

ENCOUNTER WITH THE RAUTE:
THE LAST HUNTING NOMADS OF NEPAL

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Kathmandu

Nepal has only recently been approached by anthropologists for any systematic study of the many and varied Nepalese people of different origins and backgrounds. It will take quite sometime before students of anthropology can begin to cover the whole country adequately.

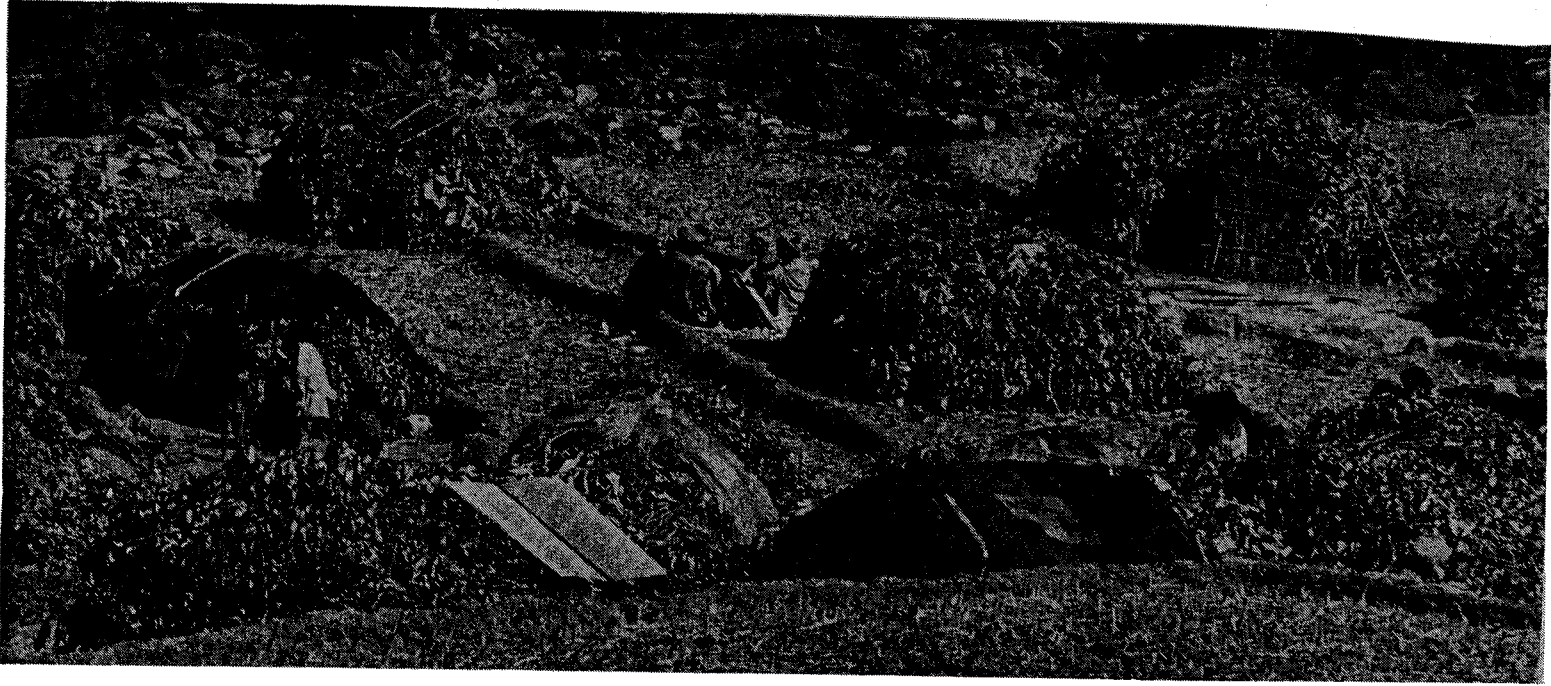
Although the size of Nepal is only a little over 54,000 sq. miles, the dramatic contrast of its landscape, altitude and climate, has attracted and retained waves of human migrations from different directions throughout the ages. Some of these groups were large and others, very small. They must have come into conflict, overlapped, and integrated over time. The stronger and more aggressive groups must have dominated and pushed the weaker and more timid ones into backwaters and isolated areas. Many of the weaker and more submissive groups either must have adopted the ways of the stronger ones or must have been forced into harsher and more marginal living areas of the land. These groups could not expand and flourish. There are, even today, half a dozen or so of these very small minority groups leading a very marginal and precarious existence in different parts of the country. Two such groups were known to lead a hunting, nomadic life, while the others are sedentary. The two hunting nomads were the *Kusunda* and *Raute*. But the few surviving Kusundas are reported to have settled in agriculture within the past four or five years. The only known existing hunting nomads, therefore, are the Raute. These Raute, although mentioned by the people in the areas where they are seen, have only recently figured in literature on Nepal, and not elsewhere in any authoritative manner. Even the national census has not recorded them, as yet.

To my knowledge, the first student of anthropology who met Raute, took photographs of them, and tape-recorded their voices, was Johan Reinhard, a research student from the University of Vienna. By a strange coincidence, Terrence Bech, a Fulbright Scholar studying music and musical instruments, also saw and photographed them on the same day at the same spot. Both of these scholars mentioned this to me personally at different times when we met in Kathmandu. Only in 1974 did Johan Reinhard publish his notes with photographs and maps in *Kailash* (Vol. II, Number 4, 1974).

I had only vague intentions to visit these people "sometime in the future" until I met the American anthropologist Dr. Carleton S. Coon in Kathmandu. Dr. Coon and his wife were in 1971 visiting their son, Carleton S. Coon Jr., then Counsellor with the US Embassy in Kathmandu. Dr. Coon, with his life-long interest and knowledge of hunting peoples around the world, had heard of the Raute and was seeking more information about them. He wanted to visit them in their camp personally, and we began to make plans of trekking together to the area. Unfortunately, the doctors advised him not to travel in an unpressurized aircraft anywhere higher than 7,500 ft. above sea level. This ruled out the possibility of his visiting the area as the terrain of the country required flying higher than was considered safe for him. But his guidance and encouragement made it possible for the author to use the opportunity to visit the Raute. With official permission from "Durgam Chetra Vikas Samiti" (Remote Areas Development Committee) of His Majesty's Government of Nepal, I was able to combine a study of the Raute with the observation of the trade cycles and routines of the people from the remote Himalayan region in their winter camps of the lower hills.

Mr. Lane Smith, an American Peace Corps Volunteer, shared with me his knowledge of the area and some descriptions of the people he had seen during his treks to Dailekh from Surkhet. He had been assigned as a High School teacher in Surkhet for the previous two years.

Thus equipped with some basic information, a few rolls of film, a camera and a taperecorder, I left Kathmandu on Saturday 29th January 1972 for Surkhet, which is about 300 air miles west of Kathmandu. The following two days of trekking over two steep hills, one over 7,000 ft. high, required considerable climbing up and down. On the second day the trail converged for a while with one which the Raute had used about ten weeks earlier to move their camp up the valley. So, in a way, I was on their trail from the 31st January onwards. In order to collect more up-to-date information I left the main trail for a day and climbed uphill to the District Headquarters of Dailekh. With whatever information I could find at the Headquarters, I continued on the 1st of February to follow the trail of the Raute. I knew I was closing in, because information and gossip about them by the villagers passing my way became more and more immediate and fresh instead of the vague, indirect or casual remarks about their look and location as on the previous day. On the 2nd February, the 5th day of my journey, I decided to camp in this village for two or three days and visit the Raute every day at the site. They would not let me stay anywhere near their own camp. This I knew from what I had heard about them so far and from what Dr. Coon, with his knowledge of hunting people all over the world, had guessed and suggested.



1. Raute campsite, February 1972.



2. Raute women and children.



3. Raute woman.



4. Raute men. The headman is on the left.

The local villagers confirmed this. In fact they were actually scared of the Raute and did not consider it safe to camp too close to them. These villagers believed many rumours about the Raute. The local primary school teacher had heard and sincerely believed that only a few weeks earlier they had enchanted four girls — two Thakuri, the local aristocracy, and two Brahman, the priestly caste — from nearby villages and had taken them to their camp to live as Raute forever afterwards. Most people in the village, and almost all I met and talked to on the way, believed that the Raute had very effective magical powers and spells which they always used in catching monkeys and would use on human beings, especially women, whenever they could be found alone or in small numbers.

The local people evidently dreaded them. They made remarks like “Raute are dirty and filthy people,” although in my own visits I did not find them any dirtier than those who said this.

“Raute are very curt and have absolutely no sense of humour.”

“They are very anti-social and never discuss anything with anyone.”

Some villagers told me that if a villager is reserved, quiet and lonely, they nicknamed him a “Raute.” These villagers told me that the Raute were not only reserved towards outsiders, but also among themselves. When the Raute leader decides to leave the old camp and move to the next, he does it all by himself and suddenly. The others have to follow him.

They usually burn their sheds when they leave the old camp to move into a new one. When the leader passes a cross-road, he leaves a dried twig pointing to the trail he wants his people to follow, and presses down it with a heavy stone so that it is not brushed aside by wind or animals.

“They are very straight forward and simple in dealing with the villagers.” Others said : “When they bring the wooden bowls to exchange with foodgrains they never bargain and never let anyone take advantage of them. They insist on the proper rate and force people to accept it. If they are ordered to make a wooden chest or some such thing, they always bring their object on the specified date and grow very angry if the client hesitates or tries to bargain.”

They usually ask for paddy against their wooden bowls. But for bigger objects like cots and beds they accept other things such as oil, chicken, goat, vegetables and any other grain. Among the vegetables they are very fond of pumpkins.

“They never stay in a village overnight, and always rush to their camp, no matter how late or how bad the weather. They never bring their children into the village either, nor do they ever beg for anything free of cost.”

Some villagers had heard different rumours. According to them the Raute captured small children, buried them under the earth in offering up to their forest gods. There were more people who believed vaguely that the Raute offered human sacrifice, although they did not know the specific manners and procedures of the actual sacrifice. Raute apparently never drank river water, but always dug a well beside a river or located a spring for their water supply, so that they could stay firm in their mind instead of being fluid like the running water, according to the rumours.

In addition to such speculative information, I picked up a more specific and recent report, namely that about ten weeks ago the Raute had quarreled among themselves and had split into two separate groups, after their last camp in the Parajul Khola. One group had headed straight west towards the Karnali river and the people in the villages had only vague ideas about their whereabouts. The other was going slightly northwest, and had reached the point in Chamgad Khola where I was pursuing them. Some people believed that the Raute respected Kusunda as their king, but others thought that the Raute were planning to go down to Surkhet Valley this year, and did not do so only because someone told them that there were Kusundas in Surkhet, which showed that Raute were afraid of Kusunda. So, I had at least this much information before actually seeing one of them.

Geethachaur, the last village before the Raute camp, was to be my base. After having made arrangements for the night, I was able to continue my pursuit the same day. Right at the end of the village there was a steep climb down about 100 yards into the river and then upstream along the river bank for about two miles before reaching the Raute camp.

I had to wade the same river back and forth five times and occasionally crawl acrobatically along big rock faces on the side of the river. After the last crossing of the river I had to climb over a small and gentle slope of a hill side. But before I was able to leave the river-bed, three Raute women were seen coming my direction. They stood still without moving, in the middle of the dry river bed, while I fumbled over my camera. Then they went off to one side and began climbing the hill very fast. I tried to take a few shots with a tele-lens. But in my haste the camera got stuck. Having lost sight of them, I continued on. No sooner had I grabbed my boots and camera and begun to move, before another group of four women emerged from over the small hill. They behaved the same way. But this time I pretended that I had not taken any notice of them, and casually lit a cigarette. Three of them continued to walk at a considerable distance from where I was, but still along the river valley. One of them, looking quite old, came closer and stopped only about 25 feet away. I then offered a cigarette which she took and smoked. While she was standing, I had a good look at her and was able to take a few photographs. Another group of three women passed as soon as

the second one was gone. They were also shy and did not come as close as the second group. The way they stopped in the middle of the trail, the movement of their heads and the way they trailed off the main track, walking fast up-hill, where there was no apparent trail, reminded me of wild game in the hill forest when they smell people. They must have the same type of built-in sensitivity and alertness, essential for their survival in the wilds.

After another few minutes, I left the river-bed and reached the top of the ridge, overlooking the cluster of their sheds. I stopped and was having a good look at their camp and the movement of the people in it, when one woman with a baby on her back began walking rapidly towards me. I waited for her. When she arrived puffing in front of me, only eight or ten feet away, I could see that she was frightened, and trembled. She looked pale, and her voice was hoarse and dry as she reported, in an unusually accented and all but unintelligible Nepali, that all the men had gone away. There were no men in the camp so would I please go away, was the first request in a feeble voice. I tried to make her relax by offering a cigarette, which she refused. By this time two other women had followed her, and others appeared ready to leave their camp. I sat down and invited her to do the same. She obeyed, still very reluctant and nervous. Within a few seconds there were more of them. But the other women did not look quite as nervous. They were also of various ages. I explained that I came to see them, their camp and their headman, if possible, but had no ulterior motives. It did not seem to have any visible effect upon them; they were as serious and reserved as before. The woman who came first with a baby on her back, said that she was the wife of their headman who had gone to hunt monkeys with the rest of the men.

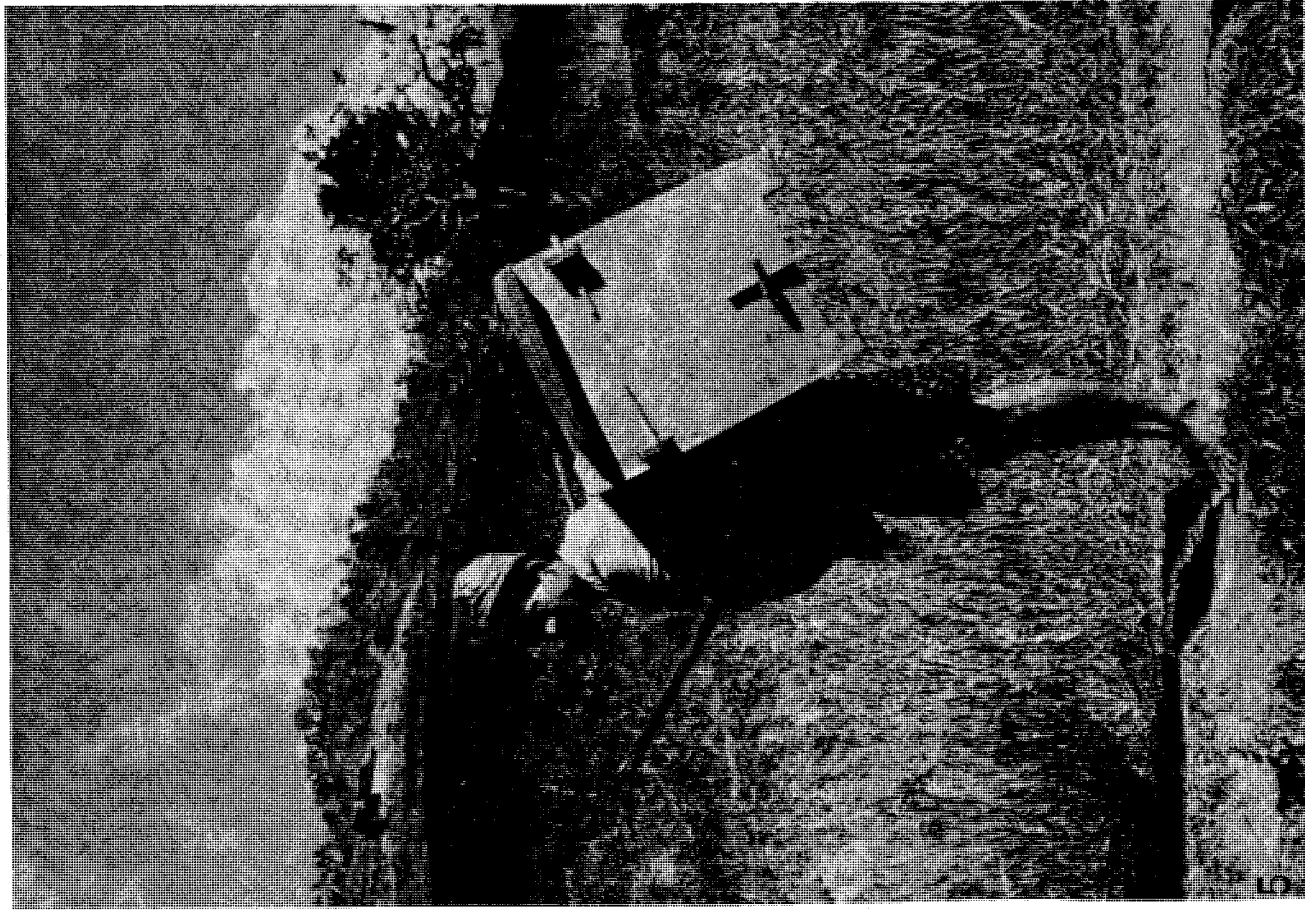
Gradually, however, with more cigarettes being lit and few gifts pushed, the atmosphere relaxed a little and conversation began. I could not believe myself when they said that the women I saw on the way up had time enough to turn around and warn them of my arrival. They must have an incredibly fast system or mechanism of warning for self protection. Since they were harmless and moved almost always without any weapon, they must naturally have self-defence mechanisms similar to those of the herbivores of the forest. But their skill and habit of catching monkeys seems to have caused some suspicion among the local villagers, leading to all the gossip and rumours about their being magic spellers, human sacrificers and so on. No other people in the area kill or eat monkeys. In fact, there are some people who have religious taboos against killing monkeys.

After a few minutes the headman emerged out of the forests and rushed quietly down the hill slope. The woman told me that they had sent for the headman from the monkey hunt. I still could not work out how the woman I had run into, while walking

over the river bed, could have had time enough to return quietly, unseen and alert every one in the camp about my movements; and then how the wife of the headman could whisper to someone in her own language and send for her husband from the expedition within such a short time as they had. This is obviously how the people must live in order to survive.

The headman was with one other male companion. The headman, more than his companion, looked just as pale and shaken as his wife when he greeted me with what appeared to be a very serious look. When he spoke, his lips were dry and his voice rather hoarse. The first thing he did was to mumble something in his own language and send all the women back to the camp. I looked embarrassed and felt very uneasy, having been proved by his actions that I was doing something wrong and inappropriate to talk to his wife and the other women. Eventually we sat down and relaxed a little, and smoked more cigarettes than any of us really needed or felt like. The truth was that I was no less nervous and uncertain about their reactions than they were about me. So both of us required some time before we could really feel at ease. I thought I had even more responsibilities than my Raute host, as I was handling a camera with two interchangeable lenses and a tape-recorder, which did not let me really relax and sit down in a casual conversation. But the host, being the headman of his people, was heavily burdened with the responsibility of their well-being and defense, and above all with his own reputation of being a competent headman. So he could not relax easily either. I was worried for different reasons. I had a different type of responsibility towards a different group of people, the academic community in this respect. I did not want to return empty-handed, and I was not certain as to how long they would let me stay and whether they would let me return to their camp again or not. So I did not want to take any chances with the camera and the tape-recorder, having gone as far as I had to find them.

At the end of about an hour and a half both the headman, Man Bahadur Shahi, and I were exhausted. He was not used to sitting down in any one place and talking to strangers for that length of time or discussing a lot of things which did not make any sense to him, or sometimes talking along the border of private and cherished parts of their lives. By the time I left him for the day we were ritual friends, and he promised that the next day he would come to the village with his wares for barter. I promised I would ensure a reasonable barter transaction for the supply of rice. He knew better than I that it was not easy to get rice in the village, because this was one of the food shortage areas this year. Once we said good bye to each other he turned round and walked very fast and straight into the camp. Disciplined as he was, he did not look back. I was told more than once by the local people that Raute never look back once they start moving. As the day was over, I collected my gadgets and leef.



5. Raute carrying wooden box to barter.



6. Raute with his wooden bowls for barter.

TABLE I. SWADESH 100 WORD LIST - R A U T E L A N G U A G E

Language family: *Tibeto-Burman*
 Place: *Daileikh District*
 Date: *February 1972*

Investigator: *Dor Bahadur Bista*
 Source: *Man Bahadur Sahi*
 Transcription: *broad phonetic*

1. na	I	51. susu/susi	breasts
2. nhəŋ	thou	52.	
3. na	we	53. bhuri <N>	liver
4.		54. tʃi	drink
5. he	that	55. dzaka	eat
6. nhəm?	who	56. kai	bite
7. haŋ	what	57. bighæ	see
8. nai	not	58. gunə	hear
9. m ^w əlyæ	all	59.	
10. buɔ	many	60. ʃiæ	sleep
11. da	one	61. si	die
12. nhi	two	62. ətʰö	kill
13. ghære	big	63. bowti	swim
14.		64. phaɾæi	fly
15. lha?	small	65. khwa	walk
16. keti <N>	woman	66.	
17. bæ	man	67. siæ	lie
18. mukəla	person	68. dzüye	sit
19. gap ⁻	fish	69. phuyɔ	stand
20. bua?	bird	70. na <N>	give
21. k ^w ui	dog	71. ʃi	say
22. ʃürö	louse	72. beɾ	sun
23. ʃiŋ	tree	73. beɾ	moon
24. biu <N>	seed	74.	
25. wa?	leaf	75. ti	water
26. džəra	root	76. səgyæ	rain
27. thakpa	bark	77.	
28. kiɾikyæ/kilikyæ	skin	78. buliæ	sand
29. ʃiæ ^ε ?	flesh	79.	
30. sui	blood	80. dewə?	cloud
31. ha·ɾəm	bone	81. dhuma	smoke
32. bosa	grease	82. muheɟi	fire
33. ənda <N>	egg	83. duɾi	ash
34. sikkəm	horn	84.	
35. mukyæ	tail	85. yuŋg	path
36. p ^w ɔx <N>	feather	86. kheɾə	mountain
37. kəpal <N>/ruŋ N	hair	87. tui	red
38. gərha	head	88. kəməiy	green
39. guna	ear	89. peɾho	yellow
40. mikö	eye	90. dhauria	white
41. ʃiŋa	nose	91. tokənyæ	black
42. mu	mouth	92.	
43. tʃhwa	tooth	93. ghəɔw	hot
44. mhwəm	tongue	94. dzuŋ	cold
45. lhəl	finger nail	95. bwab	full
46. bha	foot	96. nəu <N>	new
47. gaɾho	knee	97. ləgalo	good
48. akha	hand	98.	
49. gudəŋ	belly	99. sukəl <N>	dry
50. mənthu	neck	100. nəu <N>	name

[ə generally represents ə]

I had recorded some of the conversations in the tape and had taken a few close-up colour photographs of both men and women. I wished that the headman had not arrived so quickly, since then the women could have sat around a little longer, chatting a bit. Before the headman appeared they were gradually beginning to take me casually, and I was beginning to feel at home, as anywhere among children and women of hill villages in Nepal. The old lady, who was the mother of the headman's wife, told me that they were having a hard time getting food supplies. They could not kill as many monkeys as at other times. The hunt was spoiled if any person other than a Raute saw it. So I learned that it was not safe for a man to stay too long near the Raute camp. The women, however, became convinced that I meant no harm and had no other motives than sheer curiosity to see them and their way of life. This brought us a step closer, and we began to tell each other about our activities.

For some reason the headman's wife continued to be tense, although the other women were a little relaxed. So the burden of being a headman is heavy, not only for the man, but it must also be very heavy for his wife. The office must certainly have enough prestige and some advantage to make it worth their while.

The headman, Man Bahadur Shahi, told me the next day that he had to look after and maintain twelve people who lived in three separate huts. His own family of wife and children lived in the first hut, his wife's widowed mother and her unmarried youngest daughter in the second, and his own widowed mother, with one widowed and one unmarried sister lived in the third. The women did not make any wooden articles, and they did not go on monkey hunts. They, therefore, were an economic burden on men. All they did was to collect dried wood for fuel, husk rice in the camp, prepare meals and raise children. Women were necessarily dependent upon men for everything, including their living. The widowed women had to be supported by their sons, daughters, or in the absence of these, by the nearest male relatives.

This obviously must be a transitional phase. The women certainly at one time must have supported their living by collecting wild fruits and tubers, as in other hunting and food gathering societies. But the Raute have now become more *food bartering* than *food gathering* people. Even the hunting does not seem very important to them any more. The headman, when he came to my camp the following day, was calculating in terms of rice for every meal. He did not seem to rely too much on monkey hunt and meat supplies. This must have added to the burden of men, rendering them entirely responsible for the livelihood of men, women and children. This situation could not last for too long. The women will have to develop some kind of economic role. One should not speculate too much, but under the circumstances, and considering the conditions prevailing in the areas in which they move about, a number of things could develop with disastrous effects on their survival as an entity. Luckily,

their taboo against drinking river water and eating food cooked by the villagers, and against any kind of social intercourse with the villagers, is a good built-in preventive system against infectious diseases. But with an increasing bulk of factory-made goods being transported into the area as the road system expands, the demand for the Raute-made crude wooden ware is bound to decline. Then their dependence upon the settled economy will be even greater than now.

The Raute told me that they went as far as Deukhuri in the south, Piuthan in the east and Achham in the west. They never cross the lower Himalayan range to the north. This means that they never go higher than 5,000 ft. above sea level even during the summer, and not below 2,000 ft. during winter. Contrary to my expectations, I found them very inquisitive about a lot of things. They asked how far Kathmandu and many other places they had heard about, including America, were. By America they meant the land of the white people they had seen or run into. They could be Germans, French, British or even Chinese or Japanese.

On the next day Man Bahadur Shahi came to the village where I was staying. He brought five bowls made from redwood cedrela. I immediately despatched a man to make arrangements for paddy, roughly enough to fill those five bowls by measure. For this Man Bahadur Shahi had agreed to stay with me as long as he would have required to go round the village himself for his barter. While the rice was being bought, I had time to make some tape-recordings of his language (see table). The rice was being bought at a very high price, of course, and in addition I had also promised to leave the bowls free of cost with the suppliers of rice. I had used the Swadesh list of 100 words which were afterwards analysed with the help of Dr. Austin Hale, of Tribhuvan University. They have been compared with other languages spoken in the region.

It was very difficult to make the headman talk about anything other than what he wanted, and there were not very many topics which he was anxious to discuss himself. He would get irritated and become impatient every once in a few minutes and ask about the man whom I had sent to buy rice. The assurance of rice in return for his bowls was the only reason he agreed to let me corner him for about two hours, which was all the time I got. But he kept saying that he and I were different people, separated from the very beginning. He was a Raute (meaning forest people) and I was a "Duniya" (meaning a tame citizen under somebody's control). Finally he realized that I was not going to let him get away without giving *some* information about himself and his people.

"All right, then", he volunteered, "listen to our Shastra" (standard codes of behaviour or wise sayings). He repeated a few rhymes in Nepali. The rough translation is like this:

“Moon is beautiful in the sky
Man is beautiful when you love him
Salt is the best dressing (for food)

Buffalo came down from the hill
into the forest of Nepane
How can I preserve the wealth that I collected

Wheat is being harvested by Khaire Jethu
When can a strange trade meet again

The more of jarana rice you eat the better it tastes
It is true that we will meet in the village across the pass.

There is good rice in Dullu
But people go hungry in Dailekh
The love is not trivial,
So you should stop him.

There is cold water, but you did not drink.
Father gave birth but the fate did not allow.
The wheat was eaten by birds
I am suffering because of my fate.

The more I eat the hungrier I feel,
and I am physically soft, My mind, entangled in love.”

At the end he said : “Now you can go back. I have told you everything” I agreed and closed the note book and switched off the tape recorder. He already knew the use of a tape recorder. He asked me to play it back. When he listened to it carefully he agreed that it repeated correctly. But he insisted to have a look at the tiny man who must have been encased inside, repeating what he had said. I opened it up as much as I could and showed him the dry battery cells, which did not satisfy his curiosity. I had to apologize that I could not open it any further, and closed it. He was not happy.

He told me a few other things very reluctantly: they bury their dead; they consider it a sin to sow or cultivate anything; a sinner has to carry a very heavy stone over the back of his shoulder in the next life or be born as a horse; a meritorious, good man could be born as a king in the next life.

He also told me that the group, that was split up about 10 weeks ago and had gone to the lower valley, would join his group after the rainy season at some place near the Karnali river in the West. The reason the group split up was that one of the men

had committed adultery with the wife of another. That caused a serious row within the group and the headman had to divide the group for a few months, with the adulterer leading the splinter group.

Man Bahadur was not too interested in going beyond the Karnali river, because in the Doti area people had given him trouble. He thought the people and the government officials in Dailekh, Surkhet, Dang, Deukhuri, Sallyan, Jajarkot, Rukum and Rolpa and were very nice. They did not trouble him when he cut trees for his modest requirement.

By this time the rice for barter was arranged, so we had to end our session. He left as soon as he got his rice.

The next morning I visited the camp once more before leaving the area. I took the occasion to do a last count of the sheds in the camp. There were twenty-two in all. They were round or oval domelike structures of freshly cut branches, twigs and green leaves. They had low entrances on one side. They were arranged in groups of six or seven around an open area in the center of the group, all facing the center. There were three circles like this adjoining each other, so that the centers of the three circles opened one to the other. The sheds were approximately six feet in diameter at the bottom and only about four feet high, so adults could not stand upright even in the middle. The central courtyards were used by the children for play, by the women for husking rice or for other similar activities, and by the men for making wooden bowls or chests.

The men used a slightly curved iron adze with a wooden handle for making the bowls, and an iron axe for cutting trees. The women used metal pots for cooking.

Men wore a loin cloth, a narrow strip of material tucked at both ends in a string tied around their waist thus covering only a minimum of their private parts and they also had a large piece of cotton material over their shoulder not only covering their back and part of their front but also hung over their legs down to the knees. Invariably they wore a head cover, either a traditional Nepali cap or a piece of cloth wrapped like a turban.

Their women wore skirts of coloured cotton material, blouses, prepared by themselves and a lot of trinkets around their necks and ears. They also wore iron, brass, copper or glass bangles. The cotton materials they wear are bartered locally from the villagers.

Both men and women looked quite healthy and handsome, with well-built muscular bodies. Their average height is over five feet, which is the average for the region in which they live and travel. Their women were quite attractive.

It looks as though the Raute stand a fairly good chance of being integrated into the settled economy as soon as some major development projects gather larger number of different people in the area. This would, of course, mean the vanishing of the Raute as an entity. It is unlikely that their existing skill of making crude wooden bowls would continue to find a local market. As soon as the various factory made, attractive, colourful substitutes penetrate into the area, the Raute will find it hard to make a living unless they look for some other kind of jobs or skills. And that would certainly push them a step closer to dependence upon the settled economy, thereby exposing them to the possibility of marrying outside their group. As has happened with so many other tribal groups in Nepal, their women will be the first to marry outside. Looking at the Raute women, they will not have any difficulty in finding husbands outside. This is sad speculation, but I do not see any other possibilities under the present circumstances.

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