

THE HAT AND THE HUNT

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During the rainy season when the Tharu work hard in their rice fields, one can see the tillers standing on the harrow, ploughing or weeding the fields, large round bamboo hats on their heads. This hat is in fact an umbrella, not only used at working times, but for instance, during night rituals, when rain pours down on the participants. The *chatri* is made of bamboo and *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) leaves by men, during the dry, hot months preceding the rains. There is a small hole in the ground floor of the long house's entrance hall which is

four to five meters long and no more than half a meter wide, on wooden poles in the recently cut rice fields. Squatting on the ground, he can scare the quails by the musical move of the bundle of straw. Running more than flying, the birds are then easily trapped under the net which is folded down by pulling a string. This game (for the quail as well as the hunters) is highly prized by the Tharu - an unusual hunt on dry fields, like that of rats and mice, a hunt with a net, a hunt which doesn't make the blood flow. The Tharu, as clearers of the Terai forest, savannah and swamps, have been wrongly described as big game hunters. But trapping birds and other small game on fields (or the wild boars along the edge of the forest) is much more significant of their lifestyle in the Terai which combines rice cultivation, fishing (collecting small fish and shells in rice fields is



used to shape the hat's top. Bamboo strips are tied together in a star pattern, then the interior and exterior discs are tightly woven with additional strips and the leaves are introduced before the two discs are firmly tied. These hats are quite large, at least one meter, and never as small as those commonly seen in China or Southeast Asia. For the Tharu farmers of the Dang Valley, the bamboo hat along with the wooden sandals are the primary male attributes of the rainy season, worn to fight the mud and the deluge.

I have been puzzled by the reappearance of this umbrella-hat in the dry winter season, in December, when the agricultural work is over. Then, in the morning mist which blurs the landscape, lonely figures bent over the ground, handling and shaking a bundle of straw, are hidden under their large headgear. December is the time of the very pleasant quail hunting; the game invades the dry fields. The hunter fixes a net (*batyar*),

common) and trapping game on fallow lands.

This peculiar quail hunt is also reminiscent of the aristocratic practice of quail fights which were so common in the Nawabi culture of Lucknow, a cultural pole in the past closer to Dang than to Kathmandu. The French adventurer, Claude Martin, who lived in Lucknow at the end of the eighteenth century and ran the military establishment of the Nawabs, was as fond of animal fighting as his master, Asaf Ud Daula. In Martin's baroque palace, one can still see a drawing showing such a fight. Still today in Dang, it is rarely for themselves that the Tharu catch quails, but rather to sell to rich landlords for food consumption or fight training. It is also probably as game suppliers to the aristocracy that the Tharu carry on this rewarding hunt. Old people remember the time when the king of Salyan used to come to the valley for big game hunting and when villagers had to provide, free of charge, all the necessities

for the *sawari*, the suite; fine quails had to be served.

But why do the Tharu wear this umbrella-hat when hunting, when they don't use it for any other purpose at this time of year and the only climatic problem is the morning mist? Whatever the answer may be, it appears to me as one more sign of an ancient link between rice cultivation and fishing and trapping, characteristic of a forest-clearer population from the marshlands. These economic activities set up fallow lands as a mediate and central environmental category. Wet rice cultivation and collecting practices therefore appear linked under the same technical and symbolic system. Today this umbrella-hat, which is quite different in shape from the Indo-Chinese one, does not seem very common in South Asia. In southern Nepal, it is used by the Tharu of the Dang and Chitwan valleys and the Tharu emigrants in the western Nepalese and the Indian Terai. The same kind of large bamboo hat is also worn in eastern India, especially in Bengal and the Assam lowlands, perhaps delineating a north-eastern Indian area of distribution, linked to a way of life which reveals, through the importance of fallow lands, a specific relation to nature.