# Time, Identity and Historical Change in the Hills of Nepal

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## Introduction

Change has been an omnipresent theme in Nepali cultural production since the 1950s and throughout the Panchayat era. The title of the first play written by the young Bhupi Sherchan in 1953/4 was *Paribartan*, 'The Change'. This was an early attempt, Michael Hutt tells us, 'to produce creative Nepali literature in a revolutionary mode ' (Hutt 2010: 26). In the same vein, the progressive songs produced by the cultural front of the then banned political parties repeatedly pushed a single argument: the necessity of change. The lyrics give elaborate descriptions of the prevailing injustice, exploitation and hardships suffered by people, and follow up this assessment with the promise of a bright future after change. However, as Ingemar Grandin puts it, 'change is also where progressive rhetoric comes to a full stop ' (Grandin 1996: 7). The future is alluded to in general or metaphorical terms, as if the quest for change were less about transformation strictly speaking than about its possibilities. What the vague but overwhelming notion of change expresses is the hope for change.

Well, change did happen, didn't it? To be sure, the transformation of a Hindu kingdom into a possibly Federal Democratic Republic is radical enough. In the span of eighteen years, between the popular upheaval of 1990 culminating in King Birendra's gift of a constitution to his subjects, and the proclamation of the Republic of Nepal by a Maoist-led Constituent Assembly in May 2008, the country went through ten years of a revolutionary insurrection and a total political transformation. It does not follow, however, that the social fabric of the society or the economic conditions of the country have been transformed in the same radical and obvious manner.

As a matter of fact, if we are to believe a recent study by Piers Blaikie, John Cameron and David Seddon, not much has changed over the last couple of decades. The three authors re-visited the rural households that

they had surveyed for their famous book *Nepal in Crisis,* published in 1980. Their conclusion is that 'The most important empirical conclusion about social change in rural western Nepal over the past 20 years is the degree of continuity' (Blaikie *et al.* 2002: 1267). And again, 'The data suggest that social, natural and produced capital have all remained more or less constant over 20 years.' Contrary to the pessimistic predictions of *Nepal in Crisis,* there has not been a slide into deepening poverty for the majority of the population, but on the other hand there has been hardly any significant development either. However, they also observe that, contrasting with this condition of stasis, 'human capital has shown a profound upheaval and a high degree of mobility and adaptability' (*ibid.*). Blaikie *et al.* are not the only observers to have stressed that resilience is a constant and enduring quality of Nepal's populations.

As we say in French: 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose' or 'the more things change, the more they stay the same'. The supposed wisdom of this adage rests on a logical confusion between two different orders of things, the two different levels of observation and experience: the multiplication of changes at one level may hide a structural continuity at another, or, the other way round, a feeling of continuity may persist in spite of structural transformations. And if change pops up so frequently in ordinary conversation, it is because it is part of our daily experience as the passage of time: it is common to all of us, but its identification depends on the point of view of the speaker. In other words, when people speak of change, they speak of themselves. What needs to be understood is the relationships between subjectivity and social change.

So how new is Naya Nepal? How are we, as social scientists, to assess the changes Nepal is going through? How should we include in our analysis the different scales of space and time involved in the changes as they are perceived? In this lecture I will begin by discussing the methodological difficulties there are in identifying ongoing changes. If objective, quantitative changes do exist, the inherently subjective dimension of the notion of change, and its eminently ideological character in a revolutionary period, merely multiply the points of view. However, what all these different points of view share is the perception of time. This became clear to me during my visits to the same area in western Nepal, and even to the same village, over the course of thirty years. Thus in the second half of this lecture, I will concentrate on the Magar community that I know best

with a view to exploring how the people and I have experienced change. I will describe the different time scales at work in their oral literature and daily practices, and show how these various understandings of time are part of the community's identity and provide the motivation for its actions. Finally I will analyse a particular event that took place in a village that was declared the capital of Maoism, and has been given a central part in the revolutionary epic of Prachanda. This event took place during a calendrical festival in the course of my last visit, in June 2010. To borrow a phrase from Sally Moore, I shall call it a 'diagnostic event ', insofar as it shows change in the making or history at work.

## I. Social change: a methodological conundrum

*'plus ça change...': rupture and continuity*
It would be presumptuous of me to try to review in a few words—or even many words for that matter—the theoretical and methodological problems attached to the study of change that have always been at the heart of history and sociology. I will confine myself to a few remarks concerning the development of my subject, anthropology, in relation to its two sister subjects, sociology and history. It is interesting that the theme of social change was very much in vogue in the social sciences in the 1960s before once more subsiding into obscurity. A recent study reveals that the number of articles published in international journals since the 1940s mentioning 'social change' in their titles reached a peak in the 1970s, before falling by half and then dwindling even further in the following two decades.[1] This drop in the number of publications reflects an evolution of social sciences about which it may be useful to speculate briefly.

    After the second world war, sociologists tried to understand the transition of their (mostly western) societies towards modernity and, following the great sociologists of the 19th century, several theories of social change were developed. These theories aimed at isolating one main cause or motor of all social changes: the material conditions of production, development of technology, mutation of values, class struggle etc; all changes would result from inner contradictions or, on the contrary,

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1    108 scientific papers in sociology identified in J-Stor claimed to study social change in
     their title in the 1970s, against only 72 and 57 in the next two decades, even though the
     total number of identified articles increased (Tremoulinas 2006: 4).

from external forces. Sociologists were even ambitious enough to make scientific predictions concerning the evolution of their society. The empirical complexity of social change and the evolution of sociology itself caused them gradually to abandon this ambition in the 1980s. Thereafter, the sociologists tried rather to build their case studies as paradigms for the study of change and ceased to look for general or scientific *theories* of social change.

In the domain of anthropology after the war, in spite of the fact that many countries were aspiring to their independence and were engaged in the process of nation building, most ethnographers (though not all) would conclude their monographs with some dutiful remarks on their host societies that were changing 'under the influence of modernity'. It was clear that for most anthropologists social change somehow fell into a residual category and was a mere addendum to their essentially synchronic studies: as if change was something that began only once they had departed from the field. All this is well known and has been rightly and sufficiently criticised. The subsequent conversion of anthropologists to history and the fact that they started to take into account the temporal dimension of the societies they studied rendered the category 'social change' obsolete. Change no longer stood apart from the study of the society but was inherently integrated into it: hence the gradual drop in publications claiming to study social change. But can history account for social change as it is happening?

The historians of the French revolution have taught us to distinguish between the event itself and the causes of that event: the event, says François Furet, is political and ideological while its causes are to be found in the economic, the social and the administrative structures of the society and operate on a different time scale (Furet 1978). The causes go much further back in time and develop gradually, almost unnoticed, while the event itself obeys different dynamics, such as a combination of partly random circumstances that precipitated the course of things. The event has a date and may look like a rupture in both the historical development of the country and the experience of the social agents, while the causes will be best understood as continuities. This is why thinking in terms of the dichotomies between rupture and continuity, or before and after, leads to frustrating dead ends if we want to explain or grasp the nature of social change. Change is necessarily *both* rupture and continuity.

This is not so much of a problem when dealing with the French revolution, which happened in a relatively distant past. It is up to the historians to organise the 'facts' at their disposal in a chronological order and gradually introduce the interwoven causes of the event so that the reader will be able to make sense of what happened. The different scales of time and space can be introduced one after the other in a discursive manner. I am not suggesting that the corpus of the historian is closed—the archives, no doubt, will keep generations of researchers busy—nor that she or he is dealing with a dead past. But if the past of the French revolution lives on, as it certainly does in French identity, for instance, then the historian will leave the anthropologist to study *how* it lives on. So, to answer the above question—whether History can account for changes as they occur—it is clear that change, understood as being both continuity and change, is almost contradictory to a chronological enchaînement of facts—that is the way that the standard view of History is defined. History is necessary to understand the diachronic transformation in the structure of a society and how the past has given rise to the present forms that the ethnographer observes, but it is not sufficient to understand change as it is happening.

Let me develop this point a little further. The 1990 Jan Andolan, the inception of the People's War six years later and the insurgents' successful overthrow of the monarchy in 2008 challenged the analysts who had to explain these historic events. Apart from retracing the relevant circumstances and the series of happenings that led to these major events, social scientists turned to historians and theoreticians of nationalism to identify the trends underlying the historical evolution of the country from a pre-modern society into a modern nation. In the light of works like those of Benedict Anderson, who has often been invoked by South Asianists, the Nepali revolution appears as a possible and coherent— although obviously not inevitable—development of the Panchayat years. I will mention only four of these trends: 1) the considerable efforts on the part of King Mahendra's government to promote literacy made it possible for a far larger portion of the population to claim their participation in the political process at a level beyond their local affairs; 2) the printed press generated a rational-critical discourse and the development of public meaning; 3) the decline of the belief that society was naturally organised around and under a monarch, 'who ruled under some form of cosmological divine dispensation', went hand in hand with the transition from a ritual

representation of power to a participatory mode whereby people could assert themselves; 4) the growing diasporas of Nepali workers all over the world intensified the imagination of the home nation through an ever more effective technology of communication and, we might add, although this would deserve further attention, also supported a patriotic feeling that would eventually develop into the aspiration for a republic. Let me conclude with Anderson's observation that 'even the most radical revolutionaries are always, to a certain extent, the heirs of the deposed regime' (Anderson 1996: 163).

*Change as an ideological value and as a subjective feeling*
If the Maoist victory only precipitated the fall of a weakened regime, then the notion of radical change that is so pervasive in public discourse is partly ideological. This does not mean that it is a lie, and that it tends to dissimulate an unchanging state of affairs—a bitter criticism levelled by people who find themselves facing the same difficult economic conditions as *before*. The recurrent reference to change—even if it takes the form of a complaint about the lack of it—consists rather in the idea that it is human action that caused it—or failed to cause it. Either way the order of things is questioned. Change does not just happen; it has to do with human agency and therefore with reflexivity. This is a first conclusion.

Change is also something that people feel. They feel that something is happening, that times are changing, and that things are going too fast or, on the contrary, not fast enough. Jean Chesneaux, a Marxist French historian specialising in contemporary China, suggested that 'this perception was only confused, quasi-imaginary at the time of the old millenarisms. But the meaning and the awareness of historical mutations become increasingly clear as history advances' (Chesneaux 1976: 134). For Chesneaux and also Benedict Anderson, who developed similar views a little later (Anderson 1983), this perception is informed by similar transformations that had taken place in the past or even, we may add now that communications are so fast, at the same time, in other parts of the world. The Nepali revolutionary movement that built on the model of the Chinese revolution while claiming solidarity with the Peruvian Shining Path provides a good illustration of this cumulative process. It partly accounts for the relative speed with which the Nepali Maoists achieved the overturn of the last Hindu monarchy in the world. The Russian writer Tchernichevski expressed the historical

accelaration of the most retarded countries in a very vivid manner when he compared History to a grandmother, who likes her youngest children best. Chesneaux observes that 'in the struggle for socialism, the conscious perception of a changing era becomes an active and collective factor of evolution' (ibid.).

Seen in this light, change is best defined as a value in the sense that Dumont gives to this term—unlike an abstract idea, a value is embedded in human action. In contemporary Nepal, this value is at the centre of a series of other values that reflect the mirror image of the old order of things: it is the people that are sovereign, not the king; the old society of privileges is now founded on equality; the subjects of the kingdom are being converted into citizens.

Let us recapitulate: if the study of how societies change remains a central concern of social sciences in general, 'social change' as a reified category has proved to be unproductive and has been gradually abandoned by sociology and anthropology. A critical review of some of the reasons why this might have been the case led us to clarify the concept of change as it is used in public discourse in Nepal today. Change then is best defined as a value at the center of the revolutionary ideology, and it involves human agency. It is also a general subjective feeling that depends on the speaker's perception of time or, more precisely, his or her being in time. In other words it is reflexive, and to this extent concerns individuals' identities.

*The Kham-Magar, a society at the periphery propelled to the center of the nation*
In order to go beyond these generalities we now need to explore a specific case. The Kham-Magar community seems particularly well suited to our purposes in the sense that thirty years ago it was practically invisible on the political map of the country—hardly anybody had ever heard of this population. When the residents of the southern bazaars such as Ghorahi or Tulsipur, in the west of the country, saw the Kham-Magar shepherds coming down with their flocks of goats and sheep from the Mahabharat range in winter, they would simply call them 'those who live in the high corner of the country'. But, as you know, it was this corner of Nepal that Prachanda made the heart of his guerrilla war, the Chingkang hills of his own epic, or its Yan'an, depending on whether the propaganda chose the point of departure of the Long March led by Mao in 1934 or its destination. In a few years villagers were propelled onto the front stage of national

politics and the media. They had to expand their perception of reality to different scales of time and space.

Like most localities in rural Nepal, especially in remote areas such as the high valleys of the districts of Rukum and Rolpa where their villages, their fourteen VDCs, are situated, the Kham-Magar used to be largely indifferent to national politics beyond the local advantages that they could secure from local politicians who were well connected with the government. In various articles and along with other authors such as Kiyoko Ogura (Ogura 2007, 2008), I traced the impact of the People's War on the Kham-Magar country, the early mobilisation for the Communists in the village of Thabang, and how gradually after the 1990 Jan Andolan, the revolutionaries won over the other localities with various degrees of success. In line with the reflections on change that I have just developed, I will now turn away from the historical chain of events that led to the current situation and try to understand what being historical means for the the Kham-Magar, and what this implies for their perception of themselves.

Local mythology is not irrelevant to the understanding of political and historical change. I will explore first what the oral, mostly ritual literature of this ethnic group, who speak a Tibeto-Burman language, tells us about the creation of the world and of human beings. In the same way as the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis, shapes the vision that the Judaeo-Christian world has of men and women and their capacity for action, the shamanic chants of the Kham-Magar shape their vision of the human condition. And in the same way that we (unless we are creationists) do not believe in this mythic narrative, the Kham-Magar do not literallly believe in theirs, but it never the less offers certain clues about what it is for them to be human in this world.

## II. Time and identity among the Kham-Magar

*The paradox of the human condition*
The creation of the world and human beings takes place on a massive time scale, which is not however without direction, since it is characterised rather by a general decline. The god Mahadev shaped five human forms from five different metals, the first one from gold, the most precious metal, and the fifth from iron, but none of these metallic races ever showed any sign of life. Parbati tried on her own, using soil and animal faeces. The

creature made from these decaying materials came to life and breathed. The narrative continues with the four ages of the Hindu world. These are characterised by a more specific moral decline. The men who were one hundred cubits tall grew shorter through the ages untill they reached their current size in the dark age in which we live. Their initial beatitude had given way to the injustice of the powerful, to corruption and oppression.

Indra, king of the sky, sent his daughter Somarani in marriage to his sister's son, her prescribed partner, into the human world that was shrouded in permanent darkness and in which people had to work hard to survive. The unfortunate girl was given a dowry, a box that she was not allowed to open on the way. Consumed by curiosity, Somarani disobeyed and let out nine suns and nine moons that burned everything on earth. Treating evil with evil, she committed eight more sacrilegious faults that each caused one star to disappear until only one sun and one moon were left in the firmament. Thereafter, the alternation of day and night made life possible on Earth.

As mentioned above, the cosmogonic myth develops in a time that is not without direction since it is vitiated by a decline in morality. But there is no prospect of salvation. Human beings are not given any finality other than their reproduction on earth. It also seems that perfection or wholeness are not for humans: the most precious creature does not move, and eternal light is not viable. In the same vein, we are going to learn that men should not want too much. Here is how the first village community was taught this fundamental ethical principle:

The offspring of a man multiplied and grew richer and richer. But what they gained in wealth, they lost in virtue. Not only would they boast of their opulence but they would also live in total autarchy: neither goods nor daughters had ever crossed the river and the hills marking their village territory. It is clear that our villagers were incestuous. The god Bhagwan taught them clan exogamy the hard way: when, disguised as a beggar, he was refused hospitality by the greedy villagers, he caused an earthquake that buried the whole village. He spared only an old infertile couple to whom he granted a son. As the boy grew older, he started to flirt with unknown girls whom he met at the crossroads. His girlfriends turned out to be witches who were quick to make him sick. This is the paradox of the human condition: the marriage that men must undertake in order to father offspring is also a commitment to misfortune and death.

*A rhythmic temporality*

We see that the mortal condition of the human beings is closely associated with the rule of exogamy. It fixes the limits within which men can try to have some control over their lives. It is in this perspective that we have to understand the Magar requirement for a man to marry the daughter of his mother's brother. There is no need to dwell on the implications of this formal type of marriage system here, except to note that this requirement entails the need for at least three participant groups, since you cannot give a woman to the group that has given you one. In the event that there are only three exchange groups, as is actually often the case among the Kham-Magar, we see that in the third generation a woman comes to marry and procreate into the lineage of her maternal grandmother. In theory, and sometimes in practice, part of the dowry in movable property (jewelry and copper jars) that passes from mother to daughter comes back to its starting point. Thus, the requirement to marry the daughter of the mother's brother gives a generational rhythm to the marriage system that goes in cycles. These cycles are not achieved at the same time but are linked to one another after a minimum of three generations—hence the notion of rhythm.

In the same way as the Magar try to keep control over the circulation of their women through the imposition of a certain rhythm on the rule of exogamy, they also try to control time and organise their activities through subtle arrangements combining economic, ritual and cosmological constraints. Farming and transhumance are punctuated by both the seasons and the ritual calendar. Men do not feel that they are the ultimate owners of the land they plough. They acknowledge their dependency on the piece of nature from which they extract their subsistence, and to which in return they pay their rent, so to speak, in the form of sacrifices. The major village festivals take place when everyone is at home in the autumn, prior to the annual move to the South, and after the shepherds have returned in the spring.

Thanks to these various rhythms that are in tune with one another, the year runs with the implacable regularity of a clock, but a clock whose parts are not mechanical parts but social conventions. Trying to find out in advance when exactly a village festival will take place is a frustrating experience that all ethnographers of pre-modern societies have to face; yet everyone concerned will be ready at the right time. A village festival does

not have a date, but happens as the result of social adjustments to the stars. This is also why ritual calendars vary from village to village as if each had its own interpretation of the cosmos. I hope to have shown that temporality is a central concern of the mythic establishment of humanity in the world, even if we are far from the universal time specified by the minute and the hour of modern city folks.

As Bourdieu remarked about the Kabyle farmers, in the same way as it is important not to want too much or to be too greedy, it is also advisable not to hurry. Here is how Alfred Gell develops Bourdieu's argument: '...if an event is not already an inevitable element in the working out of the preordained flow of socially expectable happenings, then there is no point in making special provisions to bring it about; indeed to do so borders on sacrilege, disrespect towards the established order of things ' (Gell 1998: 16). This remark is also relevant to the Magar villagers who like to mock those who, while in the village, behave as if they were in a city, hurrying things along or looking at their watches and not simply at the sun to know what time it is. The day of a farmer is, no doubt, as full as a Kathmanduite's day, but farmers do not act as if they were busy. But this is changing, hence the mockery.

The mythical narratives depict a world in which human beings act on the reproduction of their community and on the time that flows through the imposition of rhythms. Human existence has no moral purpose, but the myths develop an ethic of moderation without which human life is impossible on earth. The myths also depict a community that is reluctant to exchange with the outside world.

*A structural antagonism*
The mythical ideal of endogamy is actually achieved in the big villages that count up to 300 or more houses. Unlike in the myth, the rule of exogamy is respected but women circulate between local lineages *within* the same village, and until recently this was the case for up to 90% of marital unions. This is of course an important feature, because the group's control of marriage patterns ensures the transmission of its fundamental values and contributes to the preservation of its cultural particularities. The identity of the villagers, or more accurately their collective self—the situation does not require at this point any discursive or reflexive definition of their identity—is built on their belief in their autonomy, their sense of forming

an independent totality and even a world in itself, centred on the village.

At this point I would like to report that during my first visit to the Kham-Magar villages in the district of Rukum, thirty years ago, one question that some people asked the school teacher who accompanied me at the time was whether my seed was compatible with theirs. Many among the villagers had not been in contact with white people yet and wondered whether I was quite human like them. This ontological doubt, if I may so call it, is illustrative of a particular way in which a collective self can be formed in contrast to 'others': if we are human beings then you are not, since you are not from our community— something quite different, as we are going to see, from the process of defining one's differences in terms of a historical identity.

I said 'belief in their autonomy', because this autonomy is of course an illusion. The illusion is supported by the Kham-Magars' subsistence economy, their economic quasi-autarchy, their geographical isolation, their lack, until recently, of political participation at the national level, and so forth... but it remains an illusion nevertheless. One need only mention their dependence for cash on the international hashish business for the past half century, and on current remittances from migrant workers abroad or, in the cultural domain, a ritual language that is heavily influenced by Nepali and testifies to a long history of exchange with the dominant caste population. However, and this is the whole point, this illusion is less tenable the further these remote rural communities are involved in the wider world. As they multiply their relationships with other people, they compare themselves with them, compare their village customs with the urban lifestyle, in Nepal and far beyond, and thereby become aware of new possibilities.

The ideal of the autonomous community led by an ethic of moderation and organised within a rythmic temporality has not disappeared. It remains an ideal for the old generation and a fallback position for most villagers in case things should turn bad in their life or in the world—it is significant that, as far as I know, no villager has sold his land: sheep, yes, but not land. However, the younger generation aspires to look beyond their village and, to use the local expression, stop holding onto their cows' tails. The act of comparison that used to draw positive strength from a subjective antagonism against others and their values now leads instead to growing frustration. This frustration is clearly one of the main motivations behind the mobilisation of the youngsters in favour of the Maoist insurrection, a

reaction that has been amply demonstrated. However, what is less clear is how these young people see themselves in the current situation, where several scenarios of the future are available to them. Before examining a concrete situation that will help us to shed some light on this historical change, I will say a few more words on the subjective antagonism of the closed community and the emergence of the political claim of cultural difference.

*From subjective antagonism to political claim of difference*
Indeed, the antagonist approach denies, or at least reduces, the relationship with others to its simplest form, since these others are concieved as contrary to oneself. By contrast, considering oneself as different from other people requires one to establish more complex relationships with them. These complex relationships may lead people, at both individual and collective levels, to feel dominated by the image that more powerful people have of them. They may even come to integrate this image into their own definition of themselves and lose all self esteem. Even resistance to the image imposed by the dominant group or class traps the dominated group or class into a mirror game out of which it is difficult to escape, since the dominated subject ceases to be the point of view from which he or she looks at him or herself. These subtle and always changing mechanisms of alienation are the focus of a good part of our sociological and anthropological studies. Concerning Nepal, Tracy Pigg for example has shown convincingly how a set of prejudices about the backward and credulous peasants permeates the ideology of development and puts rural people in the paradoxical position of being the targets of projects of which they should be the agents (Pigg 1992). Sanskritization processes and attempts by the ethnic groups to reform their local customs can also be analysed from the perspective of this game of mirrors, in which dominated groups find themselves trapped into paradoxes, trying to assert their identities in terms of values to which they are opposed.

   In Nepal the political use of cultural identities and the emergence of ethnicity came into the open after the 1990 andolan, a topic that the book edited by David Gellner, Joanna Pfaff and John Whelpton started to explore (Gellner *et al* 1997). What makes ethnicity a specific form of identity is its relationship with the history of the nation and with nationalism. In an essay on 'Times and Identities', John Davis vividly expressed this special

relationship: 'Ethnic identity', he wrote, 'has to be encrusted with antiquity and scarred with repressions...it has to be expressed in terms of linear, culminatory history if it is to be a valid claim against the state' (Davis 1991: 18). In other words, in order to become a full member of the nation on an equal footing with the others, the minorities need to convert their original collective self and specific historicity into a historical ethnic identity. This does not go without saying.

## III. Historical change

*The festival in honour of the gods of the locality*
As long as the Thabangis saw that the recognition of their *jati* and, above all, of their village, was growing at the national and even international level, they had no reason to decline what was being offered to them as a symbolic reward for their commitment to the revolution. The urgency of the war, during which the population was constantly mobilised by a Party that protected inhabitants from State repression as much as it exposed them to it, may have made it difficult for them to express or envisage any sort of dissidence from the Maoist rulers. However, once the Party joined the government, priorities changed for both the leaders in Kathmandu and the villagers at the local level. A brief look at the celebration of the festival in honour of the gods of the localities in 2010 will serve to illustrate this change.

Kham-Magars consider this festival as an exemplary element of their cultural community, partly because it is a celebration of the gods of the locality and partly because it involves several days of colourful dancing, for which the whole population practises for up to one month in advance. It takes place in June, just before the monsoon rains upon which the September harvest depends. The ritual consists in the youngsters of each exogamous lineage spending the night at the top of Jaljala mountain, the abode of the god Braha, and bringing wildflowers and one pine tree back down to the village the following morning. One of the trees is planted at the centre of the dance ground where men and women will dance for several days until, the villagers say, the rain comes. The dances, however, should not start before the sacrifice of a ram is made to Bhume, the god of the soil, to secure the success of the future crops. It is said that in past times, before 'civilisation', an old man, not just an animal, was sacrificed to the god of the soil. The Maoists, in a further effort towards civilisation, banned the blood

Plate 1. **Young villagers, accompanied by Tailor-Musicians, returning from the hilltop site of the Braha temple with a tree-trunk to set up in the dance-ground during the Bhume festival. Photograph by Anne de Sales.**



Plate 2. **Santos Budha leading the Bhume dance (Thabang, June 2010). Photograph by Anne de Sales.**

sacrifice to Bhume in 1997, when the first People's Village Government was established in Thabang. Instead, they transformed the ritual into an occasion for the reverence of elderly people: in 2010, Santos Budha gave his blessing (*tika*) and some money to five old men before the assembled villagers.

A great deal could be said about this important festival that concerns the very foundation of the community on its ancestral site; the history of its clans and their occupation of the land; the relationships of the Magars with the two service castes, particularly the Damais (the Tailor-Musicians), whose role is central to the dancing; finally the relationship to the local gods, Braha, at the top of the mountain and Bhume at the bottom, since the vertical axis between their two shrines is the principle underlying this ritual of prosperity.

What should hold our attention here is that soon after the insurrection, the Maoist ban on blood sacrifices became an object of open contention. A few villagers started to complain that as a consequence of the reform the crops were not as abundant as in the past. One year, the women protested against the ban and bought two male goats with funds from their association and had them sacrificed to Bhume. The Party cadres opted for a more lenient attitude than during the insurrection and turned a blind eye to this development. Yet they refused to reconsider their general decision concerning the ban on blood sacrifices, on the grounds that it was a 'barbaric' custom, antithetical to a progressive society. In 2010, there was no attempt to bring a sacrificial animal, but many villagers complained that 'this festival without a sacrifice was like an animal without a head'; in other words, incomplete and meaningless. The fact that this view was expressed not only by women and elderly people but also by the president of the Youth Club suggests that it cannot be dismissed as a conservative wish to return to the status quo that had prevailed before the insurrection.

The 25 members of the Youth Club of which Mahesh is the president belong to a generation that was born in the 1980s, after the Kartik Operation. They were brought up in an environment characterised by constant harassment from the government for being communist. Several of them, such as Mahesh himself, took part in various actions as members of the Balsangathan, or children association (Zharkevitch 2009), and those who did not leave the village in order to pursue their studies in Dang were engaged in the local militia or helped as sentries, messengers, and volunteers

in military operations. The Youth Club provides what Mahesh likes to call a 'social service'. This means checking that the new rules are respected: keeping alcohol consumption and gambling under control (rather than banning them completely as was the case during the insurrection); dealing with day-to-day quarrels among villagers; checking that Blacksmiths and Tailor-Musicians are not subjected to prejudice, and that both teachers and children attend school; and keeping the village in order, especially during political and cultural programmes or elections, when large gatherings of people must be channelled through the village. The Youth Club therefore works in close collaboration with the Party that rules over the village.

However, during the 2010 festival, Mahesh openly expressed reservations about the leaders of the Party such as Santos Budha, who he said holds a 'narrow view' of how to achieve social change. He criticised the lack of flexibility of their methods that consist, he said, in getting rid of everything that belongs to the past. He himself, by contrast, sees this past identified as tradition as an important way for Kham-Magars in general and the villagers in particular to be 'recognised' for who they are, and also as a precious commodity for tourism. Mahesh's criticisms pull in two different directions: on the one hand, he wants the leaders in Kathmandu to remain closer to the spirit of revolution that animated them during the insurrection and that can only justify the death of the martyrs; and on the other hand he argues that they should be more open to other experiences likely to facilitate a better integration of the villagers at the national and international level while preserving their specificity as Kham-Magars. I am tempted to quote here what Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote of the Subaltern Studies project that 'can only situate itself theoretically at the juncture where we give up neither Marx nor "difference"'.[2] This is exactly what Mahesh is trying to do. The problem of course is how to do this.

The celebration of the Bhume festival in 2010 helps to correct the image that the elections gave of the Thabangis, who for half a century had voted in unison as a monolithic community in favour of the communists (de Sales, forthcoming). It is clear that fifty years of communist education, including fifteen years of Maoist propaganda, had not rendered the Thabangis incapable of thinking for themselves. It is also clear that their metaphysical recognition by the local god is as important for most of the villagers as

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2    Chakrabarty (2000: 71), quoted in Pouchepadass (2004).

their political recognition within the Nepali nation. If this need was swept under the carpet during the insurrection, it resurfaced soon after through the villagers' demand that their festival should not be devoid of meaning. A sense of moral outrage underlies their claims. Santos Budha, himself a shrewd politician, sensed this need at the celebration of Bhume Puja in 2010 when he concluded his speech with a quotation from an old communist of the early days, who used to say: 'Our Braha will protect us from those who would do us harm'.[3] However, if Santos' use of Braha is primarily instrumental and clearly aims to legitimise the New Rule, how are we to understand Mahesh's position?

*From alienation to hope*
The Nepalese revolutionaries demanded of their troops complete political and personal commitment to the cause, the result of an inner transformation, a kind of conversion that extracted the individual from a world that was understood as pre-historical. In this sense the individuals had to dispose of their differences. However, the difficulties in mobilising peasants and their will to involve ethnic populations led the Maoists to fan the resentment of these groups against the dominant classes and castes who had despised or even actively suppressed their cultural differences. This is how, in 2002, the Maoists established a Kham-Magar district that was supposed to be at the heart of the resurrection of the old medieval Magarant. This project was openly justified as a necessary historical transition in order to mobilise a population that had been hard hit by the insurgency.

Once culture acquires a political purpose, it becomes a new object of knowledge and challenges. It was a lived world and it becomes the culture in which people can act in new ways. And this is what we could see during Bhume puja. Santos and his party wanted to reform the local culture, a culture that was centred on the sacrifices to the local gods to whom the farmers pay tribute in return for human occupation of the site. As agents of social change they wanted to retain what was worthy of a 'civilised' culture and abandon what they saw as the bad or useless elements. How could Mahesh, who also considers himself to be an agent of social change, be in favour of a return to blood sacrifice, a practice that flies in the face of the dominant ethical imagination?

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3    In Nepali: 'hamro naramro sochneharubata hamilai hamro Brahale bachauncha'.

In the practice of killing the sacrificial animal lies the meaning of the custom, its vitality in the true sense, since it preserves the exchange between blood and prosperity on the basis of which the community has survived ever since it established itself on the site. Is it possible that Mahesh's rejection of the reformed ritual represents a refusal to act without being able to make sense of action?

This is his own capacity of action on the world that he stands for rather than a return to the bosom of tradition. He refuses to be just a puppet for tourists, even if he also has tourists in mind in his defence of the ancient ritual. In this sense, he did integrate the image that outsiders may have of him and his fellow villagers. However, rather than seeing him as the victim of a mechanism of alienation, I suggest that Mahesh draws from his local tradition the dynamic that allows him to project himself into the future, as a historical actor in a community open onto the world. To speak of a 'return' to the tradition would be inaccurate, if only because the conditions in which the sacrifice would be performed again, if it were to be restored, have changed for ever. The Bhume sacrifice will never be what it used to be before the ban, an uncontested practice. The ritual no longer goes without saying, and distance from custom entails some distance from oneself. And in this distance lies the capacity for action to transform the world.

What was at stake during the 2010 festival were representations of the future more than of the past. What makes the difference between demoralisation that leads individuals to flee the country on the one hand and the collective search for a solution to the crisis on the other hand is, to speak like Bourdieu, the possession of symbolic instruments. In other words, to impose the standards of one's own perception and to be perceived as one perceives oneself allows the group to keep control of the crisis and avoid reactionary resentment in response to the feeling of general degradation that haunts the countryside. The desire to be consistent should not be confused here with following tradition blindly, and the possession of symbolic instruments may not necessarily mean the politicisation of ethnic differences. As I have just said, it is misleading to think that tradition could repeat itself, while the politicisation of cultural differences tends to freeze these differences artificially.

The disputes that took place during the 2010 festival are the sign of the cultural production of a contested collective identity between class and ethnic group. This involves a transformation of self and, through

its projection into the future, the insertion of that self into history. The advocates of blood sacrifice, like its opponents, have become historical actors in the same way, and have become so knowingly. It is significant that this form of historical consciousness found its expression during a calendrical festival: the celebration of the ancestral site could not offer a better opportunity for the actors to confront different time scales and rhythms and adjust themselves accordingly. These constant adjustments are what creates the impression that time is passing, whereas, in fact, it is we who are changing.

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