

## INTRODUCTION

BY MARIE LECOMTE-TILOUINE

The Himalayas are an inspiration for photographers. In a sense, they made this part of the world their own, for their means of representation is not counterbalanced by other artistic approaches, local or not. Photography is so closely linked to the region we study, that the sight of mountains undoubtedly recalls for most of us a full double page colour photograph on glossy paper, in the same manner as a Japanese landscape evokes an "estampe". However, our goal here was not to study Westerners' mental representations of a place through photography, but to illustrate the role played by photographs for scholars, even if it can also contribute to the former.

We planned this special issue to answer a few specific questions relative to the place of photography in the exercise of research within the specific context of the Himalayas. We tried to find answers to three major questions : 1) What are the uses of photography in the different fields of research represented in our area ?

2) How do researchers capture their object of study ?

3) And what do they try to show when publishing photos ? From the material we received, it appears that the primary role attached to photography is historical. Photography allows comparison, especially when the same object is taken at different times and diachronic sets of pictures appear as a favoured tool for those working at the scale of landscape (M. Fort, R. Kostka & V. Kaufmann and J. Smadja in this volume). Such an exercise may reveal surprises : if the rapid urbanisation of the Kathmandu Valley is noticeable without photographic comparison, the real extent of the phenomenon is not perceivable without it. In the same way, the rapidity of geomorphological changes, erosion as well as recolonization by flora and people, can only be shown with photographs. On the other hand, the perennality of slope-fields cultivation in some areas of Nepal, presented until now as a period of transition in the terracing process, is evidenced by the set of pictures compared by J. Smadja.

Photography also serves as testimony. An example of this is the picture of the Buddha of Bungamera Tol before its new environment was built (G. Béguin). The juxtaposition of photographs of Nepalese patrimonial buildings in different states of conservation is probably the best means to raise an urgent call in support of them, now that they have lost their traditional patrons (V. Bouillier). In the same way, a photograph showing three generations together acquires its own strength, inviting comparison, such as the Gâine family presented by M. Helffer. Photographs of lost techniques like urine divination (C. Jest/F. Meyer) and the water-clock (C. Jest/O. Aubriot) are extremely precious for our understanding of the historical background which explains the present situation. And there is no need to emphasize the interest of capturing political events such

as the repression of the Khampa rebellion by the Nepalese Army (A. Manzardo). Photos of today's techniques, rituals, monuments and landscapes have a useful, potentially historical dimension besides their present role of information (G. Krauskopff, G. Toffin, K. Buffetrille). Photographs may also be used to underline symbols, such as the friendship bridge between Nepal and China (L. Boulnois), the Mao fresco of Patan (Ph. Ramirez), or the grave of the founder of a new religion (H. Kreuzmann). Lastly, it can be used to palliate the limitation of scientific writings to express a feeling and show the people who made the stay possible (M. Lecomte-Tilouine).

Though dealt with only briefly in this volume, the internal use and representation of photography is of particular interest. It is examined in depth by P. Onta within the context of the Kathmandu Valley who shows how a photograph is carefully composed and intended to display an ideal representation of the self. In this sense, it reveals the society's ideology. It is thus that the Ranas, who had a special rule of succession among brothers and not from father to son, appear as a very extended family in their pictures along with their servants. Another expression of power is shown in 1950s photographs where Newars liked to be "immortalised" sitting on a bulldozer or in front of a car... In the same manner the holistic nature of Darling society was best revealed to the ethnographer as photographer when called in by a Chetri family to shoot their portrait. Indeed all the Kami and Sannyasi neighbours joined them for the picture without asking their consent and the initial family portrait ended up as the picture of a compact crowd of 60 persons... The tragic death of a photographer and the fate of his production illustrates in a very striking way the negative and magic connotations of photography for the Tibetan nomads of the 1940s (Liotard-Guibaut/Dollfus). In a society where people have few images of themselves, because the mirrors are small, dirty, often broken and even sometimes nonexistent in the house, portraits endow a crucial dimension. In the hills of Nepal, the verandas are real portrait galleries, where the soldiers with their uniforms and decorations stand with, women in saris, seated on Western-styled chairs, their faces turned to the ground, a disguised child on the lap. Inside the frame of these studio photos, new ones are inserted, which sometimes cover completely the poor grand-parents. They show the young ones in Hindi movie star postures, wearing sunglasses, caps and scarves, standing among flowers. Despite the changes of the staging, the young ones like their grand-parents never smile or show their teeth, even if it is quite difficult for most of them to stop themselves from doing so. This is the only strict rule when shot, and it may be not only aesthetic. Indeed, the identification of the person with his photographic portrait is deep and allows for example the village Brahmins to place the frontal *tikā* mark on the King and Queen of Nepal through their photograph or a Kami shaman to sacrifice a chicken to his Master via the

same vector. Identification may be even deeper, as when the Ladakhis destroy the photographs of a child after his or her death or when one is told in Nepal that when someone dies, his eyelids close in his photographs. But the question is more complex than these examples show because it seems that a photograph cannot for instance be employed as a substitute for the person in the context of witchcraft in the same way as hair or nails. But on the other hand, the Ladakhi medium (*lha-mo*) may keep the picture of someone to protect him in his absence.

The spectrum through which photography may be analysed is thus extremely wide and we hope that this issue will encourage new reflections in all the directions outlined here.