

# International and national migrations from a village in Western Nepal: Changes and impact on local life

Olivia Aubriot

Today the scale of migratory phenomena in Nepal is such that migrations are part of Nepalese people's social landscape: every family has a relative who has migrated, either abroad temporarily or permanently to the Terai; a young hill man has a good chance of having to leave his native village at some point in his life, contrary to his ancestors who, for the most part, stayed there from birth to the end of their lives.

However, to fully grasp the extent of the migratory phenomena, precise quantitative data are needed. Here, based on such data collected at a fifteen-year interval in an irrigated village in Western Nepal, I analyse both how migratory phenomena have developed in this village, as well as the local impact these migrations have in the field of social organisation, farming and land tenure. The hamlet studied, Aslewacaur, is located in Gulmi, one of the most densely populated districts in the Nepalese hills (258 pers/km<sup>2</sup> in 2001) and one of the most affected by temporary labour migrations (ICIMOD *et al.* 2003): the study therefore reflects the strategic adaptation of the population when there is a marked imbalance in the carrying capacity of an area – the carrying capacity is a concept describing the interrelations between population, labour supply, natural resources and technology (Schroll 2001: 129).

## Change and scale of migrations

Over the period 1992-94 when I carried out my PhD fieldwork, the number of migrants leaving Aslewacaur had already reached a high and these were of two main types: temporary (ranging from 3 to 15-20 years) migrants working in India and permanent emigrants settling in the Terai (Aubriot 1997). Since then, a further rise in migratory phenomena can be observed.

### *Quantitative data*

Our findings regarding temporary migrations (Table 1) are based: firstly on individual household interviews about family composition held within large-scale surveys carried out in 1992 (for 1974 and 1992 data) and in 2008; secondly, on the list of irrigators for the main canal supplying 35 ha of rice fields,<sup>1</sup> but also on the land register dating from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when fields started to be transformed into paddy fields, on life stories and on various comments from villagers about the changes.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1974 is the first complete irrigator list from the canal chief's archives.

Table 1: **Figures for 'temporary' absentees from Aslewacaur (Gulmi) from detailed survey carried out in 1992 and 2008.**

	1974	1992	2008
Number of households in the survey sample [% of the total number of households in the hamlet]	35 [32%]	97 [66%]	82 [55%]
Number of people living in village (in the sample)	199	568	414
International labour migrants	11	77	80
Migrants to KTM (with family in village)		2	6
Including women			5
Number of students	0	7	23
Total population (of sample)	210	652	523
Estimation of total masculine workforce*	52	153	128
<b>% of houses affected by temporary migrations</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>67%</b>
Number of emigrants per household for households affected by migrations	1.2	1.3	1.55
<b>Globally, mean number of migrants per household</b>	<b>0,3</b>	<b>0,8</b>	<b>1,04</b>
<b>Population abroad</b>		<b>11,5%</b>	<b>15,3%</b>
<b>Masculine workforce as temporary migrant</b> (abroad and in KTM)	<b>21%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>63 %</b>
<b>Masculine workforce absent from village</b> (temporary migrants + students)	<b>21%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>78 %</b>

\* In Gulmi, according to census data, the masculine workforce (ranging from 15 to 59 years of age) was 47% of the total population in 1991 and 49% in 2001. The figure of 50% was taken for 1971.

Only the heads of households are mentioned in the irrigator lists, whereas surveys reveal that family compositions vary greatly from a single woman to multiple family households with five conjugal units. These detailed surveys thus inform the researcher about the resident population, temporary migrants and students. Information regarding emigration to the Terai is based mainly on the complete genealogy (back 8 generations) of the Brahman clan which makes up 85% of the hamlet, since this genealogy mentions migrants to the Terai and the organisation of lineage groups. It was completed with a series of interviews with a well-informed person from each lineage group, and with villagers settled in the Terai. The remaining 15% of the village population includes Brahmans from other clans, Newars, Magars and Kamis.

In spite of our surprising results—78% of the masculine workforce absent from the village on a temporary basis, and more than one third of households<sup>2</sup> having definitively migrated to the Terai within the last 40 years—we certify our data statistically representative of the migratory phenomena in the village since they are very precise and refer to a large sample: two thirds of the hamlet households in 1992 and half in 2008. One of the reasons for our seemingly exaggerated results is the fact that labour migration data are seldom presented as such in censuses or literature, but rather as part of the total population, which masks their significance.

In addition, the proportion of temporary migrants abroad is practically the same as in the district (56% of the masculine workforce in 1991, 62% in 2001,<sup>3</sup> 15% of the population). Given that there is an uneven distribution of temporary migrations from one region to the next (ICIMOD 2003: 63), comparisons need to be made using data from neighbouring districts, rather than national data. The village can be considered representative of the migratory phenomena for the low mountains of Western Nepal.

Nevertheless, the hamlet represents a particular case regarding its agricultural features since 90% of fields are irrigated (versus 13% in the district, Central Bureau of Statistics 2004: 14), most villagers are irrigators, and population density is far greater than elsewhere in the region (twice that of the district). Village figures also differ from district figures for demographic growth: while the district records an increase of 1.1% between 1991 and 2001, our data reveal a freeze in the number of households over the last 15 years, and even a slight decrease in the total population, since, according to our samples, the size of the household dropped from 6.8 to 6.4 over the same period. This decline in the number of households is not reflected in the irrigator list: on the contrary, the number of irrigators reflects an increase, with 109, 147 and 155 irrigators in 1974, 1992 and 2008 respectively.

This increase in the number of irrigators in Aslewacaur over the recent period is not due to a rise in the number of households, but to new irrigators settled in neighbouring hamlets or in the village. The reasons why these new irrigators were only recently accepted will be explained later. Nonetheless, it seems that the village has reached a maximum population capacity and has balanced its demography thanks to permanent migration, with the remaining population depending on the

---

<sup>2</sup> For a sample of 120 households still in the village, representing 225 men of the same generation, 70 nuclear families have left for the Terai.

<sup>3</sup> Calculated from the census data: masculine workforce is equal to 24.5% of the total enumerated population and absentees to 15% of the total enumerated population (*District demographic...* 2002).

remittances from labour migration to compensate for their small property (on average, 1/3 of a hectare of irrigated land).

Apart from emigrations to settle in the Terai, migrations can be divided into international labour migrations, migrations to Kathmandu and migrations to pursue studies. Since all these migrations present various characteristics or refer to a different dynamic, they are presented separately below.

#### *International labour migrations*

Though Aslewacaur's peasant population appears to have been settled and well established in this village for more than three centuries, migratory movements, however, are not new to them. Indeed, despite an intensification of the agricultural production system, not all inhabitants were able to satisfy their needs with their own agricultural production or labour force. Thus, for decades migrations have proved to be one way of relieving pressure on land. The phenomenon was bound to increase with the post-1950s demographic boom, as a strong correlation exists between temporary emigration and population pressure on land (Gurung 1989: 72-73).

For Sagant (1978: 22-25), demographic pressure and land saturation are not the causes of migratory movements, but merely aggravating factors. The main reason is British colonial rule needing manpower, in Northern India (*ibid.* 22-24) circa 1820. In Aslewacaur, the local surnames of some kinship groups, such as Barmeli and Lahure,<sup>4</sup> which had taken root by the end of the 19th century, reveal that these migrations took place during this period at the latest. Men went into exile for at least five years and sometimes up to twenty or thirty years. The first destinations were mainly Burma and Assam where civil jobs were available up to the Independence of India and the separatist movements of these two States.

From then on, migrants from Aslewacaur sought jobs in regions such as Gujarat, and in 1992 they were mainly to be found in Bombay and Delhi, cities that welcome this cheap and unqualified labour. In India, the Nepalese have the reputation of being trustworthy and are often employed as gatekeepers. However, few of them seem to have a gratifying job because, on returning to their village for festivals, they never dwell on the type of work they do, save a few of them, proud to say that they are a cook in a grand hotel in Delhi, or secretary at Delhi University or chauffeur for a Bombay industrialist. Very few men from Aslewacaur have ever enrolled in the army contrary to the district's Magar population. As

---

<sup>4</sup> The 'Barmeli' went to Burma; the 'Lahure' migrated, their nickname deriving from the first Nepalese migrants leaving for Lahore in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to join the army of the Sikh ruler (Seddon *et al.* 2001: xx).

Gaborieau (1978: 144-148) noted in the district of Tanahun, variations in the migratory rate depend on socio-economic status, land owning and caste hierarchy: among landowners, the migration rate was down while land ownership was up; among craftsmen, this depended on how well paid their job was. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Macfarlane (1976) or Schroll (2001), with the latter questioning the common idea that migrants are from the poorer layer of society, and showing that people owning hardly any land are not necessarily likely to migrate (*ibid.* 131). Adhikari (2001) also shows that most wealthier households hold off-farm jobs while most of the 20% poorer households stay in the village, working in other people's fields (*ibid.* 253-254).

Since Aslewacaur's population is made up mainly of one caste, the caste hierarchy does not come into play though other factors do. Thus, in 1992, the lineage group from the traditionally locally influential kinship group was the first to see its members migrate to the Terai (see below). In the village the remaining members of this lineage became bigger landowners (about 5,000 m<sup>2</sup> per irrigator on average versus 2,000 m<sup>2</sup> for other groups), moneylenders and were less affected by labour migration.<sup>5</sup> The temporary migration rate is thus certainly affected by land owning and the socio-economic level, possibly dependent on a factor I did not cover, namely the economy related to moneylenders' loans.

The main feature of labour migrations is the extent to which they have grown: from a few men at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 50% and 63% of the village's male workforce in 1992 and 2008 respectively. Save this increase, the main differences between these two dates are the destinations, modes of recruitment and feminization of migrations. Indeed, though most migrations are still towards India<sup>6</sup> (58%), recent migrations concern more distant destinations: Gulf countries, Korea, Malaysia and London (see also Seddon *et al.* 2001). These migrations call for the services of recruitment agencies in Kathmandu or Delhi, a passport (whereas an identity card is sufficient for India), and sometimes a rudimentary knowledge of a foreign language. In addition, the jobs are mostly physical. For women, emigration is a very recent phenomenon (2005-2006), with eight having already left unaccompanied for Israel or Japan, some as maids in private houses.

---

<sup>5</sup> In 2008, too few interviews were held with this lineage group to establish reliable statistics.

<sup>6</sup> Comparison with district data (93%, ICIMOD 2003) is difficult because of the lapse of time between the census and our survey (2001 and 2008), during which many changes may have taken place.

Though the rise in the labour migration rate is impressive, the most striking changes in these international migrations over the last fifteen years are their new destinations and their feminization.

*Permanent migrations to the Terai*

With the British withdrawal from India, the closure of Burma and the changes in migration flows in Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam in the mid-20th century, the Nepalese authorities had to propose solutions for temporary migrants: the colonisation of the Nepalese Terai (Sagant 1978: 25). Various measures were taken to encourage settlement in this plain: eradication of malaria, reduction in land tax, land reforms, construction of roads (Gurung 1989, Ojha 1983). Settlements rapidly took on a spontaneous character and the Terai population grew rapidly from the 1960s onwards. The main sector to attract migrants was agriculture, with the possibility of acquiring land while land pressure was high in the hills. Improved living conditions are also often mentioned among the advantages of living in the plain: easy access to drinking water, to numerous services (hospitals, markets, etc.) thanks to roads and the flat relief, and private schools boasting a better reputation.

The majority of emigrants from Aslewacaur retain their peasant status. They sell their land in the hills, buy another in the Terai and build a house. Before migrating, some had already invested in the Terai, either in farmland or in land close to Butwal or along the highway with a view to setting up house later. Some have also seized the opportunity to open a business in town (petrol station, hotel, shop). A detailed study according to kinship groups shows that the migration process is not quite the same for all lineages. It clearly emerges that members of the lineage that has wielded local power for generations migrated earlier and in bigger proportions than members of other lineages. This is probably due to their privileged relationship with the local administration, providing them with access to information about such opportunities, since landowning is an important factor of socio-economic differentiation. Interestingly, nobody from Aslewacaur's neighbouring village, populated by the Jogi Kunwar caste, has ever settled in the Terai. Migrants from Aslewacaur live in the districts of Kapilbastu, Rupandehi and Nawalparasi, the three Terai districts the most easily accessible from Aslewacaur. Generally speaking, Terai immigrants from the hills originate from neighbouring districts and in the aforementioned districts they represent 80% of the population (Gurung 1998: 29-30).

Most emigrants from Aslewacaur leave for the Terai with their nuclear family, yet since the 1990s some young women have also married men already settled in the Terai. A new phenomenon can also be observed: the

wives of temporary migrants go to live with their children in the Terai at a relative's house or they send their children to school there.

Another interesting fact is that migrants settled in the Terai – among those living in villages no further than 30-40 km apart - band together and set up a new place for lineage worship in one of the migrants' villages, where they gather once a year. They have thus severed the link with the hill village, where they return only very occasionally (once every 3-5 years, or never even). Nevertheless, they still receive news from the village, and hill village people also receive regular news from the migrants: migrants visiting Aslewacaur or villagers visiting their siblings in the Terai always exchange the latest news about villagers and Terai migrants.

Compared to the previous 20-year period, permanent emigration to the Terai from Aslewacaur has slightly waned these last 15 years: about 40 versus 25 households (from the genealogy representing 80% of villagers) have emigrated, hence an average of 2 and 1.6 departures per year for the 1970-1992 and 1992- 2008 periods respectively. Thus, despite high land pressure in the plain (330 pers/km<sup>2</sup>, 2001 census), then Terai's attraction is such that the emigration from Aslewacaur to the Terai has been non-stop.

International labour migration also affects people from the Terai—"in recent times, non-farm income [meaning remittances] is becoming considerably important in Terai" (Seddon *et al.* 2001: 124)—but to a lesser extent (3% of the population in the Terai districts bordering Gulmi, versus 15% in Gulmi- ICIMOD 2003). Nevertheless they are a frequent subject of discussion.

### *Migrations to Kathmandu*

Migrations to Kathmandu are a relatively recent phenomenon. In some cases, these migrations have some characteristics of labour migrations to India: men migrate alone and come back regularly to the village. They nevertheless have one distinguishing feature: the men often leave to study, and get a job either at the same time or later in accordance with their qualifications. On the other hand, other men migrate with their whole family: these migrations differ from migrations to the Terai as migrants seldom own their lodgings and are systematically employed in a non-agricultural job. These migrations are *a priori* permanent (especially as urban facilities and climate are highly appreciated), yet they may be on a temporary basis, since all families (bar one) still own some land in the village (these families are not included in Table 1). Finally, another type of migrant in Kathmandu is the one who waits to go abroad.

Kathmandu has recently seen a large influx of migrants due to the civil war: young people have fled from villages, families have taken refuge in

the capital, notably the richest landowner and moneylender whose land was cultivated by the Maoists (he came back with his family in 2007 to work his land). In 2008, there were five men and one girl living in Kathmandu as temporary migrants, as well as about ten students and six families. All these Aslewacaur emigrants reside in the same area of Kathmandu (*Kalo Pul*) with other families from the same Village Development Committee. They have formed an association that organises get-togethers to help them keep in touch, proposes loans to newcomers, and intends to help villagers who have stayed in the hills. As Seddon remarks in his comment (p.120) on Macfarlane's paper (2001), people of the hills "now clearly inhabit a space larger than that of the village", referring notably to people settled in town and to migrants abroad.

*Studies as a springboard towards temporary or permanent migration within Nepal*  
Many families, even migrant ones, finance their children's studies in Tansen, Butwal or Kathmandu, including their girls' education in the case of the wealthiest families. It is generally acknowledged that a high standard of education guarantees a good job. If in 1992, only members of the traditionally locally powerful lineage paid for their children's studies, today this is the case for all kinship groups. There is a general desire to provide children with a good standard of education in the hope that they will get a well-paid job in Nepal or abroad and thus support their parents in later life. Paying for these studies represents a future investment.

To sum up, the changes in temporary absenteeism from Aslewacaur over the last fifteen years are characterised, along with the extraordinary increase in their number, by the current diversification of migrations, including departure for study and national labour migration, migration to Kathmandu being either permanent or temporary.

### **Impact of temporary migrations on local social changes**

Thanks to the remittances of migrants, various technical changes, such as metal roofs, houses built of concrete, the telephone, television, plastic chairs, etc., are all visible when walking through a village and are a sign of modern housing. In addition, various significant social transformations, especially resulting from the absence of the male workforce, accompany these migratory phenomena.

#### *Family and village composition*

As migrants are mainly men, the sex ratio in the village is particularly uneven (5:1 among working people). This has two major consequences that impact the organisation of agricultural work (see below): first of all, there is a shortage of manpower, even in a densely populated area, and secondly in many houses, women live alone with children. Among the

nuclear and extended families (type *a* and *b* in Fig.1) of our sample, 44% are headed by women only (Table 2). Save four cases, temporary migrants regularly send their remittances as well as their latest news (recently by phone).

A question that often arises is the compatibility of multiple family households with the modern economy and especially the rise in the number of migrants: how long will migrants, who send remittances to their joint family, accept to share their earnings? At some point in time they may want to invest for their own benefit, to ask to 'be split' from their brothers and eventually parents, and to receive their part of the inheritance. Such a scenario, brought about by sibling rivalry, would introduce a trend towards more nuclear families. There is indeed a balance of forces within a joint family that tends both to break up the domestic group (tension among brothers and weakness of horizontal links) and to guarantee its cohesion (strength of vertical links) (Ramirez 1993: 62), the latter being expressed by Shrestha *et al.* (2001: 162): "in most extended families the parents are the glue that holds siblings together". Parry who worked in Kangra, North-West India, recalls that controversies about this subject go back to the 1950s (1979: 150-155). Having analysed the constraints and the different stages in the cycle of family development, he concludes that "outside employment and the extension of the cash economy have introduced an obvious and unambiguous measure of the contribution of each brother. This may have exacerbated the problem but these sorts of conflict are built into the structure of the joint household, even in a subsistence economy" (*ibid.* 177-178). Our data corroborate Parry's analysis, since it is not possible to detect any variation in the proportion of the different types of household between the 1974 and 1992 family compositions: migrations have not led to more nuclear families, meaning more divisions among multiple family households.

Interestingly enough, the difference between 1992 and 2008 is a reduction in the number of nuclear families and an increase in the number of extended families with one couple, with these results challenging preconceived ideas. This can be explained as follows: when brothers split up, their parents stay in Aslewacaur with one brother (type *b* or *c.1* in Fig.1), while others leave for the Terai with their nuclear family. Another hypothesis is that because of the many temporary migrations, members of families prefer to stay in a joint family rather than to split into nuclear families which would lead to more households being run only by one woman and the difficulties this involves (see below).

Figure1: Various types of households, with reference to the head of the household

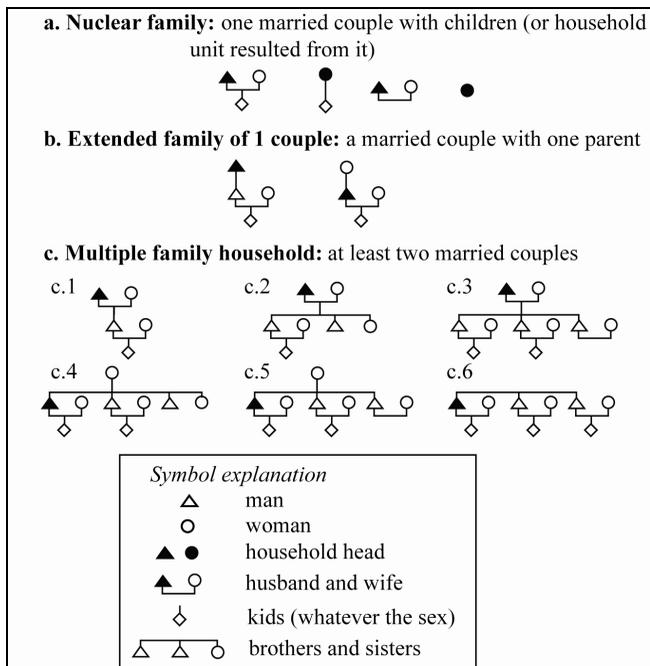


Table 2: Migration and type of household (sample of 97 and 82 households out of a total of 150 in 1992 and 2008 respectively)

	Nuclear family		Extended family		Multiple family household	
	1992	2008	1992	2008	1992	2008
Number of houses	54	31	15	21	28	29
<b>% of houses of this type</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>36%</b>
% of houses of the type where there are emigrants	57%	58%	13%	76%	79%	86%
Number of houses run only by women [and % from the type of house]	24 [44%]	14 [45%]	1 [6%]	9 [43%]	0 [0%]	2 [7%]

## Organisation of agricultural work

### Work paid in cash

The impact of temporary migrations is particularly reflected in the local economy, with cash as the main means of payment in exchanges and services since the 1970-80s.<sup>7</sup> One element revealing the importance of migrant income in the local economy is the common use of the Indian rupee – which it is theoretically forbidden to bring out of the Indian territory – and its exchange rate, frozen for many years and known to everyone. There is a noted increase in monetization in the four types of service: work requiring a specialist (blacksmith, tailor, goldsmith, potter, priest, etc.); ploughing which is religiously proscribed for Brahmins; work that can be done by each and every one; specifically masculine work.

Not having investigated the relationship between patron and specialist (case of priests and artisans) in 2008, I will not linger on this subject. It should be mentioned, however, that traditional *jajmani*-type relations characterised by a tacit agreement renewed yearly between the house-owner and the specialist, payment in grain, still existed in 1992. Nonetheless, some services were paid in cash.

For ploughing, which Brahmins are not allowed to do themselves, they call upon a man from another group. In 1992, eleven households still had their 'attached ploughman' (*hali*) who worked according to a long-term interdependent relationship, often based on a system of debt: ploughing is a way of reimbursing it. However, a very particular relationship existed between both families, preferential work versus protection, with the ploughman settling in the village's surrounding area. Apart from these eleven houses, others had to pay the ploughman in cash. Today, these attached ploughmen no longer exist because of the Maoist ban on this type of patronage relationship: all ploughing is done for cash only. Brahmin landowners still call upon men from other groups (blacksmiths, Magars (especially former *hali*) or Jogi Kunwars from the neighbouring hamlet) except for a few villagers who do not abide by the traditional religious ban and plough themselves. The changes affecting this type of work are associated with political changes, rather than temporary migrations. However, migrations provide villagers with the opportunity of obtaining ready cash.

General farm work is usually done through mutual aid (*parma*) between members of houses with similar needs. Households owning more land pay

---

<sup>7</sup> Hitchcock (cited by Adhikari 2001) had already mentioned an increase in monetisation in the Magar hills south of Pokhara in the 1960s, with cash being provided by army remittances and pensions, and interests from moneylending.

people from the village or from neighbouring hamlets<sup>8</sup>. Up until 25 years ago, this work was mostly done in exchange for payment in grain (wheat or rice) and it was not unusual for a credit-debit relationship between employer and worker to be transformed into a working relation with the aim of reimbursing the interest rates. With the development of market places and of migratory phenomena, debts are no longer paid in kind—by labour—but in cash. Moreover, workers prefer to negotiate their debt and supply of grain with local market traders rather than landowners, and to work in fields for cash rather than the reimbursement of their debt. Work in Aslewacaur paid in grain has become work paid in cash *and* grain paid in cash.

As for specifically male work (irrigation of plots, ploughing, threshing of paddy, bringing the cow to the bull, etc.), this is carried out by a few men, either from the village or from the neighbouring hamlets. Households run by women have to pay them using the remittances sent by their migrant husbands. This circulation of a cash income between ethnic groups and between migrants and non-migrants households has also been highlighted by Adhikari (2001) in Kaski district.

#### *Women as heads of households*

As the male workforce now works away from the village, many households (31%) are run by women, who are thus *de facto* temporarily heads of households. Nonetheless, men are not completely excluded from decisions to be made regarding farm issues: they give advice before leaving, they ask and even pay a brother, a cousin or a worker to help their wife with the men's work. Nevertheless, women on their own have to manage all the daily activities and decisions, which represents quite a burden as far as their subsistence and care of the young and the elderly are concerned (Macfarlane *et al.* 1990), not to mention the responsibility of making alone the right decision (Kaspar 2005: 65 & 119), or the tormenting experience of being physically separated from their husbands, and not knowing how long this separation will last (Shrestha *et al.* 2001: 156-158).

Since migrations are temporary, so is the status of women as heads of households, yet this is not even recognised by local society (see also Zwarteveen (1997) for the implication of the non-recognition of women as farmers). The only women mentioned in the irrigators list are widows, but even they do not irrigate themselves, as irrigation is still a male activity in this village. Even if women's autonomy in decision-making is growing because of their husbands' absence, especially regarding operational

---

<sup>8</sup> For a long time the Magars from Thulolumpek have been the workforce at the service of the wealthiest farmers in Aslewacaur, since farm production in this Magar village shows on average an annual four and half month food shortage (Panter-Brick *et al.* 1997: 190).

decisions in daily life, it is rare for women to call themselves heads of households.<sup>9</sup>

At village level, with decisions being taken mainly by men (regarding irrigation, common land or temple committees), many houses have no representative, and therefore a handful of men make decisions for the entire hamlet. Even if two women (out of 11 members) now sit on the irrigation committee—a rule imposed by funding agencies should the village apply for funding—and if they are well accepted by male members, they nevertheless rarely impose their point of view. Is this due to the fact they are Brahmins, as Kaspar observes in a village located further to the North, in Kaski district, that Dalit and Brahmin men practise gender discrimination at meetings (contrary to the Gurungs) and that these women doubt that their opinions are taken into account when decisions are taken (*ibid.*113)?

A relatively recent phenomenon (also noted by Kaspar 2005: 84-86), due to the better pay of husbands working in the Gulf countries, is that some women do not work in their own fields: they either lease the land (see below) or, with their husbands calling down the phone “don’t work too hard”, pay workers.

Another change in the gender dynamics can be seen from the dual-wage earning families (when husband and wife are migrants). Such a couple exists in Aslewacaur with the husband in Kathmandu, the wife in Israel and their children either at boarding school in Tansen or in the village with grand-parents. Although the wife is not the head of the household, she is identified as a wage earner, which means changing relationships within the household. As Yamanaka (2005: 354) says, “future research will be required to fully document and understand the shifting gender dynamics and family relations that have resulted in increasing women’s participation in international migration”.

#### *Feminization of tasks*

The uneven sex-ratio has led to a feminization of some tasks, notably since the 1980s concerning the maintenance and repairs of the main irrigation channel, which were purely masculine (water distribution still is). In 1992, some men had still not accepted women’s part in the tasks, as revealed by a remark made by one of them: “women have won, since they work henceforth on repairing the channel”. These men explain that repair work takes longer and is therefore more expensive, because women do not work as hard as men. Furthermore, they do not accept that the fine—imposed on households not doing their share of work—might amount to more than the cost of the female workforce: this excuse based on the

---

<sup>9</sup> This point is also observed by Kaspar (2005: 93), even though the title of her book does not suggest it.

women's contribution is a way of preventing any increase in the fine, which is, nonetheless, one way of forcing irrigators to contribute to channel repair work. For Baker (1997), who compares about forty irrigation networks in the Indian Himalayas, emigration and the possibility of non-farm employment are the main reasons for the decline in local authority and in the legitimacy of local rules, for mounting conflict and for dwindling joint participation in maintenance and repairs. Women's participation, the consequence of male labour migration, is indeed one of the changes irrigation systems have to face.

*Reduction of paddy cultivation during spring*

One of the consequences of the aforementioned shortage of labour is the reduction of the surface area cultivated with paddy during spring (April-July): the crop itself requires a certain amount of labour, and irrigating it is also labour consuming. Nonetheless, a more detailed study would have to be carried out in order to fully understand the increase in vegetable cultivation – which also calls for intense labour. Indeed, there has been a spectacular shift from very little cultivation of vegetables in the 1990s to plots cropping up next to each house, and even the sale of vegetables.

*Concentrating farming activities around the house*

The reduction of the area taken up by farming activities and its concentration around the house is a process that took place over the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the middle mountains of Nepal: in Aslewacaur, with the construction of irrigation canals that helped intensify the cropping pattern, villagers based in Aslewacaur stopped cropping fields that were more than 3-4 km away, and instead a member of the family went to settle near the fields; cows stopped being put out to graze and were permanently stalled (Aubriot 2004); with the rarefaction of trees and the closure of forests, farmers started to plant trees in their field, thus bringing the resource closer to home (Bruslé *et al.* 2009; Smadja 1995: 196-197). In many places, the restructuring of used space leads to the scattering of houses over the mountainside, a concentration of resources near houses (trees, water—with some tanks—cows, fields, etc.), while migrations send people further and further away (Smadja 2007).

In Aslewacaur, this ongoing process of concentrating farming activities around the house is being achieved via three phenomena. A first solution involves households that suffer from a shortage of labour: only fields near the house will be worked and land considered too far away (from 500 m to 3 km, according to families) will be rented out. A second solution is chosen by some men who have decided to stay on in the village: they crop vegetables in fields near their houses, and sell them; this constitutes an important value-added activity that is new to Aslewacaur, and thanks to road developments, the vegetables are despatched by truck to remote areas. A

third solution is to reduce the time needed to collect firewood and water, hence make life easier for women: gas stoves are now sometimes used for cooking and plastic water tanks have been set up near houses, which are automatically filled by a plastic pipe running from the collective water tap (thus making use of the difference in altitude).

The situation is certainly not the one described by Khanal *et al.* (2006) in Kaski district where half of irrigated fields have been abandoned – though the trend in Aslewacaur regarding the few rainfed fields seems to be towards abandoning them. The difference with the example studied by these authors might be that there land is situated on rather steep slopes, far from the house whereas in Aslewacaur land is situated near the house, hence it is a relatively easy area to work since it is flat (a high alluvial terrace), and rural density is much higher (x 2.5) in Gulmi than in Kaski. Furthermore, Aslewacaur does not match the description given by Marcfarlane (2001) again for Kaski district, which appears to be affected by a rural exodus and the pauperization of the village population. On the contrary, in Aslewacaur, a number of material improvements have been achieved, private initiatives can be observed and villagers are involved in the proper functioning of village institutions (both formal and informal, such as committees devoted to school, health post, common land, irrigation canal issues), in spite of the civil war which has induced a lack of enthusiasm for decision-making in collective affairs. Is this due to the fact that in Aslewacaur farmers are not dependent on pensions,<sup>10</sup> that they are relatively far from any town and that irrigation and roads offer the possibility of growing and selling cash crops? Most probably. Since migration differs in history and type between these two districts, its local impact is also quite distinct.

#### *Land tenure*

Concentrating farming activities near the house can be seen in the land lease process previously described, but also in the sale of slightly out-of-the-way land. For example, an area of 4 ha of rice fields situated 1 km upstream from the hamlet and which only belonged to the people of Aslewacaur, has now been entirely cultivated by or sold to the Kunwars, since their hamlet is closer. This leasing and selling of land is plainly presented by villagers as a consequence of the shortage of manpower due to men migrating. Among 57 households interviewed in 2008 about their land tenure, 20% lease out land compared to nearly none in 1992. And

---

<sup>10</sup> Adhikari (2001: 250) may have misinterpreted the impact of ‘out-earning’ in the village studied: it may not be access to outside earnings that reduces the Gurungs’ dependence on agriculture, but the type of job (army which offers pension). In Aslewacaur, migrants do not benefit from a pension scheme and are still dependent on agriculture even on returning from migration.

contrary to what one would expect, this does not generally concern farms managed by women alone, but farms where the head of the household is the only man present (the young generation having left). The importance of such a practice reflects the impact of international migration on the change in mentality regarding agriculture, the food supply and the monetization of exchanges: nowadays farmers agree to buy rice from the shop instead of producing it, to have fields cultivated by somebody else for cash or grain, which was inconceivable fifteen years ago.

However, small landholders rent land on lease and tenant farmers represent 24% of the households interviewed. Interestingly, among them 42% are run exclusively by women. A detailed economic study would have to be carried out if we are to understand the weight of factors such as the land owning area, current labour force, and amount of remittance in this leasing process.

Another indirect impact of permanent and temporary migrations is the purchase of land by neighbouring villagers. Initially, on construction of the irrigation canal (end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), people who were not Brahman could not acquire water rights. For example, Newar land located on the boundary of what became the irrigation network was not included and the Newars were not at first granted water rights. Some blacksmiths, who had land in the area were excluded, with old land records attesting to this (this exclusion does not figure in the collective memory). Irrigation has progressively evolved from elitist and exclusive rules to include other groups as water right holders. Nowadays, the informal rules on selling land, preferably within the lineage group or the clan, are less rigid. More Kunwar people (from 2 in 1992 to 9 in 2008), from the neighbouring hamlet, have bought irrigated land in Aslewacaur with their remittances. Thanks mostly to the Maoist movement, some Magars (former *hali*) and Kamis, settled in the hamlet, might now have access to rice fields (7 v 1 in 1992).

Following Adhikari's example regarding his study in a village in Kaski district (2001: 248), we can conclude that the creation of land-leasing and labour employment opportunities within the village help to sustain the livelihoods of marginal farmers and landless labourers.

## Conclusion

The amazing rate of national and international migrations from Aslewacaur is undoubtedly a consequence of demographic growth in a densely populated area, with the village being incapable of feeding its inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the migration rate has most probably increased

---

<sup>11</sup> In 1992, rice production covered less than 80% of village needs (Aubriot 2004: 41).

over the last 15 years because of the civil war which has caused young people to flee. The other changes in temporary migrations are the diversification of destinations (abroad and to Kathmandu), their feminization and the general desire to study. Permanent migrations to the Terai are still ongoing because of its very strong pull (easier life, schooling, hospitals) despite growing land pressure in the region.

On the whole, labour migration has resulted in the monetization of services and the decline and even death of traditional service jobs and relations, as well as a sex-ratio imbalance due to the ensuing labour shortage. This has led to the feminization of some tasks and responsibilities (one-third of houses are run by women only), the lease of land, especially parcels further away, and conversely, the purchase of land by farmers from neighbouring villages. The land tenure movement and resource management dynamics are part of a more general process dating back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely the concentration of farming activities around the house prompted by the labour shortage.

However, two findings are quite unexpected in this context where a village is affected by migratory phenomena: the first is related to the proportion of joint and nuclear families, the latter being lower in 2008 than in 1992 and previous years. The incredible percentage of male workers now absent may have led to preventing a split into nuclear families that would otherwise have been headed by women only. The second is that among farms taking out a lease on land, many are run by women, whereas this process of leasing land is quite recent (within the last 15 years) and is due, according to villagers, to the shortage of manpower. A more detailed study taking into account the cultivated land area, remittances and the workforce on the farm would have to be carried out in order to understand the choice between intensive or extensive agricultural work, between taking out a lease on land or leasing out land.

It remains to be seen whether the current trend towards international migrations follows the same pattern as previous Nepalese migrations, where migrants have invested their earnings in the farm, or whether it is linked to a social context favouring schooling and a reduction in the value of manual labour. According to this last hypothesis, one consequence of this could be young people's lack of interest in farming activities already observed in the plains of the Terai and in India. Will the densely populated Nepalese mountains be spared this tendency or will they follow the same process and in a few years' time be inhabited only by elderly farmers or by people with very little schooling? It is difficult to make any estimation at the moment since the young generation is living away from the village, in migration.

## References

- Adhikari, J. 2001. "Mobility and agrarian change in Central Nepal". *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 28 (2): 247-267.
- Aubriot, O. 1997. *Eau: miroir des tensions. Ethno-histoire d'un système d'irrigation dans les moyennes montagnes du Népal central*. Doctorat nouveau régime (Anthropologie), Université de Provence (Aix-Marseille1). 601 p.
- 2004. "Irrigation history in central Nepal: the interface between agriculture and technology". *Water Nepal* 11 (2): 19-43.
- Baker, M.J. 1997. "Common property resource theory and the kuhl irrigation systems of Himachal Pradesh, India". *Human Organization* 56 (2): 199-208.
- Bruslé, T., M. Fort and J. Smadja. 2009. "A bocage landscape, Masyam and the hamlet of Kolang". In *Reading Himalayan landscapes over time. Environmental perception, knowledge and practice in Nepal and Ladakh*, edited by J. Smadja, pp. 509-551. Puducherry: French Institute of Pondicherry.
- Central Bureau of Statistics. 2004. *National sample census of agriculture, Nepal, 2001/02. District summary*. Kathmandu, Nepal: His Majesty's Government, National Planning Commission Secretariat.
- District demographic profile of Nepal: A demographic data base for Nepal based on censuses 1981, 1991, 2001. 2002. Kathmandu Informal Sector Research and Study Centre.
- Gaborieau, M. 1978. "Les migrations temporaires à Samjur (Népal Central)". *L'Ethnographie* (77-78): 141-153.
- Gurung, H. 1989. *Regional patterns of migration in Nepal*. Honolulu, Hawaii East-West center (papers of the East-West population Institute, No 13, Sept. 1989).
- 1998. *Nepal social demography and expressions*. Kathmandu: New ERA.
- Hitchcock, J. 1966. *The Magars of Banyan hill*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- ICIMOD and CBS 2003. *Mapping Nepal Census Indicators 2001 and Trends*. Kathmandu: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development.
- Kaspar, H. 2005. "I am the Household Head now!". *Gender aspects of out-migration for labour in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Nepal Institute of Development Studies (NIDS).
- Khanal, N.R. and T. Watanabe. 2006. "Abandonment of agricultural land and its consequences. A case study in the Sikles area, Gandaki Basin, Nepal Himalaya". *Mountain Research and Development* 26 (1): 32-40.
- Macfarlane, A. 1976. *Resources and population: A study of the Gurungs of Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 2001. "Sliding down hill: some reflections on thirty years of change in a Himalayan village". *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 20-21: 105-110.
- Macfarlane, A. and I. Gurung. 1990. *Gurungs of Nepal: A guide to the Gurungs*. Kathmandu Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- Ojha, D.P. 1983. "History of land settlement in Nepal Terai". *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 11 (1): 21-44.
- Panther-Brick, C. and M. Eggerman. 1997. "Household responses to food shortages in Western Nepal". *Human Organization* 56 (2): 190-198.
- Parry, J.P. 1979. *Caste and kinship in Kangra*. London: Routledge.
- Ramirez, P. 1993. *Patrons et clients. Etude des relations politiques sur le site d'un ancien royaume indo-népalais, Argha (Népal central)*. Thèse de doctorat (Anthropologie), Université de Paris X.
- Sagant, P. 1978. "Du village vers la ville et la plantation". *L'Ethnographie* (77-78): 11-33.
- Schroll, M. 2001. "Off-farm employment and temporary migration in a Nepalese village". In *Aspects of migration and mobility in Nepal*, edited by S. von der Heide and T. Hoffmann, pp. 129-152. Kathmandu, Nepal: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- Seddon, D., J. Adhikari and G. Gurung eds. 2001. *The new Lahures: Foreign employment and remittance economy of Nepal*. Kathmandu Nepal Institute of Development Studies.
- Shrestha, N.R. and D. Conway. 2001. "The shadow life of migrant's wife". In *Aspects of migration and mobility in Nepal*, edited by S. von der Heide and T. Hoffmann, pp. 153-177. Kathmandu, Nepal: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- Smadja, J. 1995. "Sur une dégradation annoncée des milieux népalais : initiatives villageoises pour remplacer les ressources forestières". *Natures Sciences Sociétés* 3 (3): 190-206.
- 2007. "Introduction". In *International workshop on Territorial Changes and Territorial Restructurings in the Himalayas*. Villejuif.
- Yamanaka, K. 2005. "Changing family structures of Nepalese transmigrants in Japan: split-households and dual-wage earners". *Global Networks* 5 (4): 337-358.
- Zwarteveen, M.Z. 1997. "Water: from basic need to commodity: a discussion on gender and water rights in the context of irrigation". *World Development* 25 (8): 1335-1349.