

The Kham Magar country, Nepal: Between ethnic claims and Maoism

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(translated by David N. Gellner)

Identity politics were unheard of in the early 1980s, when I carried out my first fieldwork among the Kham Magar, a Tibeto-Burman population of west Nepal. If people felt like comparing or defining themselves, they focused on very local differences: on the dialects of different villages, their specific festival calendars, their different ways of covering haystacks (by means of a cover made of goatskin or with a straw roof), the different itineraries they followed with their flocks, or the boundaries of their communal territories. Subjects like these were discussed again and again. Such conversations presupposed a common shared identity, of course, but there was no context in which Kham Magars needed to articulate it. For example, relations with their cousins, the Magar, the largest minority in Nepal, were undefined and the exploration of differences between Kham Magars and Magars did not appear to be important, at least to the Kham Magar themselves. In sum, Kham Magar villagers preferred to see themselves and to be seen as the inhabitants of one 'country', *deś* in Nepali (the term has been adopted into the Kham Magars' Tibeto-Burman language). A 'country' is a given natural environment in which one is born and where one lives alongside others similar to oneself. It is the Kham Magars' 'country' that has turned out to be the stronghold of the 'People's War' launched four years ago by the revolutionary Maoist movement. The life of the Kham Magar has been turned upside-down by this, and many of them have died.

The present essay seeks to answer several questions: Why was this region chosen by the Maoists? How have rural people reacted to the campaigns of politicization originating in the towns? How is that they have found themselves involved in, and how have they allowed themselves to be dragged into, fatal combat? And, finally, how do processes of identity formation develop in the face of these new pressures? I begin by presenting the necessary historical background, in particular the democratic revolution of 1990, which was a turning point for identity politics in Nepal. I will then attempt to explain (i) why the Maoists based themselves in the Kham Magar country, (ii) what techniques the Maoists have used, and (iii) what the motivations of the Kham Magar may be. There is a certain paradox in revolutionaries

basing themselves on a tribal heritage from which in principle they distance themselves. Whereas the ethnic ideologues who are concerned with the problems of defining the cultures which they claim to defend often find themselves without any means of political action, the Maoists have skilfully appropriated certain traditional techniques in their strategy for conquering the Kham Magars' territory.¹

The historical and political context

The revolution of 1990: The beginnings of mass politics

The 'People's Movement' (*jan āndolan*) was officially declared on February 18 1990 by the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) which brought together liberal parties and communists, both of which were banned under the Panchayat regime. After numerous demonstrations, which caused several hundred deaths across the country, King Birendra lifted the ban on political parties on April 8. In mid-November he promulgated a new constitution which established parliamentary democracy. The revolution of 1990 marked the beginning of mass politics, for which forty years of profound social change had prepared the country.²

The first democratic revolution in 1950 had put an end to a century of dictatorship by the Rana Prime Ministers. Ultimately, the revolution lasted for a very brief period and only served to restore the Shah dynasty, which had been kept away from the centre of power since 1846. The revolution was the work of a small élite of intellectuals and politicians who had been educated in India and had participated in the nationalist movement for independence there. None the less, the 1950-51 revolution served to open up to the world outside a country that had been turned in on itself since its formation under Prithvi Narayan Shah and his descendants in the second half of the 18th century.³ During the years of his short reign (1951-55), King Tribhuvan, in alliance with the Congress Party and under the close control of India, developed a series of policies which already revealed the priorities that would change the face of the country: economic development financed from abroad (especially India and the USA), and education.

Tribhuvan's son Mahendra took over the reins of power in 1960 after seventeen months of a Congress Party government elected by universal suffrage, and in 1962

¹ I will not attempt here to give a complete account of the Maoist movement, which has spread well beyond the region and the population that I analyse here. For some general reflections on the Maoist movement, which is still little studied, see Ramirez (1997).

² In this first section on the history of Nepal I follow Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton (1999), who describe the two democratic revolutions Nepal has experienced in the last half century.

³ Some recent work has attempted to qualify this view (see especially Mikesell 1988).

he installed the Panchayat system. This regime, described as ‘guided democracy’, in reality allowed the king to reserve all powers to himself. The ideology on which it was based was inscribed in the Constitution of 1962 and had a profound influence on the country.⁴ The project was to build the unity of the nation and to develop national sentiment. Simultaneously, a certain conception of identity was born. In one of his speeches, King Mahendra translated the Western notion of the equality of all citizens into essentially religious (Vaishnavite) terms. In this form of identity, “all the devotees of Vishnu [have] an identical subtle substance that unites them within the subtle body of Vishnu in the form of Parbrahma.” Thus, all Nepalis are conceived of as identical (*samān*) or ‘one and the same’ (*ek ra samān*) in their devotion to the nation-state (Burghart 1996: 257).

The efforts to ‘build the nation’ quickly led to a contradictory situation: in order to avoid ideological conflicts encouraged by political parties, the parties themselves were banned and there was a general repression of the mass media. On the other hand, in order to develop national identity, schools were established throughout the kingdom.⁵ But education played a key role in politicizing the people, who consequently became less and less willing to accept repression from the government. When King Birendra submitted the continuation of the Panchayat regime to a referendum in 1980, his victory over the opposition, which sought the liberalization of political life, was gained only by a narrow margin.

Economic development was another banner waved by the governments of the Panchayat period. But the opening up of the country to a modernity which remained inaccessible to most of its inhabitants⁶ only served to provoke frustration among the people who felt themselves to be unfairly neglected. I will return to this point. Thus, even if the revolution of 1990 was also, initially, carried out by an elite of students and city-dwellers, its repercussions were much more profound at all levels of the Nepali population than the first revolution forty years earlier. The revolution was prepared by the gradual development of political awareness in the country; but in its turn the revolution was a key factor in promoting widespread politicization.⁷

⁴ See Gaborieau (1982) for an analysis of the 1962 Constitution.

⁵ Whereas literacy stood at 5.3 per cent in 1952, in 1989 it had reached 40 per cent. It should be noted that the population doubled in the same 40-year period (Gurung 1998: 85).

⁶ In 1987 the World Bank included Nepal among the seven poorest countries in the world (Gurung 1998: 167).

⁷ “This second revolution in Nepal’s modern period did not only come as a result of a raised level of political consciousness. The revolution itself made the people politically conscious” (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton 1999: xi).

Until 1990, rural people were far removed from the centres of power—necessarily so in view of the facts of Nepal’s geography. More than two thirds of the country is made up of mountains where the means of communication are very basic. But, above all, monarchical institutions gave individuals hardly any chance of participating in decisions at the national level. One should not conclude from this that Nepalis passively accepted their lot. The different groups which made up the Nepali population knew how to negotiate the rules that were imposed on them.

Forms of identity before 1990

Some good examples of the local manipulation of national regulations are provided precisely by the fluctuating identities of ethnic groups. A national legal code, the Mulukī Ain (‘law of the country’), was established in 1854. It assigned each group to a very precise position in the hierarchy of castes and regulated the life of the citizens in the smallest details of their life and death. The tribal groups occupy a middle position in this hierarchy, between the Twice-Born or Tāgādhārī who are ritually superior to them, and the Untouchables who are inferior. They form the group of Matwālīs or ‘alcohol-drinkers’. Among the latter, there were those who were not permitted to be enslaved, such as Magars and Gurungs, and those who could be enslaved, such as the people of Tibetan origin (known as ‘Bhoṭe’), certain groups of Newars, and the Chepang (Höfer 1979: 45).

Each community was granted rights or privileges and duties, which they were quick to use in their relations with the central government. Rights over land and trade were not the same for everyone. Thus, belonging to one group or another had both political and economic consequences. Several studies over the course of the last twenty years have shown how the ethnic identities that can be observed today are the outcome of various processes of mutual accommodation between regional ethnic systems and the policies of a centralizing state.⁸

I was myself able to observe a similar process among a population of miners (*āgrī*) in the Dhaulagiri region. Work in the mines gave individuals of suspect origin (the offspring of intercaste unions, for example) the opportunity to take on a pure identity, and it allowed others to climb in the hierarchy. The government sought to increase the number of miners by giving them various privileges, including that of

⁸ Cf. Levine (1987) who gives some general reflections on this subject and analyses the case of the Humla region where it is not only individuals but entire villages which have succeeded in changing their ethnic affiliation and their position in the overall Nepalese caste hierarchy. By providing the first analysis of the Mulukī Ain of 1854, Höfer (1979) did much to encourage such research in Nepal.

not being susceptible to enslavement (for example, because of debt). Taking on the status of *āgrī* thus allowed an enslavable alcohol-drinker to be promoted to a more desirable category which included the Magar and the Gurung. Thus, individuals of diverse origin (Magar, Bhote, Chetri) formed communities which were united in the first instance by their occupation and the desire to take advantage of the newly announced rules.

In 1920, the government closed the mines and offered the miners land as compensation. The latter then began to search for a new identity. They took on the name 'Chantel', and adopted (1) customs from their Magar neighbours, (2) a history that saw them as the descendants of a Rajput clan from west Nepal, and above all (3) a language, which has become the ultimate defining feature of an ethnic group (de Sales 1993). The campaigning work of one individual, Dil Bahadur Chantel, an emigrant to Kathmandu, was particularly crucial in arousing this feeling of identity among the villagers to whom he distributed pamphlets which gave them a summary of their own culture. He founded an association which had as its primary aim the acceptance of the Chantel as a distinct category in the population census. Only success in establishing the category would legitimate them as a new ethnic group. It is noticeable that there is a difference here from the earlier motivations for creating an identity. It is no longer merely a question of acquiring the means to improve one's political and economic position, but also of winning recognition as a Chantel.

Studies such as these show how individuals have succeeded in modifying their lot, for all that it was so strictly controlled. They also show that group attempts to establish identity correspond to given historical situations. But it is above all the continually changing aspect of pre-1990 identities that needs to be stressed. Ethnic identities in this period seem to have been labels that one could change, labels that had political, economic, and legal reference, rather than a social or cultural one. Changing a label did not necessarily involve any existential crisis. It was primarily a question of a more advantageous adaptation to a given situation.

This frankly instrumentalist vision of identity, seen in the strategic use of the rules laid down by the 1854 law code, should not cause us to forget these groups' need for recognition which emerged in the process of these manipulations, even if such deep-seated sentiments can easily be exploited for political ends.⁹ In Europe this need was born "in the middle of the 18th century, when the old system of honours,

⁹ For a discussion, in the Nepalese context, of the debate between primordialists or essentialists, on the one hand, and instrumentalists or modernists, on the other, see Gellner (1997a: 6-12).

reserved for a few privileged persons, fell into disuse, and everyone aspired to his own public recognition, to what one would come to call one's dignity" (Todorov 1995: 29).

This historical detour through Western thought can help our understanding of identity in Nepal. In the last 100 years Nepal has experienced a profound questioning of the ancient hierarchies which had provided the taken-for-granted framework of daily life. After the conquest of the 18th century the different peoples remained attached to their 'countries', from which they drew their 'natural' identity, so to speak, as was suggested above for the Kham Magar—for the old forms of organization were never completely obliterated and can still be seen today. In the 1854 law code all groups are designated as *jāt* or 'species', that is to say, as social units, detached from their territorial base and integrated within the same interdependent system (Burghart 1996: 251-3). Thus, when a new state system was put in place whose aim was the building of a nation, the groups were led to redefine their identity, to find distinguishing elements in their culture, and to establish definitions which were as rigid as they were artificial, in order to achieve recognition. This movement was reinforced after 1990.

The warrior who is cursed and powerless

It is worth considering for a moment this need for recognition as it was expressed by the cultural associations of certain tribal groups even before 1990. The explosion of identity politics which occurred after 1990 may lead one to forget that the first consciousness-raising movements were less concerned with making demands and rather more concerned with self-criticism. One can cite as an example the Association for the Defence of the Language and Culture of the Magars, on which we have some fine and valuable observations by a Nepali ethnographer, K.R. Adhikari (1991). This association was formed on the initiative of some Magar soldiers who had retired from the British army. On their return from the Second World War, where many of their fellows died a hero's death, they were struck by the fact that those who had stayed in the village did not seem to appreciate their heroism and continued to have a very low opinion of themselves.

In 1956 the Reform Association of the Magar Society [sic] was formed in 63 districts with the aim of "root[ing] out the evils that existed in Magar society", i.e. "over spending and over drinking". Annual meetings were held in the form of picnics, because the government considered any ethnic meetings to be 'communal propaganda'. During these meetings the Magar accused themselves of being responsible for their own poverty and 'backwardness' and relied only on their own determination to get out of it. Adhikari was present at a meeting of the association

which had become the Nepali Langhalee Association (Nepali Langhalee Sangh) in April 1989. By this time the issues present at the origin of the movement had developed a political dimension. Thus in order “to preserve the language, culture, and identity of the Magars” it was necessary to reconsider

1. Customs of spending on eating and drinking at birth and death rituals beyond limitation of one’s means.
2. Excessive belief in ghosts and spirits and the custom of sacrificing animals in the name of gods and goddesses instead of offering just flowers and food... (Adhikari 1991)

I myself have heard similar proposals from Magars living among other castes who are often better off than they are, or from Kham Magars who, having lived elsewhere, return home with a new perspective on village problems. The image of Magar culture that is revealed here is the negative side of high-caste Hindu values: to tribal excesses, the Brahman opposes his own preference for economizing (to put it at its mildest), his rejection of alcohol, and his worship of pure and vegetarian Hindu divinities. Most important of all, communal rituals—the very activities which are precisely the context in which tribal culture comes into play—are picked out as threatening to it. That which the activists propose to suppress (or weaken) in order to save Magar culture is the very thing that constitutes it.

Other quotations are eloquent. An orator, recalling how the Magars have contributed to the conquest of great Nepal and how they have been praised throughout the world for their courage in the past 100 years, adds that at present, “The Magars are like those warriors who have forgotten their power and strength because of a curse, and they will remain weak unless they are reminded of their strength for the struggle” (ibid.).

This curse has to be understood as an expression of the Magars’ alienation caused by their subordination to the dominant groups in Nepali society, as is proved by the negative image of their own customs reflected in the mirror they hold up to the culture of the high Hindu castes. They are trapped by their contradictory conceptions and this confused feeling paralyses them and ensures that their attempts to participate in the enterprises of modern society usually fail.¹⁰ It is clearly a question of a suffering that is not acknowledged, of a need for recognition. This need can no longer be accommodated within a politics that seeks merely to ameliorate

¹⁰ The biographies of villagers who have departed to seek their fortunes make rather depressing reading. Not only are they often the victims of dishonest middlemen, they have also failed to form networks of mutual assistance sufficiently strong to defend themselves.

the material conditions of life: it needs to be met, in the first place, on the symbolic level. Moreover, it seems as if winning this recognition requires violent means to be employed. The cursed and weak warrior may wish to seek his revitalization in the sacrifices entailed in a revolutionary struggle.

A third and new argument, which was more directly political, made its appearance as a consequence of this discourse in the period leading up to the revolution: 'The Magars are an exploited group. They should no longer tolerate this exploitation, they should struggle for their rights.' It is one thing to play by rules that have been imposed from above, it is quite another to wish to play a part in deciding on new rules. After the revolution of 1990 a new political sensibility, that is to say, the beginnings of a feeling among individuals that they could change the contours of their own social life and participate in the government of the country, penetrated even the most remote villages. This political awareness took several different forms.

Before presenting the different organizations and their ideologies, it is necessary to mention those individuals, who have become increasingly numerous in recent years, who have had experience of realities other than those of the daily life of the village. Whether their personal journeys have been in search of a better education or, more commonly, in search of work, whether they have gone to the flatlands of the Tarai, to the capital, or abroad, they have come into contact with a modernity which, even if it is not viewed as 100 per cent positive, marks a Rubicon. The perception of rural areas like theirs as dead ends, forgotten by the rest of the world, discourages the young people, who are more inclined than in previous times to join a militant project for a society in which they would have a more respected place and a better life. And these projects, whether revolutionary or ethnic, are all about making identity claims.

Ethnic movements after 1990

A brief glance at the events which followed from 1990 shows that there is a considerable gap between the claims put forward by individuals, their motivations, and the political responses they received. Immediately following the Jan Āndolan and during the six months leading up to the promulgation of the new constitution, ethnic parties multiplied alongside the big national parties. The last national census of 1991 listed 60 *jāt* or 'species': these included 26 ethnic groups, making up 35 per cent of the total population, 30 castes, and 3 religious groups (Tarai Muslim, hill Muslim, and Sikh), and a Bengali group (Gurung 1998: 43-5). The census also

recorded about twenty Tibeto-Burman languages.¹¹ Many of the ethnic groups have retained their original shamanic or oracular religion to a greater or lesser extent, even if the census classification is not always able to convey this.¹² In the west of Nepal, certain groups, such as the Magars and Tharus, have conserved their own religion while integrating into it Hindu practices such as the cult of Shiva or the Goddess, which means that they are officially classed as Hindus.

In order to build a national identity, which was the principal aim of the ‘Panchayat philosophy’, the Nepali language was imposed from the beginning of primary school, to the detriment of other languages. Children learned, and still learn, the history of the unification of the country by Prithvi Narayan Shah as a ‘unification’—though many today would prefer to describe it as a violent military conquest. Schoolbooks on Nepali culture include the biographies of historical personages who have been designated as national heroes. A good example is Drabya Shah, an ancestor of the reigning dynasty, who is presented as having imposed himself in a Magar and Gurung milieu by means of his wisdom and physical prowess (de Sales 1998). A final element was that Hinduism was presented as the religion of the kingdom. The legal code forbade both sorcery and the specialists who were traditionally charged with combatting it. This proscription did not prevent these traditions from maintaining themselves (sometimes secretly), but it was seen as oppressive. People in Kham Magar villages still remember angrily how for several years their shamans were forbidden to beat their drums or to denounce sorcerers by making them dance.

The ‘People’s Movement’ was the chance for this repressed diversity to come out into the open. The domination of the high castes of the hills (the Parbatiya) in every sphere—economic, political, and religious—was openly criticized. This tendency was already manifest during the 1980 referendum campaign. Ten years later the international context provided indirect support for such claims. It has been suggested that the collapse of Soviet power and the reawakening of the nations of

¹¹ The latter can be placed in six principal groups: Magar, Bhotia, Gurung-Tamang, Newari, Chepang-Thami, Danuwar. The difficulty of distinguishing a language from a dialect means that more than a hundred languages have been identified in Nepal. About fifteen Indo-Aryan languages are recognized in the census, including Nepali (spoken as a mother tongue by 50.3 per cent of the population) and Maithili (Gurung 1998: 59-60).

¹² The first census to record religion was that held in the aftermath of the first revolution, between 1952 and 1954. The census of 1991 is more complete and distinguishes, in addition to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, Christianity, Jainism, and ‘Kiranti’ (taken from the name of the tribes of east Nepal) (Gurung 1998: 95).

eastern Europe which followed on from it played an important catalytic role in the Nepalese revolution. When the United Nations declared 1993 'International Year of Indigenous Peoples' it provided world backing for local problems.

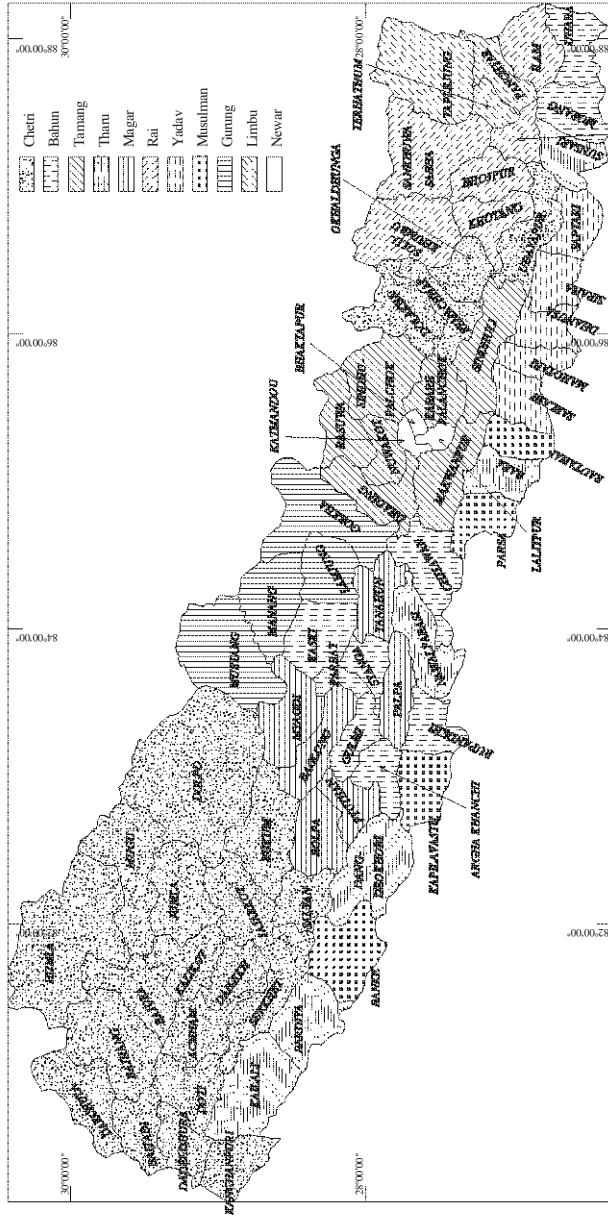
The first political party to be established after the revolution was the National Front for the Liberation of the People (Nepal Rāṣṭriya Janamukti Morchā), made up basically of Tibeto-Burmans of the hills. The secretary general, Ghore Bahadur Khapangi, presented a memorandum demanding a federal government to the commission preparing the new constitution. Another party, the Janajāti Party or 'minorities' party', led by Khagendra Jang Gurung, which was more violent in its mode of action, campaigned for the division of the kingdom into twelve autonomous ethnic states. Alongside these parties, which attempted to organize nationally, each ethnic group formed one or more parties made up only of its own members.¹³ These ethnic parties are sometimes old cultural associations founded during the Panchayat period which had to hide their political ambitions, as was the case with the Magar association discussed above.

A simplified map of Nepal reveals, from west to east, several ethnically Tibetan enclaves in the north of the country, whereas the plains in the south are the habitat of various different Tharu groups dotted around a mosaic of very different peoples (Muslims and Chetris in the west, Yadavs and Bahuns in the east). By contrast the hill peoples have a tendency to form solid blocs. The Karnali basin in the west is inhabited predominantly by Chetris of Khas culture. There is a Magar zone in the mid-western region bordering on an area inhabited by Bahuns. From the Kali Gandaki river eastwards the people of the Parbatiya caste hierarchy form only a half, more or less, of the population. The northern half is the homeland of the Gurungs and further east of the Tamangs. Finally, in the east of the country there are three cultural zones dominated by the Chetri, the Rai, and the Limbu respectively. It is here that ethnic movements are the most active. The Limbus have a strong tradition of opposition to the state, focused on their claims to tribal land-rights (*kīpaṭ*), going back to their conquest in the eighteenth century. By contrast, the Gurungs and the Magars were a part of that conquest and provided a large part of the military personnel that carried it out.

The ethnic movements are organized primarily around the three themes of *bhūmi*, *bhāṣā*, *dharma* ('land, language, and religion'), a phrase which recurs like a ritual formula in the activists' discourse. Protection of the mother tongue, secularization

¹³ The Newars are an exception here. Gellner (1997b) examines the reasons why the Newars, despite being a highly educated and politicized group, were slow to set up an ethnic party.

Ethnographic map of Nepal
Ethnic/Caste dominance by districts



CNRS, SIS, UMR 8564
 Centre de recherches géographiques et méditerranéennes "Méditerranée, Analyse spatiale, SIG"
 Sources: Gurung, H., Nepal Social Demography and Expressions, Kathmandu, New Era, 1998, : 52.
 Logiciel ARCIHO version 7.2.1
 Réalisation F. PIROT, M. LEGRAND, A. DE SALES

of the state, and, to varying degrees, local autonomy, were the main issues which came to the fore in the spontaneous days following 1990—to the point that people feared the appearance of regional or communal conflicts of the sort seen in India. These were the issues which were thrashed out in tea houses and led to angry fist-shaking during political meetings. These discussions inevitably led to more and more debates over the definition of particular groups, and with them came the fundamentalist notion of pure and unequivocal ethnic affiliation. In this way of thinking, either one is born a ‘pure’ Magar, or not. This exclusive notion of group belonging defined in terms of blood derives from a concern to erect barriers between categories that previously were permeable. It can even be interpreted as an expression of alienation arising from the domination of the high castes who are well known, as noted above, for their use of purity to exclude and subordinate others.

Shortly after the new constitution was promulgated, those who sympathized with the ethnic organizations held an enormous demonstration in Kathmandu to protest specifically against Nepal’s official designation as a ‘Hindu kingdom’. Their call for a secular state that would no longer legitimate the superiority of the Tāgādhārī over the Matwālī (not to mention the low castes) went unheard.

Moreover, the national elections which followed did not reflect these priorities: not one single MP was elected from the ethnic organizations, either in 1991 or in 1994. Even in the eastern hills, the region with the strongest presence of organizations fighting for the rights of ethnic groups, and where several neighbouring districts form a bloc dominated by Limbus, the National Front for the Liberation of the People took second place to the communists. These political setbacks have generally been explained not only by the inevitable divisions between those making identity claims that reduce their importance at the national level, but also by the fact that, when people enter the voting booth, they prefer to vote for projects which are likely to improve their everyday life. Everyone is concerned about drinking water, jobs, and education, and national parties, including the communists, win votes with policies on these issues.

None the less, it is interesting that the ideals for which people are willing to be mobilized and risk death in street demonstrations do not appear or are much diluted in the political programmes that succeed at elections. The very same people who carry out a revolution to defend their identity will vote for politicians who promise them clean drinking water. To interpret this gap between the need for recognition and political action as a sign that the former is less important or less urgent than the latter would be to misunderstand individual motivations. Rather, it is a question of different motivations coming into play at different moments. But the very fact that

the dominant political process does not take identity claims seriously into account means that these claims are left unsatisfied; they remain full of life, and potentially revolutionary.

Another pole of opposition to the government is formed by the revolutionary communist movements which have figured regularly and prominently on the front pages of the daily newspapers for nearly five years. It is necessary to examine the history of their foundation in order to understand how they have taken root in particular locales.

The emergence of the Maoist movement

The Communist Party of Nepal was born towards the end of the Rana period, on September 15 1949, in Calcutta. Its founder, Pushpa Lal Shrestha, remained a radical republican up to his death in 1978, refusing all compromise with the king and insisting, in line with Maoist tradition, on a mobilization of the peasantry in order to overthrow the 'feudal state'. However, another tendency became apparent early on, which prefigured the emergence of a policy of reconciliation with the constitutional monarchy as a form of transition to the establishment of a republic. This position was taken up, to different degrees depending on the period, by Man Mohan Adhikari, who was elected general secretary of the party in 1953.¹⁴ In the general election of 1959 the communists won only four seats (out of 109), which demonstrated the small significance of the party at that period. Mahendra's coup d'état in 1960 forced the communists to go underground again. Factions multiplied.

At the end of the 1960s the peasant revolt in Naxalbari, in the Bengali foothills of east India, encouraged the Nepali revolutionaries to form a fraternal movement. Called after the district of Jhapa, which adjoins Naxalbari, the Jhapolis began 'a campaign to eliminate class enemies', which was forcibly repressed by the Nepalese army in 1973. From this group at least two further factions developed. The first, called the 'Fourth Convention', emerged in 1974 and is particularly well established in the natal region of its founder, Mohan Bikram Singh, in west-central Nepal (Gorkha and Pyuthan districts). Just before the 1980 referendum, which the Fourth Convention boycotted, the army was put on a war footing in this region (Hoftun *et al.* 1999: 237). After several internal splits, this faction became the Communist Party of Nepal (Mashal), which is at the forefront of the revolt today.¹⁵

¹⁴ This position was taken up above all by Keshar Jang Rayamajhi, who gave his name to a faction of the party in 1963. It was pro-Soviet and hardly exists today.

¹⁵ Hoftun *et al.* (1999: 392) give a useful diagram which represents all the numerous splits and regroupings of the various communist factions between 1949 and 1995.

The other group emerged in 1978 and became the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) or 'Mā-lé', first led by Pushpa Lal until his death in the same year, and later by his widow, Sahana Pradhan. The Mā-lé distanced themselves more and more from their Jhapali origin and gave up terrorism as a means of political action. Eventually they were close to the position adopted by Man Mohan Adhikari, with whom they allied themselves to form the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) or UML, which in 1991 became the second-strongest political force in the country after the Congress Party. They even formed a minority government of the country for nine months in 1994. The accession of the communists to power involved them abandoning the very principles which were at the origin of the movement. They accepted the Hindu kingdom and aimed for agrarian reform rather than armed combat against big landlords.

Small groups of revolutionary communists did not accept this tendency and turned their backs on those they accused of having slavishly followed the social-democratic policy of the dominant party 'as a tail follows its dog'. They remained faithful to orthodox Maoism and accused the new Chinese government, which overthrown the Gang of Four in 1976, of being counter-revolutionaries. During this period, mainly in the USA but also in Britain, revolutionary international movements were formed which advocated armed revolution against imperialism and revisionism. In March 1984 the CPN (Mashal) was represented at the second international conference of Maoist parties in London. This conference ended with the delegates of nineteen revolutionary movements, including the Peruvian Shining Path, signing a declaration that saw the birth of the Revolutionary International Movement or RIM.

In 1989-90 Mashal, as a party, did not join other Communists and the Congress in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD). None the less, its members were very active in the many demonstrations which began in February 1990. One of the young leaders of the party, Baburam Bhattarai, organized an alliance of extreme leftist groups under the name United People's Front (Samyukta Jan Morchā or SJM). Day after day the SJM pushed forward each stage of the struggle and was quick to criticize the MRD for failing to keep constant vigilance and being incapable of taking advantage of its position of strength to extract real concessions from the king (Nickson 1992: 366-70).

Bhattarai decided to stand for election in 1991 without intending to take his seat in Parliament. His aim was to show that his movement, which remained underground, was not a negligible force: they won nine seats and the status of a national party (with more than 3 per cent of the votes).

The map of the electoral results in 1991 is significant in this regard. It clearly demonstrates the cleavage between the Kathmandu Valley and the east of the country, where the communists won a majority of seats, and the west, dominated by the Congress Party. The regions which were the most politicized, and which returned communists, were also the best off economically, whereas the west contains the poorest districts. The few islands gained by the Maoists were to be found principally in the traditionally conservative west, specifically in the districts of Rukum and Rolpa which are of particular concern here.

The years which followed the first election were marked by extreme governmental instability. Different ministerial teams succeeded one another, alliances between the parties were made and remade in accordance with individual allegiances, which satisfied no one. In this new democratic context, those in power managed to lose their legitimacy in the eyes of a population which, in different forms, seemed to have lost its illusions.

On February 4 1996, the SJM submitted a list of forty demands to the government, requiring a response within two weeks or it would begin a 'People's War'. The memorandum strongly criticized the Hindu kingdom and demanded a republican constitution drawn up by a constituent assembly elected by universal suffrage. At the same time it evinced a virulent nationalism which criticized all Indian and Western influence.¹⁶

The government did not consider it wise to respond to this memorandum, and on February 13 the SJM carried out simultaneous raids against police stations in Haleri (Rolpa) and Athbiskot (Rukum). In Haleri the telephone lines were cut and a temple was set on fire. There were no deaths but the Maoist operations became more frequent. Three and a half years later, in 1999, a fortnightly leftist magazine¹⁷ had on its cover a photograph of Musikot, the district headquarters of Rukum, which had become the 'Maoist capital'; the (official) tally of deaths from the People's War had reached more than 1500.

¹⁶ In the first place it demanded that all treaties with India which threaten Nepali sovereignty must be abandoned (on these treaties, see Hoftun *et al.* 1999: 260 and 275). In addition it required Western imperialism to be fought, both as expressed in international development aid, which encourages general corruption, and in the 'pollution' of the media (video and licensed newspapers).

¹⁷ *Naulo Bihānī 2056* (1999, Baisākh-Sāun).

How the Maoists established themselves in the Kham Magar country

A natural guerilla site

Numerous newspaper articles have attempted to explain why this region has become a Maoist stronghold. Three factors are usually cited: the presence of the forest which offers a natural opportunity for guerilla operations, the particularly poor economic conditions, and finally a local population, mostly Magars, who are seen as

a naïve people... easily swayed.. but who, if they can be enlisted for a task, continue in it or die in the attempt. There is irony in the fact that as many Magars have been killed by the Maoists as by the police. According to unofficial statistics half of all victims have been Magars. (*Awaj Weekly Chronicle*, February 15 1999, Vol. 2, No. 23)

Poverty and the presence of the forest have certainly played their part in the rise of the Maoists, although the same conditions are of course found in many other regions of Nepal. The third point—the presence of the Magars—requires some commentary. The northern part of the area selected by the Maoists is in fact partly covered by the National Park of Dhorpatan, and the communal lands of the villages are still largely wooded: more than half of the districts of Rukum and Rolpa are forested.¹⁸ Furthermore, the extremely primitive state of the communications network keeps the hills in isolation.

These characteristics, which make the region an ideal refuge for fighters, equally impede its development. It is, along with some of the districts further to the north-west, one of the least developed of the country (Gurung 1998: 169, Fig. 30). In the two districts of Rolpa and Rukum there is, for example, not a single hospital nor any industry. Ninety-five per cent of the population live from agriculture. The most fertile land in the southern parts of the region is inhabited by Chetris, whereas the Kham Magar to the north and north-west live above 2000 metres and supplement agriculture with transhumant animal husbandry and the secret production of hashish.

This configuration is not unique to the region. The districts further to the west are, as just noted, equally isolated and poor and have experienced a very high level of emigration to India: every year hundreds of villagers in the area around Jumla are

¹⁸ Cf. HURPES (1999). HURPES is a Nepali human-rights NGO funded by the Norwegian Human Rights Fund. Its report traces the history of the leftist parties since 1990 and the birth of the Maoist movement in Nepal. Much of its information about the districts affected by the People's War is derived from investigations in the field.

forced by hunger to leave and seek whatever work they can find. Epidemics also ravage the enfeebled inhabitants. The great majority (more than 70 per cent) are Chetris and they tend to support the Congress Party. The success of the Maoists in establishing themselves in the west-central region does seem to be due, at least in part, to the presence of the Magars, the third frequently invoked factor.

It is easy to recognize in the quotation given above the stereotypes frequently used for those groups which provide recruits for the Gurkhas: naivety, courage, endurance, and loyalty to their leaders (who, one may suspect, are responsible for propagating the stereotypes in the first place). The military qualities of the Magars, Gurungs, and Kirantis have been praised many times—in inverse proportion to the degree to which those in charge have given them a place in running the country. And it may be that the young mountain-dwellers—brought up in harsh surroundings and enrolling at the end of their adolescence in the military (the only way they see of obtaining what they lack: regular income, education, travel)—do in fact correspond to these descriptions. It remains true that these are stereotypes and it would be false to imagine the Magars as a people who go to war blindly, unanimously following their leader.

Bearing these qualifications in mind, it is necessary to underline the similarities between the Nepalese situation and that which gave birth to the Naxalites. In his famous study of the revolutionary movement in India, Sumanta Banerjee noted that “a special feature of the peasant rebellions has been the role of the tribal population... It is significant that Naxalbari, where the first uprising took place in 1967, is inhabited by Santal tribal people who took a prominent part in the movement. In Srikakulam in the south also, where the movement matured in 1968, Girijans or the hill tribals, formed its nucleus” (Banerjee 1980: 33-4). That the tribals should have been the spearhead of the peasant revolts can be explained in the first place by the fact that they were the first to suffer because of continual immigration by peasants from the lowlands. But he also remarks that “through all these vicissitudes, the tribals have jealously guarded the autonomy of their various social institutions, and have retained a certain amount of militancy...” (ibid.: 34). If Banerjee had been writing today, no doubt the term ‘identity’ would have sprung naturally from his pen in connection with the tribal peoples.

The potential of these peoples for activism was well perceived by the leaders of the revolutionary movements. Banerjee (1980: 36) suggests that in the case of Srikakulam “both the existing economic frustration of the tribal peasants and their past militancy encouraged the leaders of the RCC [Revolutionary Communist Committee] to concentrate their activities in this area” (which was moreover largely for-

ested). One may well suppose that the leaders of the Nepalese Maoist movement followed a similar reasoning when they chose Rukum and Rolpa as the base area of their guerilla movement. The two leading figures of the Maoist movement are both Brahmins, originally from west Nepal and coming to politics during the student movements of the 1980s. Baburam Bhattarai, mentioned above, studied in India and presents himself as the theorist of the movement, whereas P.K. Dahal, better known by his *nom de guerre* Prachanda, is the commander in chief of the ‘people’s army’.

Certainly the situations in India and Nepal are different, if only because the events compared are separated by thirty years and the world and political forces have changed. It remains true that the Nepali revolutionaries see themselves as continuing the Naxalite heritage. The magazine of RIM, *A World to Win*, celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the Naxalbari revolt at the same time as the first anniversary of the People’s War in Nepal. A selection of writings by Charu Mazumdar, ‘the pioneer of Maoism in India’, was published in this issue as a source of inspiration for the activists of today. It is very likely that the Nepali leaders based themselves on the analysis of the earlier ideologists in organizing their guerilla campaign. Although many other scenarios may have been conceivable,¹⁹ the Kham Magar country probably appeared as a tempting target.

The country of the Kham Magar

As we have seen, the term ‘country’ refers to an entity that is simultaneously geographical and cultural: those who live there automatically feel attached to it. Each year the Kham Magar migrate south with their flocks of sheep; the southerners call

¹⁹ Although geographic and economic criteria would naturally tend to indicate the west of Nepal as the choice for a base, the Tharu groups in the Tarai could also have been susceptible to Maoist propaganda. Far more than the Magars, they are a people who have suffered from the exploitation of large landowners belonging to the high Hindu castes for whom they have to work in a kind of feudal relationship. Perhaps the Tharus’ reputation for timidity—they do not share the warlike character attributed to the hill populations—has played a part in the Maoists’ not taking this option. But this is not to say that the Tharus have remained unaffected by the movement. By contrast, the Kiranti groups in the east of the country are well known for their tradition of resistance to the state. The Limbus, as noted above, have a long tradition of fighting for their privileged form of tribal land tenure. However, not only are forests rarer in that part of Nepal, and impoverishment less extreme, but these tribal groups also possess a political organization which is perhaps more solid and less easily penetrated by the radicalism of the Maoists. Instead, the communists have been able to establish themselves in this region by skilfully including strong ethnic claims within their programme.



A Maoist propaganda poster stuck to a tree in Dolpo district, north of Rukum. Only part of the text is visible in the photograph. It is signed by a Maoist group and announces to passers-by that they are entering the territory under its jurisdiction. The authors refer to an assembly of people united in their opposition to hangings carried out by the government. In the foreground of the poster men and women are shown brandishing their weapons against government forces who can be seen running away from explosions in the background. The scene is dominated by a communist flag flying from the summit of a mountain behind which the sun is rising. In line with conventional communist imagery, this symbolizes the dawn of a new era. (I thank Marietta Kind for providing me with this image.)

them Shes and Shesini, i.e. ‘those who live high up, hidden away’ (Nep. *śeṣ*: ‘end’, ‘remainder’). They have long lived far from the centres of power and this distinguishes them from their cousins, the Magars, who are nowadays scattered everywhere throughout the kingdom. The Kham Magar inhabit about thirty compact villages in the higher parts of Rukum and Rolpa districts. All of them are peasant cultivators of land which they themselves own. They have hereditary relations with low service castes (blacksmiths and tailor-musicians) who live at the edge of their villages; no other caste has settled in their territory. With a history different from that of other Magars, the Kham Magar have conserved or developed many of their own unique cultural practices. They preserve a particularly rich and lively shamanic tradition, for example, which leads them to call their land ‘the country of the blind’ where only shamans can see (cf. Oppitz 1991). Their compact villages have as many as 300 or 400 houses and several thousand inhabitants.

These sizeable communities are endogamous. The Kham Magars marry preferentially with their matrilineal cross cousins: this form of alliance engenders a difference of status between the sons-in-law, the wife-takers, who thereby become inferior, and their maternal uncles, the wife-givers, who are superior to them. Numerous rituals, from weddings to funerals, and including ritual healing, reinforce this fundamental relationship, which defines every individual. Another important relationship exists between the founders of a given site, where a village is established, and later settlers. The former are believed to have a privileged relationship to the earth, which legitimates their dominance, both politically and religiously, in the community. Of course this dominance can be questioned. The analysis of some rituals allows one to surmise that the tensions between the two sides, i.e. the founders and the rest, are in fact at the heart of social dynamics in these communities (de Sales 1996).

These two structuring relationships, between founders and later immigrants on the one side, and between marital allies on the other, once coincided with each other, since the first founders made the later immigrants into their sons-in-law, by giving them both daughters and land. This bipartite schema became ever more complicated with time and the division of clans and lineages, but these social units are still visible in the layout of the village as well as of the cultivated fields which surround it. Behind the unity of these large villages, it is necessary to know how to discern clan-based fragmentation.

Members of the same clan believe that they share a common ancestor and common geographical origin, which, in the last analysis, determines clan exogamy. Thus each of the four Kham Magar clans—Pun, Gharti, Buda, and Rokha—is known

by a second geographical designation, which locates its ancient site of residence. Two members of different clans but originally coming from the same village may not marry each other. The conclusion is inevitable that belonging to a clan is not a matter of blood alone, but also of territory. In fact it is territorial attachment that is the ultimate determining factor.

The lack of identity politics despite the long-term presence of communism

The relative isolation of the Kham Magars may explain why ethnic activists have made little impression on them until recently. Ghore Bahadur Khapangi, the founder of the first national ethnic party, is himself a Magar, but he comes from the eastern Tarai. He is also the secretary of the National Magar Association (Nepāl Magar Sangh), which did not have a single Kham Magar volunteer or employee working in its office in 1997. Since then the Association has remedied this embarrassing lack, but Khapangi himself, when questioned on this point, argued that the Kham were not yet politicized and were difficult to mobilize because of their “lack of education”.²⁰ One may add that very few of them had entered the British army up to the middle 1980s, though their number has increased since then.²¹ The role of retired servicemen in the politicization of ethnicity has already been pointed out.

In contrast it seems that the village of Thawang, in the heart of the Kham country (in the north of Rolpa district), had already become communist as early as 1957. It was a bridgehead of the revolutionary movement founded by Mohan Bikram Singh in the neighbouring district of Pyuthan. Later, in 1980, a local with a very strong personality, Barman Budha, was elected the mayor of Thawang. He is known for having boycotted the referendum and burned the portraits of the King and Queen which are supposed to be displayed in every government office. He was imprisoned for five years and his project of establishing a commune in the village failed. But he returned and was elected as a Maoist (SJM) MP in 1991.

Locals relate how, before he went underground, he turned up at the first sessions of the National Assembly dressed as a Kham Magar peasant: around his thighs a short piece of cloth made of woven hemp, which left his legs naked, was held up by a long woollen belt wound several times around his waist, in which was stuck a large dagger (*khukuri*), the symbol of the hill peoples. An upper garment that crossed over his chest and formed a pocket on his back was the distinctive sign of Magar

²⁰ Interview with the author, May 1998.

²¹ In 1981, when I began my first fieldwork among the Kham Magar, not one of the 2,500 inhabitants of the village where I lived had joined the British army. Nowadays there are about twelve who have done so.

dress. The contrast between this and official Nepali costume was certainly striking. This story, told as a joke against the dominant high castes, shows how the revolutionary Maoist movement learned very quickly how to make skilful use of ethnic symbols.

Although the success of the SJM at the national polls in 1991 was relatively modest, in the following year's local elections it obtained a majority in Rolpa district and in neighbouring Rukum it came a very close second to the Congress Party. This advance of the Maoists was evidently seen as very threatening by the party in power (Congress). It was then that the activists of the two rival parties began a merciless war against each other. Amnesty International reported numerous cases of arbitrary arrest by the police, of torture and murders "including numerous Magars, members of the low Hindu castes, lawyers, teachers, and young people" and, on the other side, murders by Maoist activists of 'class enemies', meaning local politicians who belonged to the Congress Party.²²

Ancestral conflicts become murderous

It is not only crimes: false accusations have also become more common. They enable us to understand how it is that members of the same community have come to the point of killing each other, in the absence of the traditional safeguards that used to prevent conflict from getting out of hand and encouraged compromise between warring parties. Most false accusations are treated as matters of public order. The slightest altercation between two people in public, at a fair (*melā*) for example, is likely to be reported to the police by a witness. The case then becomes the responsibility of the Chief of Police. The accused is put in prison and stays there until his case appears in court, unless he can put up bail of 28,000 rupees. Very few villagers can afford or raise such a sum. Above all, in this context, the accused will doubt that the strength of his case will have any relevance, because the police chief, appointed by the Home Minister, will back up the supporters of the party in power. The majority find that the only solution is to run away 'into the forest', to a city, to the plains, or even to India in the hope of passing time there until their relatives manage to sort out the dispute.

An accusation by a neighbour who supports the Congress Party in power will be much talked about in the village, where all neighbours are relatives to some degree or other. Usually it serves to stir up ancient conflicts which would previously have been dealt with inside the community. The senior men of the clans would hold a

²² In addition, two SJM activists were assassinated in Rolpa and three communists in Dang during the national election campaign of 1994 (Amnesty International 1997: 3-4).

meeting at the headman's house in the presence of the parties to the dispute, and the difference would be discussed and settled. Villagers rarely resorted to the state's legal institutions in the district capital. Nowadays disputes of this sort very quickly move out of the control of the protagonists themselves. The Maoists get hold of it and send their hooded guerillas (*chāpāmār*) to kill the 'class enemy' who has made a 'false accusation'.

The 'people's army' is organized in such a way that the fighters in any one district always come from outside it. They are mostly young peasants (all castes mixed up), some of whom have suffered setbacks when attempting to emigrate to the town or abroad. They are led by leaders who are said to have received special training, sometimes in India. It is also said that in order to rise up in the hierarchy of the revolutionary army and to achieve the status of *chāpāmār*, it is necessary to kill a 'class enemy'. The fighters are informed about their victims by their contacts in the village, but they do not know them personally. This is how ancestral conflicts, rarely fatal until now, have become so.

In the past the opposition between 'us' and 'the others' (our clan and our affines, or the founders and the more recent settlers) was counterbalanced by a whole network of relationships which enabled life in common to carry on within the community. Affiliation to national political parties has dissolved the boundaries of the village. The neighbour who makes an accusation is protected by the party in power, the accused is 'defended' by the revolutionaries. The two sides then become pawns who are manipulated by forces outside the community. This type of scenario occurs more easily in a society that has already become fragile, a society whose members are no longer in a position to unite in the face of forces coming from the outside.

It is striking that the opposition between the two parties at the local level makes far more use of a logic of identity reduced to its most basic form than it does of political convictions. The large village of Taka illustrates this phenomenon particularly well. Two clans there marry each other: the Gharti, the founders of the site, and the Budha, who arrived later. If one knows that the Gharti support the Congress Party, it is not hard to guess that the majority of the Budha support the SJM. This should not blind us to other cleavages which are important nowadays, in particular the generational gap between the youth, who are more easily seduced by Maoist propaganda, and their elders who no longer have the right to pronounce on political matters, whatever their clan. None the less, it remains true that the overturning of traditional rules exacerbates the logic of identity and leads to murder.

Khapangi was very quick to denounce a situation in which Kham Magar peasants were fighting a war that was not theirs, but that of the two parties fighting for territory. He emphasized that once again the Magars were the victims of high castes, since the political leaders both of the Congress Party and of the revolutionary movement were equally Brahmans. The Maoist conquest has been made at the cost of Magar blood, just like the conquest of 'great Nepal' by Prithvi Narayan Shah. The founder of the first ethnic party wants to awake the feeling of Magar identity among the Kham. Such ethnic feeling will follow paths that are hard to predict.

The development of the situation

The situation which has just been described obtained at the beginning of the 'People's War' in 1996. But it was transformed by the intervention of the police who were supposed to re-establish order. Conflicts were displaced. It was no longer a case of villagers settling scores by using the Maoists as intermediaries. It became a direct confrontation between the Maoists and the state. There is no space here to go into the details of the police procedures which have been denounced for four years by numerous organizations concerned to defend human rights. It is enough to know that, in addition to almost daily cases of arbitrary arrest or murder reported in the national press, three special police operations have been launched. In November 1995 a squadron of 165 policemen, of whom 50 had received special military training, were charged with 'winning the hearts and minds' of the people of Rolpa in an operation dubbed 'Romeo' (an involuntary irony derived from the language of radio transmission: Romeo was the 'R' for Rolpa). In June 1998 there began an operation called 'Kilo Sera Two' what was to last for more than a year in eighteen districts. The police were charged with finding the Maoists in the most remote villages and in the forest where they were hiding. Finally the last operation appeared in the newspapers under a name that requires no commentary: 'Search and Kill'.

The organization of daily life in the village is paralysed: peasants who leave the village risk being arrested by the police who suspect them of helping the guerillas. Thus taking animals to pasture, departing for summer residences, going to the forest to collect berries and mushrooms, which form a not insubstantial part of the village diet, have become either impossible or extremely problematic. Schools are closed. Young men, those who have not joined the guerillas in the forest, have left to hide in the big cities or in India. It is said that the women plough and the old people keep silent.

All the accounts I have received describe an impossible living situation. The villages are harassed at night by Maoists who have to be fed and during the day by policemen looking for suspects. But very quickly, and whatever their political incli-

nations, my informants admit that they prefer the Maoists, who make do with maize and salt, whereas the police demand chicken and alcohol. Above all, the Maoists have shown themselves over time to be predictable in the way they deal with people. They inform the villagers about their activities during programmes that they hold, usually at night. Individuals from whom money is demanded are informed by letter. They have the reputation of never harming poor people, whereas the police, no doubt themselves often under pressure, consider any peasant they meet on the path to be guilty and often beat them without any further investigation.

The villagers view their country as currently being unjustly persecuted by the forces of the state. A feeling of revolt has developed that focuses on the defence of their territory, a sentiment that has been cleverly exploited by the revolutionaries who promise the Kham Magars autonomy. Thus the situation has evolved considerably over the four years of the People's War. It began as intra-communal conflicts which were used by two opposed political parties, and it has become transformed into a struggle for territorial autonomy, an entirely new idea for the Kham Magar. This idea put forward by ethnic activists only caught on among the Kham Magar with the development of the Maoist guerilla movement. The villagers do not notice the paradox of the revolutionaries, fervent defenders of a new nation, becoming activists in favour of ethnic autonomy. Ideological principles, which are in any case rarely made explicit, give way before the necessities of action. The needs of the Maoists (to have a secure base territory for their guerilla action) and those of the villagers (to protect themselves from a government that has become hostile and dangerous) coincide, even though their projects are not the same. The Maoists' techniques are capable of covering up such ambiguities.

The symbolic conquest of territory and its revitalization

Despite its overt anti-religious statements, Marxism possesses a hidden religious dimension that has often been remarked upon. The first analysts who were interested in this question in the Nepali context sought to point out the continuity between communism and certain elements of Hindu and particularly Buddhist tradition (Hoftun *et al.* 1999: 215-18). Philippe Ramirez demonstrates how a materialist ideology has been adapted to Nepalese reality, "a society where religion does not constitute an autonomous domain" (1997: 52), and how the practice of Nepalese Maoism is hardly a secular affair. He mentions in particular the cult of 'martyrs' (*śahīd*), a term that refers both to the communist victims of repression under the Panchayat regime and to present-day Maoists killed by the police. According to Ramirez, this cult can be traced back to traditional conceptions in which "the martyr who dies a violent death can only escape from eternal wandering by a recognition of his status, which is the equivalent of reintegrating him into society"

(Ramirez 1997: 60). In the region discussed here this fundamental ritual of Maoist propaganda has been adapted in a way that returns us precisely to the discussion of territory.

An article that appeared in a Maoist-aligned magazine in May 1998 contained a balance sheet of two years of the ‘People’s War’ in Rolpa district: 56 civilians killed by the police were declared as martyrs.²³ Their names were combined and given to two gardens set up in their honour, to about a dozen paths, and to five wayside stopping places with stone platforms (often constructed in the shade, they enable travelers to put down their loads).²⁴ Although the gardens are a new idea (borrowed, presumably, from a communist vision of urban development), the resting platforms and paths are traditionally built in memory of the dead, who then, in Kham Magar belief, become ancestors. Established in a locality where he will receive regular worship, the dead spirit will, it is believed, ensure the prosperity of the place. It seems that the revolutionaries have adopted this reasoning: they seek to neutralize the violent deaths of the victims of the People’s War by turning them into benevolent ancestors.

Another example illustrates how the Maoists are willing to follow local traditions. Two commemorative pillars have been erected. One, at the top of a hill, celebrates the second anniversary of the ‘people’s war’ and is called ‘Śahīd’. The other has been put up exactly on the Jaljala pass, the highest point of the district. It has been baptized ‘Sija’, from ‘Sisne’ (a neighbouring pass) and ‘Jaljala’. This site is particularly rich in symbolism for the villagers of the valley it overlooks. The god Braha lives there and each year hundreds of rams are sacrificed in his honour. Braha is a local god attached to a specific village territory (there are numerous accounts of conflict between neighbouring Brahas); he is closely linked to the ancestors (de Sales 1991: 145-6). Establishing a commemorative pillar on his site shows that the revolutionaries do not think that it is sufficient to occupy a place physically, but that they have to root it in a specific history of events in which the principal actors are locals. The veneration of dead heroes both ties this history to the place and opens it up to the other world.

Alongside this appropriation of space by means of ritual activity, the Maoists take care to eulogize places, just as they exalt the dead. The article cited above finishes with a series of praises in the epic style of communist propaganda:

²³ *Muktiyuddha* (The War of Liberation), no. 1.

²⁴ Several of the names were represented by the first syllable only, in order to make a single name by running them together.

Rolpa will be immortal in the history of Nepal. Rolpa is not just a district, it is Nepal. It is the source of revolution, the centre of hope. Glory to Jaljala, glory to Sisne! For Jaljala [we feel] an infinite faith and for Sisne a deep love!

Thus the ‘country’ that was forgotten in its remote fastnesses is placed at the centre of the nation, praised for *being* the nation itself, and the mountain passes that are so intimately related to the villagers’ everyday landscape are recognized by everyone as the source of deep attachments. This need for recognition, the source of the revolt over identity, is expressed most movingly in revolutionary songs. More than a hundred songs are recorded on cassettes that are handed around clandestinely. They deserve a separate study, but it should be noted here that although propaganda rhetoric is present, most of them simply describe the suffering (*dukha*) of the peasant trying to survive in a country where the conditions have become too difficult and which he is often forced to leave to seek his fortune elsewhere. The musical style of the traditional folk songs of west Nepal conveys with nostalgia all ‘the love for this country in the shadow of Dhaulagiri, stretched out in the cool of the evening’.

It is difficult to know whether the revolutionaries make use of such traditional techniques for their own ends in full consciousness of what they are doing, or whether such techniques impose themselves as a spontaneous response to a situation of crisis. Or, to put it another way, whether it is a question of a strategic or a traditional use of local tradition. Either way, local tradition continues to live on in their practices. The ethnic movements, by contrast, have set themselves up to defend a tribal heritage which loses its vitality in the very efforts made to define it, when it is represented in cultural programmes or made the instrument of political ambitions.

Another example goes in the same direction. When the Magar activist calls himself a warrior who has been cursed and is without strength, he is certainly the victim of the stereotypes which depict him as a brave and long-suffering fighter. The hill tribes have been trapped by these descriptions by means of a process of ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Clarke 1995: 114-15). It remains true that the depression and frustration which results cannot find much satisfaction in the contradictions of ethnic revivalism, as expressed in the desire to save Magar society by reforming its ‘excessive’ or superstitious customs.

In contrast, the revolutionary struggle may seem to offer a solution when it preaches the ‘annihilation of class enemies’. Charu Mazumdar, the ideologist of the Naxalite movement which the Nepali Maoist leaders view as a forerunner to their own, conceived of battle (and murders) as the only way in which “the new man [can]

be reborn” (cited in Banerjee 1980: 145). The conception of a ‘nation sacrificed by feudals’, ‘eaters of men’, is central to Nepali revolutionary propaganda, as is the necessity of ‘taking revenge for the blood of the martyrs’. The conceptual universe revealed by these few key terms of activist discourse is evidently organized around a sacrificial schema, and this suggests that the combatants, by participating in the revolutionary struggle, are seeking some kind of symbolic revitalization.

It was suggested above that there was considerable truth in the remark made by Khapangi, to the effect that the Magars have found themselves fighting a war that is not theirs: they are just cannon-fodder for the two parties struggling over their territory. Perhaps one could go further and suggest that the young people enrolled by the Maoists are fighting precisely in order to revive the strength of the warriors that they suppose their grandfathers to have been, and to free them from the curse that has paralysed them and reduced them to silence in their own territory. This would then be their way of appropriating the war and making it their own.

Conclusion

In conclusion let us consider the way in which the Kham Magars have resorted to an intensified sense of identity in relation to their ‘country’. Should one see it as a resurgence, in a situation of crisis, of a traditional identity which combines both territorial and cultural ties in one, which fixes on the locality’s uniqueness rather than on its differences from the other countries of the kingdom? Richard Burghart expressed this Nepalese notion of ‘country’ particularly well when he remarked, “Although a native may claim that his country is best of all, the point... is not that one’s country is better than any other country; it is that one’s country is best for oneself” (Burghart 1996: 235). No doubt the villagers caught up in the chaos of the guerilla war feel great nostalgia for their country, either because they have been forced to leave it, or because they have to see it being torn apart by incessant fighting. But their attachment to their country and their efforts to defend it or to claim autonomy for it are about as far as it is possible to be from the projects of the revolutionary leaders. Maoist propaganda is quite clear: when it draws a metonymic link between Rolpa and Nepal (“Rolpa... is Nepal”), it is attempting to construct a nation out of all these countries, a nation in which all these countries will be united and ultimately dissolved. The Maoist project with respect to the nation is remarkably similar to that of King Mahendra as evident in the discourse, discussed above, in which all subjects were to find their ‘identity’ in their shared devotion to the newly conscious nation.

Let us note, finally, that the guerilla war is simply accelerating the exodus of the mountain-dwellers for the valleys further south where the dynamism of the nation

is located. Thus, the focus of the Kham Magars on their identity in relation to their country has to be viewed as the response of individuals who are caught in a bind. Once the crisis has passed, however that may come about, they will abandon their autonomy and their principal aspiration will be to merge into the wider Nepali population.

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