

FILM REVIEWS

SIMAREKHA, A HISTORICAL BORDERLINE ?

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At the end of last winter, walls in Kathmandu were covered with posters advertising a historical film, *Simarekhā*, "The Borderline". "You studied History but you have never seen it", the posters claimed along with the pun, "*Simarekhā* has drawn a historical borderline". By promising the true History, the advert denounces the falsification that, it claims, has been foisted on the Nepalese public until now. It also underplays the fact that this is a cinematographic fiction: what you will see is true, contrary to what you read or

studied at school, which was not.

Dominant culture or received ideas do not need to be justified. They easily occupy the whole field of common knowledge. Individual interpretations may depart from the main line without being questioned by the majority until there is a visible change. The reasons for this change will not be analysed here. I shall focus rather on one example of the manifestation of change, of its visibility.

Simarekhā was billed as the first Nepali historical film. Even though there might have been other examples¹, this is the first one to attempt a revised interpretation of a historical event and to be so successful and widely acclaimed. It ran for several months and filled cinema halls to capacity. The director, Kishor Rana Magar, succeeded in dealing with a "serious" topic (to take up a classification used in video rental shops) without discouraging the audience. Films in video rental shops are divided into two main categories in order to help undecided customers for whom the third Art is still rather new: "Love Story" and "Action". A third category, designated by the slightly depreciative sobriquet of "slow type", comprises psychological dramas, usually of Western provenance. Two other categories have emerged recently: "Political (*rājnitik*)² and "Historical" (*aitihāsik*).

Among the various posters advertising *Simarekhā*, several show a confrontation between two rows of men, or as on the poster shown here, only two men, their respective chiefs. Dressed in mediaeval outfits, the Thakurs are in black, while the villagers facing them wear white clothing, similar to what rural Gurungs or Magars wear nowadays: a kilt with a wide

belt, a cloth crossed in front, forming a large pocket in the back, a turban wound around the head. The former ride horses, the latter are on foot drawing bows. The opposition is, so to speak, colour coded: there was no "unification" of Nepal, but a victory of the "baddies", the black ones, the Thakurs, over the "goodies", the white ones, the indigenous people. The face of a woman, in close up, wearing jewellery and a scarf that identify her as a Magar or a Gurung, hovers near the centre of the poster as if to reassure the prospective

viewer that the story will contain element of romance.

The inverted commas that frame the concept of “unification” subsume the present claim by indigenous populations that the history of their country needs to be revised. The film goes against stereotypes that were transmitted within the dominant culture and reveals the point of view of the populations that consider themselves not unified under the banner of a unanimously accepted king but rather defeated by violence and stratagem.

The analysis of this film needs to trace back the chain of various works that preceded it. The event that is specifically related here is the sixteenth-century conquest of the Gorkha kingdom ruled by a Magar king, by Drabya Shah, the ancestor of the “father of Nepal”, Prithvi Narayan Shah. We are dealing here with one of “the foundational historical narratives of the Nepali Nation”, to take up an expression used by Pratyoush Onta in his study of the creation of the Bir History of the country³.

The conquest of Gorkha was first told by Suryabikram Gyawali who started his series of biographies of the great men of Nepal with Drabya Shah’s biography in 1933. Since then the story has been told in different forms. Only some of them will be considered in the present article. I shall begin by looking at a chapter in a text book for elementary schools before studying a document published by the Yogi Naraharinath, that relates the same event. The two texts present two different visions of kingship. A play by Bhimnidhi Tiwari, *Silānyās*, “The Foundation Stone”, develops a certain conception of the Matwalis and of the Tagadharis, the two basic components of the Nepalese nation. This controversial work led to a novel, *Simarekhā*, by Naru Thapa Magar, and eventually to the film. This historical film itself has a history that brings to light variations in the relationships between political and religious powers.

An image: the winner of the race.

In the same way as Saint Louis is represented dispensing justice under an oak tree, or Joan of Arc is shown expelling English soldiers from France, Nepalese schoolchildren learn that Drabya Shah conquered Gorkha by being the strongest runner in a foot race. The third chapter of a school book, *Hāmro Nepālī Kitāb*, is entitled: “He who won a race became king”⁴.

We learn in this chapter that Nepal was organised in several small states among which the Lamjung kingdom stood out as the most powerful under the rule of the Thakur king Yasobramha Shah. Of his two sons only the elder, in accordance with the rule of primogeniture, would inherit his kingdom. The second son, however, happened to be particularly gifted, both strong and clever. He showed no personal ambition and was led the modest life of a cowherd, devoted to the care of his parents’ livestock, when the prediction of a yogi that he would be a great king determined the course of his life. Since Lamjung would go to the elder brother, a new kingdom was needed for the younger.

And the small neighbouring kingdoms, ruled by the Ghale, offered the most natural target.

The Ghale used to elect their king through competitions. The winner of the final race acceded to the throne for one year. The auspicious day for this election is said to have been Tika day, during the Dasai festival⁵.

Drabya Shah declared his intention of taking part in the race in Liglik, a neighbouring Ghale kingdom. The villagers, first divided about their attitude towards the stranger, ended up accepting him as a competitor. And Drabya Shah, by winning the race, won the kingdom in 1559. We are told that this was the beginning of an irresistible ascent since at the same time he subdued Gorkha, the point of departure for his illustrious descendant’s conquest of Greater Nepal.

As his elder brother, heir of Lamjung, wanted to add Gorkha to his kingdom, Drabya Shah claimed his right to rule over his own conquest. According to the legend, the mother of the two enemy brothers brought them together on the bank of the Chepe river that runs between the two countries. She poured a few drops of her milk in the water and begged her sons never to go against the milk that had nourished them by crossing the river.

The account presents the ancestor of the ruling dynasty as someone who is not motivated by personal or political ambition. He wishes only to follow the destiny that has been foretold and in this way prescribed for him by a religious figure. By trying his luck in the race, Drabya Shah shows respect for local custom. He fights on equal terms with the people whom he wants to conquer and his victory legitimates his accession to the throne. In a way the legend presents the surrender of the autochthonous populations to the good Thakur as being natural, in accordance with the planets; in a word, in the Order of Things. This neat image is part of the cultural kit, so to speak, that is acquired in the course of a few years at school, and even if grown-ups cannot remember the words of the song that tells the legend, they can reproduce the drum beats that are supposed to have accompany the race: “Dharra Dhamma Dharra Dhamma”.

No matter how cleverly the legitimization of the conquest is presented, the fact remains that the story compares two different political systems: on the one hand kingship is open to everyone but questioned every year; on the other hand kingship is hereditary, and is likely to involve either divisions among brothers in the kingdom or new conquests in order to satisfy everyone’s ambitions. This reflexion evolves from the fight between the two brothers and their mother’s mediation that concludes the account. Such an ending could be interpreted as a warning against the internal fights that the great conqueror of Nepal is supposed to have terminated. But this comparison could also be used in favour of the defeated system, raised to the status of ancestor of democracy, as is the case in the film.

It is rather surprising that the Ghale mode of election of a king was remembered in this way by the dominant

culture. It is reminiscent of similar customs brought to light by Philippe Sagant in his analysis of chiefdom in the Tibetan province of Amdo. An annual hunt used to determine the future chief of the community. If the candidate came back empty handed, it was understood not only that he was not a good enough hunter but also that the gods did not approve of him. If on the other hand he was successful, his trophy was the sign that they had invested him with the authority to lead his community for a year. In Sagant's conceptual framework the principles underlying this custom are equally at work in the institution of "great men" in Kirant societies in eastern Nepal. A man is powerful thanks to his competence but he also needs the vitality and the good luck that depend on supernatural powers. High deeds are signs of a divine election. Victory can't be achieved without the gods' agreement. The analysis of this subtle link between political and religious powers deserves a development that cannot be undertaken here⁶. However, a point that should be stressed in the perspective of what follows is that accession to power is achieved without intermediaries. Nobody consecrates the winner.

It is difficult to know whether the legend of the king who won the race is based on actual fact or even how it was born. Its epic inspiration evokes court songs in praise the new rulers who have arrived recently from India. The folklore would have perpetuated such narratives and these themselves found their way into chronicles. Further research is needed to clarify what actually happened during the first encounters between Thakurs and the local populations. One of the documents published by the Yogi Naraharinath in 1965 in his collection of treaties offers a very different interpretation of the same event, in which the role of the Brahmins is presented as a determinant factor.

The "god" of Gorkha, a creature of the Brahmins.

The discoverer of the document does not tell anything about its origin. Entitled "The entry of Drabya Shah to Gorkha" (676), the account is written in a lively style, with concrete details that suggest the work of a storyteller possibly on the basis of several chronicles.

Yasobrahma Shah, king of Lamjung, has three sons and wants to conquer Gorkha for his second son, Drabya Shah. Narayan pandit, a Brahmin famous for his high intelligence, is on pilgrimage in the area. Called to the palace, he promises to bring the matter to a successful conclusion: "If I fail, I'll throw my books and my sacred thread in the fire", he says to the king. Resuming his pilgrimage to Gosainkund, he meets on the way another Brahmin, Ganesh Pandey, who furnishes him with information about the coveted area.

Himself from Palpa, Ganesh Pandey has come to know the Gorkha region from the time when he accompanied his king, Mukunda Sen, on campaign against this state. The mission failed but Ganesh Pandey has stayed on. This is how we learn that the Khadkā king of Gorkha drinks alcohol and insults the Twice-born, the Tagadharis, by pressing them to do the same. The

latter feel badly treated and are ready to part. Ganesh Pandey seizes the opportunity. Accompanied by a Magar traitor, Ganga Ram Rana Busal, he fetches Drabya Shah for the preparation of the campaign. The aggressors decide that it would be safer first to attack the small Ghale kingdom of Liglikot.

The Ghale king has been ruling for the last ten or twelve years. Although his status has been subject to his victory in an annual race (according to the custom already described), nobody had been able to get the better of this particularly strong king. The Brahmins therefore judge that they will be better off ignoring local custom and attack in order, by the sword (*tarwār*), the dagger (*khukuri*) and the sabre (*khuda*). Drabya Shah and his men win the battle, with heavy losses on both sides.

Then the Thakur army attacks Gorkha. After fighting two weeks in vain, the counsellors decide to resort to strategy. One night, Drabya Shah and a few men enter the palace and kill the Magar king. Drabya Shah is consecrated on the spot, in front of a population that had transferred its loyalty to him.

The Ghale kingdom of Upalokot is the next to fall. Drabya Shah unifies the submitted territories under one banner and becomes the "god of Gorkha". He thanks his counsellors, especially Narayan pandit whom he rewards with land and everything needed to live on it: clothing, utensils, grain, horses, cows, buffaloes and slaves.

Contrary to the version of events contained in the legend, Drabya Shah does not take part in the race. The Ghale king is supposed to be invincible and only violence and deception can defeat the local population. Two new characters, absent in the previous version, appear in this one: the two Brahmins, the true architects of Drabya Shah's victory. Fine strategists, they know how to use the discord within the region on which they have set their sights and the resentment of the Twice-born against the excesses of a tribal king. Moreover they are helped by a Magar traitor, who, we suppose, informs them about the land where the battles will take place. The point here is that the Thakur enters the scene only once everything is ready and victory is almost secured. He seems passive until the two counsellors ask him to fight. When he fights, he fails, and his accession to the throne is thanks to the Brahmins' intrigues. This text develops a Brahminic model of kingship, contrary to the model that is implicit in the legend. The king is no longer a man whose physical strength, vitality and skills designate him as a natural chief, somehow divine. He is now a puppet of the Brahmins. They appear as the inevitable intermediaries in the king's ascent to the throne. The "god of Gorkha" is clearly presented here as the creature of the priests.

Although political and religious power are still closely linked they are nevertheless distinct and in the hands not of the king but of religious specialists. The political strategy of Narayan pandit is reinforced by a religious ceremony, Purascaran⁷, supposed to orient the planets'

configuration in favour of Thakur success. While it could be understood that is an instrument in the service of politics, it may be more accurate to see religion as the frame within which people make politics. Narayan pandit is seeking his fortune during his pilgrimage. The prospect of a good deal does not cause him to interrupt his religious journey to Gosainkund, but rather gives him an opportunity to cultivate fruitful contacts and realise his nascent plans. His return to Lamjung and his performance of the ritual of Purascaran, gives him the chance of becoming more deeply involved in the affairs of the kingdom and of officialising his enterprise. We shall later see a more radical discourse on the use of religion in politics.

The fights against Liglikot and even more so against Gorkha are described as particularly violent. According to this account, as we have seen, without the brahman's stratagems, the Thakur would not have defeated the tribals, who are both physically stronger than them and may have been more familiar with the country. How are we to understand that the king emerges from this account no better than being totally dependent on the Brahman for his victory? The various accounts of the conquest are organised around two recurrent qualities, cunning intelligence and physical strength. While the brahman masters the first one and the tribals are endowed with the second, the Thakur king excels in neither.

The first reason that comes to mind is that these accounts are written by brahman who are attempting to substantiate their model of kingship. In order to show how much their advice is needed by the king, they have to present the enemy as invincible by strength. They also have to deprive the king of the epic power with which the legend endows him and that enabled him to conquer all by his own divine strength.

The two paradigms of intelligence and strength are also very present in a third version of Drabya Shah's conquest, a play written by Tiwari and published in 1967, two years after the appearance of the yogi's account.

The Foundation Stone: a play burnt in public

The play *Silanyas* obviously takes up the same sources as the document. The author takes advantage of the personality of the dissolute Magar king who ends up turning the population against him.

In the third act of the play a public crier beats the drum and announces that from now on every household will have to give a share of home-made beer and a selected piece of meat from every pig killed at home; as if this were not enough, every bride must visit the palace before her marriage. This announcement causes lively discussion among the villagers, who start questioning the justness of the king. The following act develops stereotypes that are respectively associated with the Twice-born and the Matwali.

In front of the palace, the Magar king Mansingh is in the middle of a discussion with his secretary, Magar Ale, and with a Brahman, a Chetri, and a Ghale. In

awkward Nepali, the king questions the caste hierarchy:

"Mansingh: What is this about Bahun? About Chetri, about Ale, about Ghale? (Turning to the right) If I cut your skin, you'll bleed. (Turning to the left) If I cut your skin you'll bleed. Blood is blood. Skin is skin. You'll be hurt and you, you'll be hurt. All this is nonsense.

The Brahman: Sire, we are not the authors of these rules. The religious caste order has been going on since ancient times. How do you want to replace it?"

The king turns towards the Ghale and the Ale Magar who defend the caste system by referring to it being specifically human:

"Mansingh: (...) What do you have to say? He! Ghale!

Ghale: Sire, men are men. They are not like sheep that stay mixed together. Bahuns stay with Bahuns, Chetri stay with Chetri, Ale stay with Ale, Ghale stay with Ghale. Like that, there won't be any quarelling.

Mansingh: And you Ale! What do you have to say?

Ale Magar: From father to son, for generations, the Tagadharis are separate, the Matwalis are separate. The Matwalis respect the Tagadharis.

Mansingh: What are you telling me here? I made you my secretary and you show no wisdom whatsoever! (...)"

Then the king drinks more beer and offers some to the Chetri: "You don't drink beer? Why don't you? You eat curd. We drink beer. This is the same. Fermented milk turns into curd exactly in the same way as fermented grain turns into beer (...) Eh! Ale! Everybody is the same. Beat the drum (to announce this). Who is inferior? Who is superior? Men are all equals. Brahman's and Chetris' wives, if they are unhappy with their husbands, may marry again. Why not? Beat the drum."

Towards the end of the act, the Brahman tries to reason with the king: "If we stay with you as your courtiers (*bhārdhār*), we shall give you good advice, our rules will be applied and you won't lose". But Mansingh rejects the brahman's offer. Getting even drunker, he laughs loudly in mockery of the Brahman's lack of wit and ends the act by shouting: "May only the Matwalis stay in this kingdom!" It is clear now that the Magar king is cutting himself off. He refuses that his kingdom be converted to a Hindu state as the brahman suggested and rejects the integration recommended by the Ghale and the Ale secretary.

The whole play and this scene in particular deserve an analysis that cannot be undertaken here, suffice to say that the work was on the curriculum of universities and colleges till 1995. Of the thirteen editions that were made, the last four were funded by the government that made of it a piece of the national literature. Recently the portrait of the Magar king depicted in this scene was judged by militants for the Magar cause to be an insult against their people. At the beginning of the nineties, the Nepal Magar Association (Nepal Magar Mahasangh) asked that the play be removed from school and

university curricula. Since the government kept ignoring the claim, the Association openly burnt the play in the conference hall of its 5th national meeting, in Dang in February 1995.

The Magar king is indeed excessive and provocative. He behaves like a drunkard and claims *ius primae noctis*. His poor Nepali completes the image of a rough king who rejects the help of educated brahmans expert in the art of ruling. There is, however, another side to the character invented by Tiwari. The fool-king also utters truths even though they sound sacrilegious to the Brahmans: are we not all made of flesh and blood in the same way? Is the caste hierarchy as natural as that? Why would the fermentation of grain be impure and not the fermentation of milk? These questions remain even after the king has been silenced. In the post-revolutionary context of the nineties, militancy cannot hear these possible echoes of a literary work that was also a consecrated example of the panchayat culture that they wanted to abolish. They saw in this portrait of the king a mockery of all their kin. These reactions are not exempt from a certain puritanism that inflexibly rejects the least evocation of drunken revelry, gay feasts and free love, familiar stereotypes attached to indigenous village people. The Magar king alone defends them loudly and clearly before being betrayed by his own people.

The following acts show the Brahmans working at the conversion of the population as this happened to be the only way to conquer kingdoms otherwise invincible by the armed forces: "Magars are invincible, like cocks they keep fighting even though they are blind with blood" (66). Drabya Shah is said to have become king of Liglikot by winning the race and then to have been crowned king of Majkot-Gorkha in front of a population that was secretly converted by brahmans spies.

Let us consider this "foundational narrative of the nation". As in the document published by Yogi Naraharinath, the conquest is presented here as a game in which strength and bravery lose in front of subterfuge. Although the autochthonous people are depicted as rough human beings, comparable to animals, they still show an exemplary courage, that makes them admirable, especially in the chronicle of a war. It was suggested above that a reason to enhance indigenous strength was to demonstrate that the help of the brahmans was needed in an otherwise impossible task. Another reason may be more precisely at work here. The play was rightly understood as aiming at the building of the Nepalese nation. In this process the indigenous people are the backbone of the country, and they must be part of the National Bir History, although on an inferior level. The Tagadharis are superior to them in intelligence as various institutions, distinguishing between men and between food, show. This capacity for discrimination is also at work in long-term plans that happen to be more efficient than blunt confrontation. The guardians of these rules and the finest strategists are the brahmans, while the Thakurs, well advised by them, have to be good warriors. It remains that physical

strength is distinguished from spiritual qualities and submitted to cunning intelligence. Local populations are shown to be the raw material of which the Nepalese nation is made. It is not a matter of getting rid of brute force but of civilizing it by means of Hindu rules and integrating it with a superior humanity. It is precisely this vision that the novel *Simarekhā* challenges.

Simarekhā

The author of the novel, Naru Thapa Magar and the director of the film, Kishor Rana Magar have similar backgrounds. Both are natives of a district in the mid-West, Baglung, but were partly brought up in India because, like many men in the area, their fathers were serving in the Indian army. Kishor Rana went to Bombay to enrol in the Navy, but was unable to join the service and was left jobless in the world capital of cinema. He started to work in a production office until he found himself behind a camera. When he came back to Nepal, it was with the idea of making films that would be specifically Nepalese and not simple imitations of the Hindi films that are invading the market. He wanted to tackle Nepalese concerns such as the building of his nation.

Naru Thapa has now responsibilities in the Nepalese Secret Service. He explained in an interview with the journal *Rastriya Samanantar* that he wanted to go against the pervasive notion that "only winners have History" (*itithās jitneko huncha*) and give the subjected populations a voice. The novel claims to tell the true story of Drabya Shah's conquest. When, in the third chapter, it is clear that the balance of power between the Magars and Thakurs is reversed in favour of the latter, the author takes some historical distance and writes: "The descendants of Micakhan and Kacakhan⁸ are making their history. With the blood of men borderlines are drawn then erased. If Drabya Shah did not do that, Nepal would not be". The novel does not question the conquest but aims rather to reveal how it really happened. The title of the play and of the novel are nicely contrasted in this respect. While "The Foundation Stone" evokes the founding union on which the Nepalese nation is built, "the Borderline" brings to light the violent confrontation at the origin of the nation.

Both the novel and its cinematic version develop a parallel between the village of Liglikot, where the young Ghale Magar king⁹ is assisted by an elderly tribal priest, and the Lamjung palace where the king Yasobrahma holds a council with brahmans about the succession of his kingdom. We are first in Liglikot in 1549. We are told that Nepal is made up of various small states ruled by "Mongol" lineages. Private property does not exist. Neither rich nor poor, everyone enjoys a home and lives on natural products. Women are given a prominent position, designated as "matriarchy" (*mātripradhān*). The political organisation is presented as the ancestor of democracy probably on the grounds that the custom of the yearly election of the king through a competition is open to all. The king has

a mentor, a guru, the tribal priest, who is said to school his pupil in certain secret methods of fighting.

The Liglikot king, "strong as a tiger" is the villagers' pride. But he is shown to behave as an ordinary man. The first scene catches him on his way to the place where a pig had just been killed, because he particularly likes fatty pork. But his mother stops him and reminds him of everything he has to do: cut grass, take care of the animals and so on. Villagers joke about his appetite. In this way we are introduced to the simplicity of an accessible king and to the authority of women. However the king is not quite an ordinary man. Two hunters coming back from their expedition with a dead deer give him the head and the skin of their quarry. The king is shown to enjoy a natural authority among his kinsmen. The scene is set up in a charming and peaceful village where harmony reigns under a blue sky with snow-covered peaks in the background.

Contrasted with this peasant good humor, the following scene takes place in the Lamjung palace among rigid characters in magnificent heavy robes, wearing worried expressions on their faces. The king expresses his fear of weakening his kingdom by dividing it among his sons and the queen insists on her younger son having his own kingdom. The brahman Narayan Aryal suggests the conquest of Liglikot and it is decided that Drabya Shah should be called back from the pastures in order to start the campaign. The first appearance of the prince suggests that he is the counterpart of the Ghale king. He is shown building a cowshed, dressed like an ordinary peasant, but his tall imposing stature and his strength already make him a natural chief. The Thakur king, even though he is on the wrong side as his black outfit makes clear in the film, will be spared by this revised version of the conquest.

The real villains of the piece are the brahmins. Both the novel and the film depict in detail the hidden but steady infiltration of the tribal kingdoms by the Hindu cause carried by the brahmins with the help of Magar traitors. The chief spy whom Narayan sends to Liglik, Chandreswar, gets close to the Magar priest and healer by pretending that he is wounded. He becomes the priest's servant and is in a good position to set a trap and kill his benefactor. When the dying priest, impaled on sharp stakes, calls for help, the brahman retorts: "Why are you shouting? You're brave, aren't you? You don't need help! In politics there is no sin (...) In the open, you are like my father, but in politics you're my enemy". When the old priest mentions the gods who will not forgive such betrayal, the brahman reveals his view on what he is supposed to serve: "Religion is created by men for their political purposes". The priest then invokes History, which will remember the brahman's treachery, but the triumphant assassin declares: "History is written by the winners. I make history. This is my History. My name will be great". At last, before burying his victim under a last spadeful of earth, he announces the imminent victory of Drabya Shah over

the Magar king and ends his speech with what appears to be his motto "If strength does not win, ruse will win" (*balle na jite challe jiltā*).

The extreme cynicism of the brahman's statements leave no doubt about the militant purpose of both novel and film, precisely on their anti-brahmanism. This scene, where the priest, a wise and generous man, in favour of opening his country to newcomers, falls into the trap set by the brahman is elaborately developed and emotionally charged. The brahman is evil or deception incarnate. He denies all human feelings, all morality and even the gods. Politics alone is his religion. His attitude stands at the other extreme of the spectrum we observed at the beginning of this article with the epic model of kingship in which religious and political powers were merged. We saw how the brahmanic vision of kingship drives a wedge between the two. However, the brahmins in the Yogi's document as well as in the play by Tiwari do not go as far as denying religion. Their politics remain within a religious framework. Here in the novel and in the film, political power stands by itself, aloof from any religious pretention or even ethical concern.

Once again ruse and more precisely, trickery, win over physical strength. One of the last scenes is very expressive in this respect. The villagers are celebrating the victory of their king, forgetting about their enemies. This is the moment that the Thakur army chooses to go into action. The Magar king and Drabya Shah have been fighting for some time when Narayan, who is attending the fight, asks a soldier to stab the Magar in the back and finish him off. Drabya Shah turns towards the brahman and blames him for having killed a warrior such as the Magar king:

Narayan: Two knives can't be put in the same sheath.

Drabya Shah: It's possible to make a smaller knife.

Narayan: A khukuri will never be a khadga.

Drabya Shah: I'm sad. He was brave and a good fighter."

Until the last minute the brahman is leading the game. His way of finishing off the Ghale king makes the Thakur both innocent and at the same time somehow of secondary importance. The image of the khukuri, a tool as well as a weapon, represents the Magar nation while the sabre refers to the Hindu kingship. The Thakur king pleads for an integration of the Magars into the nation even on an inferior level. But the brahman's retort, full of contempt, rejects the assimilation of the two nations, as if they were two different species. This raises a doubt about the possibility of one nation, a question very much at the centre of modern ethnic claims.

The film is in two parts: dances and love songs performed by villagers in a bucolic setting give a certain rhythm to the first part. But after the break, the second part develops a very fast succession of murderous fights represented in a hyperrealistic way: people are shown dying very slowly in the midst of general bloodshed.

This organisation suggests the massacre of a paradise, of a golden age that preceded the Hindu invasion.

The picture of the Magar village before the Thakur conquest is reminiscent of European utopias in the 18th century that reconsidered the concepts of family, sexuality, property rights, government and religion. An egalitarian society is forged, free from the constraints of the private property and gender inequality. Divorce is allowed with the help of a village council presided over by a woman who dispenses justice (an affair between secondary characters shows the harmonious functioning of this ideal society).

The guardian of this system is the tribal priest. He teaches a religion of nature and of the ancestors and shows more concern for ethical values than for liturgy. He contributes to make of this village community an enlightened society, far from the stereotypes of obscurantism usually associated with tribal populations.

The tribal priest is a new element in the novel and in the film compared to the three previous narrations: the legend, the document and the play. This character next to the Ghale king looks like the counterpart of the brahman who serves the Thakur king. It makes the comparison of the two societies more balanced: the tribal government too is bicephalic, with an executive king and a thinking brain, the priest. But the dyad formed by the young warrior instructed by his guru is not only informed by the parallel with the Hindu government, but is strikingly reminiscent of Kung Fu films that are very popular in Nepal. The master has a supernatural force that can be acquired not only through a certain physical discipline but also by respecting ethical rules and achieving wisdom. The political dimension of power here is underplayed.

The presence of the tribal priest in the film is not only new compared to the other versions of the conquest. It is new in the presentation by Magar militants of their own culture. It seems that ethnic claims have seldom referred to their traditional priests as an institution that should be defended. They do fight for the protection of their "language", of their "culture" but not for their local priests. This is somehow surprising since these priests are often the guardians of the tradition of the community, in so far as they recite origin myths and perform rituals. But they do not seem to be identified as such. The fact that the tribal priest is not isolated as an element that can be added to the list that is supposed to describe a local culture would suggest either that it is not important at all or that it resists folklorisation and cannot be easily objectified.

The film, on the contrary, gives a very prominent part to the tribal priest. This new image is impregnated with romanticism. In the ordinary life of a village, priests are not (directly) consulted on political matters. Although their ritual action may have political consequences, they keep their distance from political power. Only somebody conceiving this culture from the outside, who has experienced a modern way of conceiving the two powers as separate could think of the tribal priest

as a political councillor. Then the priest is shown next to the king in order to demonstrate, somewhat artificially, that the two powers were merged in ancient times.

The importance of nature, specifically manifest in the film, needs to be located in the context of the reconstituted utopia. The Magar peasants emerge as noble savages in a pristine world. The author of the novel speaks in this respect of the purity of the film: "In this film there is pure Nepalese art, Nepalese culture, Nepalese history". He then develops his statement with a list of symbols that express Nepal: "The film shows the Nepalese soil, the air, the rivers, the trails, the plain and the mountains, the resting places and the passes... There is in this film a Nepalese plough, a sickle and its sheath, a mat and dried spinach, nettles and maize porridge, a drum, Magar dances and a woman in love."

This reconstructed image of "true" Nepalese culture, featured in travel brochures for the benefit of tourists, is invoked here as a measure of authenticity, a sort of proof that the version of history purveyed is the true story. Landscape, tools, objects and food seen in the countryside, which are still commonplaces for the majority of Nepalese, constitute the form that is given to this new history, which stands for the truth. They are the hallmarks of a genuine culture and history. Of course, this reconstitution has the character of folklorisation for an observer or analyst who watches the process from the outside: a folklore that is, ironically, partly made up of myths borrowed from both the West (the European Utopia) and the Far East (the warrior-sage), and mirror-images of the same Hindu society that has been rejected (the tribal priest as the counterpart of the Brahman).

But this observation fails to do justice to the emotional impact that this highly successful film has had. To take the example of the student, once a schoolmaster, who helped me with the translation of some of the works cited here: he was completely scandalised by the discovery that Drabya Shah may not have taken part in a footrace and that his accession to the throne was the outcome of nothing more than an ordinary political victory. He felt cheated and showed his eagerness to know more about the populations that had been conquered. What the film shows is that history is not monolithic; that it may be called into question and subjected to a range of interpretations; in short, that work can start. *Simarekhā* may, after all be a historical borderline.

Notes :

- 1 "Prem Pinda" is another example of a historical film in the restricted sense that it takes place in the past, in Rana times. But it seems to have no pretention beyond the love story that forms the central plot.
- 2 Just before *Simarekha* was shown, one of the largest cinema hall in Kathmandu presented *Baldan*, a film about the 1990 uprising.
- 3 See Onta 1997.
- 4 The other chapters are devoted to edifying accounts of famous characters of Nepal like Prithvi Narayan Shah, the mountaineer Pasang Lhamu Sherpa, and the sculptor Arniko.

Other chapters present great men from world History, about Abraham Lincoln, Einstein and Leonardo da Vinci. There are also debates such as the advantages of salaried job over a business, which is more lucrative but always more risky.

⁵ It seems that several localities in the Gorkha area were ruled by Ghale who remain largely unknown. They probably were of Tibetan origin. The fact that the competition took place during Dasai is curious in view of the violent confrontations between the Ghale and the Hindu invaders (see Lecomte on the subject). There are Ghale settlements in the North of Gorkha that have not been researched so far.

⁶ See for instance Sagant's first article on the subject in 1981 ("La tête haute: maison, rituel et politique au Népal oriental." in *L'homme et la maison en Himalaya*, G. Toffin, L. Barré, C. Jest (eds)) and his last book, *Les neuf forces de l'homme*, Société d'ethnologie, Nanterre, 1999.

⁷ When India imposed an economical blocus on Nepal, just before the 1990 uprising, king Birendra ordered this ceremony (Mahesh Raj Pant, personal communication).

⁸ Micakhan and Khacakhan are supposed to be ancestors of the Shah dynasty, who fled away from Citaur and came to Lamjung and Gorkha (see Lecomte on the subject).

⁹ According to Gurung historians, the king of Liglig was Ghale and his population Tamu (see the English translation of Pignède, pp.486-487). There might have been Magar as well but this is the first mention of Ghale Magar that I came across. The king of Gorkha, on the contrary appears to be Magar in all sources, although his name Khadka is not. The Thakur rule had already been long established in many parts of the middle hills.

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