for rank-endogamy are based on the premise that people of different *rü*, in the sense of social rank, represent incompatible types of human beings, whose mixture of substances is inappropriate.

As the example of the Nyinba shows, the concept of bone can be also used as a marker of social rank, indicating exopraxis within one's own stratum and endopraxis against other strata outside. Such a correlation is not an isolated affair. The Yi (formerly called Lolo) of Yunnan and Sichuan for instance, used to pair clan exogamy with class endogamy. Society was divided into three social layers, forming two classes. The uppermost layer was constituted by the ruling class *nuoke*, the aristocrats, who held the biggest share of land property. This layer/class was spoken of as black bones, in contrast to white bones made up of the two lower layers of society: on the one hand by people of free origin, called *qunuo*, owners of small fields; and by people with no land, called *ajia*. Marriage between members of the two lower layers was admitted, i. e. within the limits of white bones, but strictly forbidden between the two classes of black bones and white bones. Each of the two endogamic classes was composed of several exogamic, patrilocal clans and the preferred type of kin alliance was bilateral cross-cousin marriage.

The division of society into white and black bones to denote hierarchical endogamous ranks, is also widespread amongst the peoples of the central Asian steppes – but with an opposite colour attribution. For instance, the Kazakhs of the Altai region used two different terms to denote their patrilineal clans, both with the meaning of bone: one was *sök* and the other was *uru* or *ruu*, the latter of which might be related to the Tibetan word *ru(s)*, also meaning bone, while *sök* can be found both in Mongolian and in several Turkic dialects. Just like the Kalmuk, the Altai Kazakhs distinguished between two layered ranks: the white bones *aq syek* (*sök*), designating the noble clans presumably descended from Jenghis Khan; and the black bones *kara syek*, consisting of the commoners. Just as it was prohibited to marry within one's own bone, marriages between white bones and black bones were equally prohibited, – however, for

opposing reasons, too close in the former, and too separate in the latter case.

According to Lawrence Krader, the image of bone relatives for the agnates on the father's side and the complementary image of flesh relatives on the mother's side was a conceptual feature shared by all pastoral societies on the Asian steppes to express the supremacy of the principles of patrilinearity. Over time, this concept was also used to consolidate the interior division of society into classes, by separating the bones into white bones (for higher ranks) and into black bones (for commoners). The societies concerned were the Ordos, the Khalkha, the Chakas and all eastern Mongolian groups; the Kalmuks among the western Mongols; and the Kazakhs and the Usbeks among the Turks. The only societies to escape these developments of stratification were the Altai Turks, the Kirgiz, the Buryat, the Monguor of Gansu and the Turkmen, who never made the distinction between white and black bones.

Let me sum up this excursion into comparative kinship studies. All things considered, it does not seem justified to read the widespread kin metaphor of "bone" and "flesh" as a clue to one particular type of matrimonial alliance: that of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, or indirect exchange. Only one case – that of the Magar – fits this hypothesis. All other test cases point in different directions. The Tamang, the Nyinba and the Yi associate a preference for bilateral cross-cousin-marriage with the bone and flesh concept, which indicates, together with the Kiranti case, where classificatory sister exchange is sought, a compatibility with the direct mode of matrimonial exchange. The Naxi, for their part, link the kin metaphor of bone and flesh to a discontinuous alliance system, generated by a preference for the patrilateral type of cross-cousin marriage. And the Sherpa use bone as a signifier for the indestructibility of the patriline, without practising any of the three elementary modes of kin alliance. In some – or should one say many – cases, (if one looks from the Himalayas further north to the Mongolian and central Asian societies and further east to the Sino-Tibetan marches) the kin metaphor of bone (and flesh) is employed, by dividing it into colour components, to indicate social stratification. In short, bone and flesh have been considered apt for social classification in numerous local societies of the Asian continent, irrespective of the modes of alliance involved.

Material culture

Before drawing to a close, I would like to touch upon an area, in which I see considerable potential for comparative ethnographic research – that of physical objects. They have an advantage over immaterial subjects: They are visibly, tangibly, undeniably there; they have size, shape and

substance, independent of the observer. As objects they have objective qualities; as material things they are pieces of evidence. They are apples, unquestionably to be compared with apples.

When I studied the local religious practices of the northern Magar, I soon realized – as others had realized before and after me – that they were comparable not only to similar practices in neighbouring local societies, but displayed features similar to those found in the shamanic traditions of Siberia and other North Asian regions. These similarities covered various realms: the body techniques of the local experts, their gear and garment, the sequence and course of their acts, their repertoire of oral knowledge, their mythologies, their cosmological ideas and worldviews, their position vis-à-vis the society in which they stood out. Astounding as these similarities were, whenever I stumbled upon them, I found no convincing clue to assemble them into a coherent picture, let alone explain them. Any essentialist approach, such as Eliade's, put me off. Finally, I decided to reduce the scale of an unassailable topic and to concentrate on a concrete and single object.

I chose one, which all these shamanic experts – north and south – shared; which they considered indispensable; which served a multitude of functions; which materialized immaterial concepts; which reflected or symbolized religious thought and ideas: a vessel of signification. This object, the ideal semiophore, was, quite obviously, the drum. The instrument's aura was amplified – apart from the fact that it radiated with meaning – because it was venerated by those who made and used it. The respect it received, equalled the respect shown to books in societies taking pride in their scriptures. In fact, the shaman's drum turned out to be, in those local cultures without writing, a worthy equivalent to the book.

So, I started to compare drums of shamanic use as physical artefacts, first in the Himalayas, later in areas of the classical North Asian tradition. The first surprising conclusion was: morphologically, all shamanic drums are of one and the same basic type. Wherever you look, from Lapland to Kamchatka, from the circumpolar regions down to the green Himalayan hills, from the Bheri to the Amur – the drum used by the shamanic experts is a frame drum with a wooden hoop, formed by a bent and overlapping lath; the frame is covered – in the great majority of cases – by a leather membrane stretched over one side, while a handle, fitted inside the hoop, is grasped from the other, open side; the membrane is beaten with a single, separate drumstick.

The second observation was: although all shamanic drums belong to one and the same class, no individual specimen is identical to any other. Each drum is a unique piece. To a certain degree, this may result from the circumstances and techniques used to make the instrument, which are the complete opposite of a modular way of production, invented and

perfected more than two thousand years ago in Ch'in China. But the individual shape of each shaman drum is also intentional – for drums are considered to be living organisms with their own individual birth, youth, adult life, ageing and death.

A single, elementary type on the one hand; and countless variation in the manufactured individual pieces on the other – within these poles unfolds the unlimited morphological wealth of the Asian shamanic drum.

As for the Himalayan region, two distinct types can be singled out, each of which spread out over its own area. The first and western type is found around the Dhaulāgiri and Annapurna ranges. Its main characteristics are: a frame covered with a membrane on one side only; a handle inside the hoop held through the uncovered open side; and a straight stick which beats the outer side of the membrane. This morphological group may be subdivided into several regional variations: a Dhaulāgiri variation can be found among the northern Magar, the Chantel, the inhabitants of the Bhuji Khola and among various Kāmi populations westward up to the Jajarkot region; an Annapurna variation is found among the Thakali, the Kāli Gandaki Magar and the Gurung; whilst a jungle variation is used by the Chepang of the Terai slopes. All these variants entertain close morphological similarities with the drums of Siberian and Mongolian shamans.

The second basic Himalayan type extends roughly from the Daraundi Khola in the West through the entire range of the middle hills eastward up to Darjeeling, covering the areas of the Ghale, the western, central and eastern Tamang, the Thami, the Sherpa, the various Rai groups and the Limbu. This type is morphologically characterized by a frame, covered with a membrane on each side and an outer handle rising out of the bottom of the hoop; the drumstick is usually bent. This eastern, basic type displays organological affinities with the Tibetan Buddhist *nga-chen* drum. Even though the two elementary types of Himalayan shamanic drums appear to be rather different, they are in fact members of a single morphological class.

The North Asian drums are all of one single basic type, cognates to the Dhaulāgiri and Annapurna variants, with a few exceptions on the south-western and north-eastern (polar) fringes. These exceptions, found in Manchuria and in Chukotka, differ from the basic type in that they have a handle attached to the outer rim of the hoop, a bit like the eastern Himalayan type.

Until very recently, no formal comparison of the two large areas of the Himalayas and northern Asia has been made, one reason being that the histories and personnel of ethnographic exploration are different; and another reason being that they seemed to be separated by a gap. This gap was marked by the huge deserts between them and the little known areas

of the northern Sino-Tibetan marches. In regard to the shamanic drum, I was able to fill in a few of these blanks by studying the membranophones of the Naxi in northern Yunnan and those of the Qiang in the Min Shan Mountains of northern Sichuan. I made a discovery among the Qiang: their shaman drum closely resembles the Chepang type in the south of Nepal and the Darkhat drum in the north of Mongolia. It is a missing link, uniting, as it were, the two separate blocks.

Since then I have treated the two areas as a single comparative universe. The question remained as to how to deal with the apparent morphological similarities registered over such a vast territory with so many different societies and such divergent histories. I decided to put formal criteria to the fore, applying the tools of transformational theory, as had been developed successfully in modern biology to study the metamorphoses of living organisms, and in anthropology to study myths. In other words, I introduced to a science of form (as D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson had called it) an object of material culture, taking each particular drum as a transformational manifestation of those around it. This led to the emergence of a huge web of interdependent pieces. And the lack of historical evidence to prove movements of diffusion could be counterbalanced: by installing a morphological navigation system. This enabled me to locate any given shamanic drum with considerable precision on the geographical and cultural map of the marked out universe of comparison.

As with drums, so with shamanism – or more correctly – shamanisms. For in the same way, as the material manifestations of this type of religious practice vary from place to place, so do the corresponding systems of belief. Not regulated by any fixed written dogma, they change from one place to another, from one local culture to the next. Each shaman's drum is a peephole into a localized shamanic universe, its most compact materialisation. On account of its manifold functions, the shaman's drum paves the way for many entries: to the ritual practices it accompanies; to the mythological chants for which it pounds metre and rhythm; to the dances, kinetic movements and ritual journeys which it animates; and to the world of ideas and the supernatural, which it depicts on its membranes. Comparing shamanic drums on a large scale is an invitation to similar comparisons between those numerous localized cultures and their non-unified religions, – bound together only by an invisible web of constant transformations.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please let me end my talk as I started it: with a word of reminiscence. Last September was a grim month for Nepal. In a single blow the country lost a score of its best people and some of its best allies. One of them was a friend.

   I met Harka Gurung through Fürer-Haimendorf, who, back in 1973, had convened a conference on Himalayan Anthropology at SOAS. Harka had come down from Edinburgh as if he had just walked down from the Lamjung hills. His stout presence impressed everyone. Over the years the places of our encounters changed: New York, Naxal, Zürich. In Naxal we had our best times together, in a stucco hut with no furniture in it. Fortunately, it had a fridge. In this house we would play our favourite game: daring ethnographic comparisons. The audacity of arguments was regularly stoked with the help of spirits stored in the fridge. Harka was always a few steps ahead. Our favourite topics were: the Pig Cultures of Nepal; the Green Religions of the Middle Hills; or the Bamboo Cultures of the East. In memory of you, and as you would have wanted it, Harka, let us continue with our comparative ethnography of the Himalayas.