

CHARAKO BOLI

A brief note on the language of the birds in Nepal

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In the middle hills of Nepal, the common word for the song of the bird is *boli*. *chiribiri* is an onomatopoeic word used for the twittering of small birds (*chiribiri garnu*: to sing) like sparrows or swallows; for larger birds one would say *karāune*. In Nepal birdsongs are often associated with human feelings. They may also be interpreted by the farmer as a signal or a warning, and may be imitated by the hunter for capturing fowl [cf. CD. 15]. Birdsongs are often thought as narrating a story. Such is the case of the sad duet between the *nyauli* and *kuthurke* birds [cf. CD 16]¹:

nyauli chari
byauli
kuthurke chara
byaula
sabai chari
milijuli
aphnei gharma jaula...

The female bird *nyauli*
[is] the bride
the male bird *kuthurke*
[is] the bridegroom
all the birds
having assembled
let each of us go to their house!

¹ *nyauli* (Nep.): great Himalayan barbet, *Megalaima virens*. "The great Himalayan barbet sings in the month of *cait* (March-April) when people do not have much food to eat and when the stores are empty" (GBM). According to the dictionary of Nepali, *nyauli* has different meanings: a type of bird, lovers in popular songs (*lokh git*), a musical instrument: bagpipe (when one presses on a bagpipe, it emits the sound *nyaul*) (Nepali *brihat sabdakos*, Kathmandu, Royal Nepal Academy, 2040 BS/1982:755a), *kuthurke* (Nep.), blue throated barbet, *Megalaima asiatica*. A brightly coloured green bird with a red forehead and a blue throat.

In Kumon, the Hurkyas, a caste of bards, sing a repertoire called *nyauli* which recall the sadness of lovers who are separated (see F. Bernède : *Bards of the Himalayas, Nepal/India*, Le chant du monde CNR 274 1080, Compac disk).

Gyendra Bahadur Rana told me the following story concerning the *nyauli* and the *kuthurke*:

"A long time ago, when the gods lived on earth with the humans, a young girl left home without the permission of her parents. She did not accept her fate of being married without her consent. Her parents were very upset and cursed her; she could never go back to her mother's house. She died and was reborn as a *nyauli* and her lover became the *kuthurke* bird. In her bird's life she wanted to return to her mother's home, but the *kuthurke* bird told her to wait as she could only go if she was requested by her parents. This is the reason why, along the river, one can hear: "*nyauli, nyauli*", I am sad, I am sad!, and her lover answering: "*pakh-pakh-pakh*" Wait! wait! wait!"

The song of the *nyauli* is also associated with the weeding of maize. During the month of *asar* (May-June) a song which mentions the *nyauli* is accompanied with a rhythm produced by two *dhol*, ritual drums.

The Nepalese are fond of the "voice of the birds". The Newars have often kept birds as pets. They were put in a cage and one can remember the merchants in Asan tol, in Kathmandu, listening to bird songs in the early morning hours. The *torichari*, the Himalayan gold finch, *Carduelis spirooides* "the bird which eats mustard seeds" (*tori*), are kept in cages. They sing melodious songs in *kartik-munsir* (October-November). Sometimes, *battai*, quails, *Turnix sp.*, are also kept in cages above shop entrances.

The birdsongs are understood as a signal for farming activities: The *kaphalpakyo*, the Indian cuckoo, *Cuculus micropterus*, gives the signal for sowing maize. It is also called *hakupaku* and indicates that the small berries such as *aishalu* wild raspberries, or *matsaïno* (*Comaria nepalensis*) are ripe.

The *kagalkui*, crested serpent eagle, *Spilornis cheela*, calls the rain with its song "*supi-supi*".

The *phapar chara*, hoopoe, *Upupa epops*, signals that the buckwheat, *phapar* is ready to be harvested.

The *karang kurung*, crane, *Grus virgo*, signals that the pumpkins are ripe.

Other birds are always on alert and warn people in case of danger. Thus, *seto jureli*, the white-cheeked bulbul, *Pycnonotus leucogenys*, emits a "*té-té-té*" when a leopard approaches houses.

The *lampuchare*, the red-billed blue magpie, *Cissa erythrorhyncha*, cries and attacks leopards, jackals and cats.

The *cibe*, drongo, *Dicrurus sp.*, emits "*chibe yoki chibe yoki*" in the presence of leopards.

Hunting is practiced by farmers, and the most skilled attract fowl by imitating their song. The *chakura*, partridge female, *Alectoris chukar*, is called by imitating the song of the male "*tok-tok-tok*". The *luije*, the jungle fowl, *Gallus gallus*, is called with "*kokorik kokorik*"; the female answers "*kotkotkotkota*".

The *titra*, the black partridge, *Francolinus francolinus*, is called with "*ti tarititri*" or the call of the male, "*teng teng tarara*".

The *dokur*, the turtle dove, *Streptopelia orientalis*, is attracted by the song "*dokurkur kur*".

Reference:

Fleming R.L. Sr, R.L. Fleming Jr,

1976, *Birds of Nepal*, Kathmandu, (published by the authors).

