

Utopia and Ideology among the Magars: Lakhan Thapa versus Mao Dzedong?

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The Magars form the largest minority in Nepal, with one and a half million individuals recorded in the 1991 census. They are scattered throughout the country, but are more concentrated in their original territory, the Magarant, located in west-central Nepal. The majority of Magars are peasants, but Magar men are numerous in the Indian and the Nepalese armies and often emigrate temporarily to India to earn money. Since the 1990s the Magars have been closely linked with Maobadi activism, both as victims and actors, especially in the districts of Rolpa, Rukum, and Pyuthan.¹ Despite the great number of articles that have been published in newspapers, information on this secret war is scarce and difficult to analyse, because it often originates from biased sources such as the police, journalists who have not done fieldwork, leaders of the movement, or villagers talking from hearsay. According to the latter, who are perhaps the best source for an understanding of the sociological origin of the guerrillas, the majority of the Maobadis are young men, comparatively educated, who have no hope of finding salaried work and are unwilling to work as farmers like their fathers. They live in groups in the forests, where they hide during the day. Villagers often say, "During the day the policemen walk, during the night the Maobadis walk." Maobadi armed groups mainly attack police stations and their aim, according to the people, is to get rid of the police as well as the wealthy men.² Many wealthy families in the hills owned lands both in the Tarai and around their houses, but they usually preferred to spend most of

¹ On this subject, see de Sales (this issue), and on the Nepalese Maoist ideology in general, see Ramirez (1997). I would like to thank them both: the former for having sent me her unpublished paper and the latter for having communicated to me the text 'Strategy and Tactics of Armed Struggle in Nepal' as well as for his helpful comments on the present article.

² Their target, as formulated in the text entitled 'Strategy and Tactics of Armed Struggle in Nepal' which was adopted by the central committee of the Maoist party of Nepal in March 1995, is as follows: "...the target of armed struggle will be the confiscation of the lands of feudals and landlords and their distribution amongst the landless and poor peasants on the basis of the land-to-the-tiller principle, and in order to cut the roots of imperialist

the year in the hills where the climate is more temperate. Many have already been forced to quit the hills to settle in the Tarai, in order to flee from the Maobadis. However, the simple peasants also fear the Maobadis, because burglars take the opportunity of the guerrilla war to rob the common man. The villagers say that they cannot distinguish the Maobadis from the *dāubādīs*, a name for these opportunist thieves. The ideology of the Nepalese Maoist movement is strongly egalitarian and communalistic: these two features are attractive to the Magars because they have always stressed the sense of equality and mutual help which prevails among their group.

The question of status is also largely debated within the framework of the other major ideological movement which has emerged in the last decade in the Magar community: ethnic revivalism. Indeed, parallel to the secret war, ethnic associations, ethnic meetings, and ethnic publications have flourished. These two streams developed at the same time. Though they are not visibly connected, there are some striking examples of individuals who are activists in both movements, such as the Magar poet, Khadgasimha Baral, who is (or was) both an ethnic activist and a Maoist militant.

In many respects these two movements appear as two distinct paths: one advocates peaceful changes within the law, the other advocates the use of violence and revolution.³ Both advocate something approaching a utopian ideology, i.e., aiming to build an ideal society where there will no longer be rich or poor, low or high, alcoholism, etc...

In this paper I shall discuss and analyse the case of a Magar rebel of the 19th century whose story shares many features with that of the Maoist guerrillas. Interest-

exploitation to attack projects such as industries, banks etc. which are in the hands of comprador and bureaucratic capitalists, and also projects run by government and non-government organizations." The Maobadis' main allies tend to be farm workers, bonded labourers, landless peasants, porters and poor peasants, cart pullers, rickshaw pullers, and drivers of tempos and taxis. Their strategy is to take peasant revolution as the backbone, and to rely on and unite with the peasants to surround the city from the countryside.

³ These two paths are also specifically related to each of the two major sub-groups constituting the so-called Magar ethnic group. While ethnic activism is apparently more prevalent among the 'southern' Magars, Maoism is strongly connected with the 'northern' Magars. However, this occidental taxonomy is not used by the Magars themselves, who distinguish between the eastern and the western Magars, on the basis of more accurate geographical observations.

ingly, this rebel is a major figure in Magar ethnic activism and is also recognized as a revolutionary by the Maoists.⁴ This rebellion may shed light on current events by placing them in a historical continuity of revolutionary movements; in return, the current situation will help to articulate the recent reinterpretation and instrumentalization of this old rebellion within the framework of ethnic and/or political Magar movements.

Lakhan Thapa was probably born in 1834. He joined the Magar battalion created by Prithvi Narayan Shah, but after he had attained the rank of captain he quit the army in 1869 and established himself in the village of Bungkot, in the neighbourhood of Manakamana, Gorkha district. There he organized a rebellion against the government of Jang Bahadur, creating a real utopian kingdom. He built a palace with an exercise ground for his 'soldiers' and in 1871 he was consecrated as a local king by the population. He used to say:

Jagadamba Kalimata offered me this prediction, (*bardān*): 'Jang Bahadur has sold Nepal to the barbarians (*mleccha*), the people call for help. Displace Jang, relieve Mother Nepal of the burden of sin, re-establish the *satya yug* in Nepal!' Let's go, my brothers, be ready! (Ranamagar 1997)

Although Lakhan Thapa was hung to death in front of his house in 1876, he is believed to have used his tantric powers to bring about the death of Jang Bahadur seven days after his own.

In his well-known history of Nepal, Balchandra Sharma describes Lakhan Thapa as "ridiculous"; the Ajanta dictionary (n.d.: 490) goes further: the entry under his name reads, "a worthless person; a good for nothing fellow". Who was this 'ridiculous' and 'worthless' man in whom the Magar ethnic activists have found a potent symbol of their movement? An official acknowledgement of the ill treatment meted out to this Lakhan Thapa was the first of the ten claims the Nepal Magar Sangh set before the Nepalese government in the 1990s.

In February 2000 the anniversary of Lakhan Thapa's death was the occasion for a great meeting organized jointly by various Magar associations: the Magar Samāj Sevā Kendra (Lalitpur), the Nepal Magar Sangh (Kathmandu), the Sorāṭhī Kalā

⁴ In 'Strategy and Tactics of Armed Struggle in Nepal', one reads, "Here, even after the development of the centralized Nepalese state, the Nepalese people have been fighting and opposing in their own way the atrocities let loose by the ruling classes, especially the Ranas and the Shahas. Notable among these are many clashes within the different ruling classes and the rebellion of Lakhan Thapa against the Ranas."

Kendra, and the Central Magar Students' Union.⁵ The *Rising Nepal* of 24 February 2000 announced that His Majesty's Government had decided to declare the late Lakhan Thapa as a 'first martyr' and to provide Rs 500,000 to install his statue in the village of Bungkot, in Gorkha district, where he led his action and died. An article in the same newspaper, dated 6 March 2000, reported that the Magar association had expressed its appreciation to the Government for this decision, but its members had gone further, asking the Government to establish a statue of Lakhan Thapa in Thapathali, to rename it 'Place of the Martyr Lakhan Thapa', to issue a stamp bearing his portrait, and to rename the Manakamana cable car 'Lakhan Thapa Cable Car'.

Numerous articles and even some books have recently been devoted to the life and deeds of Lakhan Thapa. All are written by Magar authors. Some older texts also mention him, but only in passing. I shall first sketch out his biography using these older documents, whose biases are obviously different from those of the more recent ones. I shall then examine his new image as moulded by Magar scholars, and finally compare the differences between these two views.⁶

Only the more recent writings debate the birthplace of Lakhan Thapa. According to Shivalal Thapa, his chief biographer,⁷ he was born in Arghau, a village located in Kaski district, Central Nepal. When he was 4 or 5 years old, he was taken away

⁵ From *The Kathmandu Post*, Feb. 15, 2000. "Lalitpur, Feb 14. People from different walks of life gathered here today to mark the 124th death anniversary of Lakhan Thapa, the first martyr of Nepal. Lakhan Thapa was born in 1834 in a remote village of Bungkot, Kaule VDC in Gorkha. He retired as army captain after 14 years of service and later became a religious preacher. He started revolting the general public against the rule of Jang Bahadur. As a result, he was hanged to death in his own residence at the age of forty-two. The program was jointly organized by Magar Samaj Sewa Kendra (Lalitpur), Nepal Magar Sangh (Kathmandu), Sorathi Kala Kendra and Central Magar Students' Union. On the occasion, Minister for Local Development Chiranjivi Wagle assured any kind of support to the task or plan related with martyr Lakhan Thapa. He said, 'We will soon include Lakhan Thapa in the school curriculum.' At the function, various other speakers highlighted on the role played by martyr Thapa. The programme was chaired by Nepal Magar Sangh district chairman Dharma Raj Thapa."

⁶ The documents consulted for this article are as follows: military reports published in the Regmi Research Series; an undated chronicle published in Nepali by Gyanamani Nepal; and the biography of Jang Bahadur Rana written by his son. With this corpus I contrast recent Magar writings, which claim to be based on local oral traditions.

⁷ The most often quoted reference for Lakhan Thapa is Shivalal Thapa's book *Ojhelmā Parekā Magarharū*.

from there to Lucknow by his father, who was a soldier in the British Indian Army. According to this author, he was educated there. Other Magar writers have rejected this hypothesis. According to Ranamagar (1997: 73), Lakhan Thapa was probably born at Manakamana,⁸ as he bears the name of the famous saint who founded the sanctuary of the goddess Manakamana. Why, argues this author, would he have gone from India to Bungkot, a village close to this sanctuary, and why would he have enrolled in the Nepalese army if his parents were in Lucknow and his father was in the Indian army? Similarly, Ranamagar finds it whimsical to believe that Lakhan Thapa's name derives from the city of Lucknow rather than from the name of the saint Lakhan Thapa, as Shivalal Thapa stated. According to Harkabahadur Budha Magar (1997), it is ascertained that Lakhan Thapa was born in vs 1891 (1834) to a Magar family residing in Kaule, a hamlet located in Bungkot, in the neighbourhood of Manakamana. This author also rejects Shivalal Thapa's version of Lakhan Thapa's birth and childhood. Why, he asks, would Lakhan's father have risked taking his family along the dangerous path, "infested by tigers, bears and brigands" leading to India? Budha Magar also notes that the line of the saint Lakhan Thapa's younger brother inherited the priesthood at the Manakamana temple and still maintained the custom of adding the name of the founder to their own, that is Lakhan Thapa (the first). On the basis of his name, Budha Magar argues that Lakhan Thapa the second was from this same lineage.

In 1911 (vs 1854), aged 20, Lakhan Thapa joined the Nepalese army and was attached to a Magar battalion, the Purāno Gorkhā Gaṇa, which had been created by Prithvi Narayan Shah. The history of this Magar battalion sheds some light on the participation of this ethnic group in the great geo-political changes which occurred in Nepal during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Purāno Gorkhā Gaṇa had taken part in the 'unification' of Nepal, playing an important role in the successive annexations of the Eastern Chaubisia kingdoms, the Kathmandu Valley, the western Chaubisia and Baisia kingdoms, and Kumaon and Garwhal.

This battalion of Magar tribal recruits was first attached to the Shah Thakuris' cause and helped them in their conquests. Soon after that blitzkrieg, the battalion distinguished itself in 1815 during the Anglo-Nepalese war. When Lakhan Thapa joined it, these deeds were still quite fresh and they certainly contributed to the fame of the Purāno Gorkhā Gaṇa. Soon after he was recruited, however, the Purāno Gorkhā Gaṇa, which was then under the command of Jang Bahadur, the usurper Prime Minister, was sent to rescue their previous enemies, the British, during the Sepoy mutiny. Lakhan's battalion was sent to Lucknow in 1857. Indeed the Purāno

⁸ The Manakamana temple is located in Gorkha district.

Gorkhā Gaṇa was one of the 25 Nepalese battalions which were sent to help crush the Sepoy mutiny. This event certainly upset the Nepalese order and should be placed in its proper context if it is to be understood.

Obviously, the position of the Nepalese soldiers was difficult under these circumstances. In fact, more generally, it should be noted that Magar soldiers have often served causes which have not directly concerned them or the defence of their territories. Leaving aside the feelings of the soldiers who ‘unified’ Nepal, it seems that during the reign of Jang Bahadur rebellions emerged among the tribal recruits of the Nepalese army.⁹

The Ramsay narration (reproduced in Hasrat 1971: 334) reports a rebellion which is surprisingly similar to the Lakhan Thapa case but took place 20 years earlier, in June 1857—just before Jang’s decision, in July of the same year, to send 14,000 men to India to reinforce the British army:

On the 2nd of June a serious event was expected at Kathmandu, owing to the state of feeling which was supposed to exist in the sipahis of Gurung class, and the measures which the Darbar intended to adopt should they hesitate in pronouncing sentence of death upon a Gurung Jamadar, who had confessed being engaged in a conspiracy to assassinate Maharaja Jung Bahadur. It had been decided to attempt to annihilate 1700-1800 men, (52 guns had been placed in position for the purpose) should they not promptly pass the sentence of death that was required of them. Happily, the Resident succeeded in inducing the Minister to change his plans and a bloody

⁹ According to an undated chronicle of the kingdom of Garh (Dabaral Charan 1973), “Ram (sic) Bahadur Shah gave orders for the conquest of the hill principalities. This order set off a wave of jubilation in [...] the army. Soldiers were paid full salaries during a campaign, and also expected to profit from plunder.” Interestingly, the main thesis of the Maoist text ‘Strategy...’ is that the Nepalese people are by nature violent, and that “[t]he reactionary propaganda that the Nepalese people are peace-loving and that they don’t like violence is absolutely false.” The text is an apologia for the use of violence. It remarks that, “Until today, whatever general reforms have been achieved by the Nepalese people have had behind them the force of the violent and illegal struggle of the people,” but it severely criticises the engagement of Nepalis in other people’s struggles: “Foreign imperialism and its running dog, the domestic reactionary ruling class, have conspiratorially turned the brave Nepalese into mercenary soldiers.” Long before ‘foreign imperialism’, Nepalis, and especially Magars, were engaged as mercenaries. Thus, B. Acharya (1975: 169) writes of the Malla kings of the Kathmandu valley: “They also used to invite Khas and Magars from Gorkha and Tanahu for military assistance.”

struggle was averted, which, had it taken place, might have led to a revolution and a total change in the Nepalese policy towards the British Government.

Although we do not know exactly if this rebellion was linked to the decision to send the Nepalese army against the sepoys, this affair is a precedent for the Lakhan Thapa rebellion. In addition, it shows one aspect of the then Nepalese government's policy toward ethnic problems. As this case illustrates, this policy consistently induced the members of an ethnic group (here organized in a single battalion) to punish their defecting member or otherwise receive collectively the same punishment.¹⁰ This perverse and efficient totalitarian policy seems also to have been adopted in the case of Lakhan Thapa, whose denunciation and arrest was led by a group of soldiers among whom historical documents attest the notable presence of Magars.¹¹

The British Resident also mentions another agitator whose politico-religious discourse may be brought together with the allegations against Lakhan Thapa. A man, whose identity is unknown, is said to have wandered through Nepalese villages in the year 1852, claiming that Jang Bahadur was planning to sacrifice 150 children to the gods and that he was himself in charge of collecting them. The terrified mothers, it is said, offered him huge amounts of money in exchange for their children. This man was arrested and taken to the Tundikhel in Kathmandu, where he was forced to confess his crimes in front of the army.

Although detail is lacking, the similarity with Lakhan Thapa's case is striking. Indeed, Pudma Jung Bahadur Rana states that before his rebellion Lakhan Thapa had already been arrested and judged by Jang Bahadur for having extorted money from villagers, disguised as a 'holy man':

He had for some time been in the habit of masquerading as a saint about the streets of Gorkha, and of extorting money from the simple-minded rustics who gave credence to his pretensions. He had been sent over for trial to the Maharaja, before whom he confessed that he was assuming that disguise merely for bread, and then he was let off as a silly fellow from whom no danger could be expected. He then used this pardon for the pur-

¹⁰ While the Ramsay account appears to indicate that the Gurung rebel was not killed, a letter written by the same resident, quoted by Whelpton (1991: 211), reports that he was put to death by his own regiment at the Tundikhel.

¹¹ He was perhaps executed by Magar soldiers as well, but no document mentions who hanged him.

pose of further cheating the people to whom he represented that he had won forgiveness from the Maharaja by virtue of his saintly qualities. The pardon had encouraged him in his malpractice, till he was arraigned of the charge of fomenting a rebellion and hanged... (1974: 302-4)

This account does not allow us to know exactly what the ‘malpractice’ of Lakhan Thapa was at this early stage, for numerous holy men wander and beg in the Nepalese villages without being prosecuted. This first arrest of Lakhan Thapa may indicate that his speech already had a subversive tone against the government, before he decided to instigate an organized rebellion.

As for the man mentioned by the resident, his tongue was cut out in front of the troops after he had confessed his crime. Why were this confession and this torture organized in front of the army? Was this man a soldier? Or was the scene intended to edify the army?

Other historical details tend to indicate that under Jang Bahadur the army was viewed as a reduced and idealized image of the whole society. Thus, it was in front of the army, for instance, that the king announced to his ‘people’ the nomination of Jang Bahadur as Raja of Kaski and Lamjung in 1856 (Hasrat 1971: 332). In fact, since its creation by Prithvi Narayan, the composition of the Nepalese army had consistently reflected the social structure. It had been divided by this king into four ethnic battalions, which corresponded to the division of society into four classes to which he often alluded in his memoirs: Bahun, Khas, Magar, Thakuri (Naraha-rinath 1964: 7). This initial ethnic organization of the army was retained (or recreated) under the Rana regime. But in each battalion there were both artisanal castes and high castes, presenting an image parallel to the caste system: the head of the army was the king (or the prime minister), the highest positions were given to his family and high-caste individuals, the bulk of the troops were mid-ranking groups (including all the tribal groups), and this ensemble was served by low castes, such as musicians or blacksmiths. This organization in a way mirrors the codification of the groups as it appeared in the code of Jang Bahadur,¹² dated 1854. As dreamed of by any dictator, the army plays the role of an ideal society which is made real, organized and modelled at will, where control and command are not obstructed by individuals.

¹² Whelpton (1991: 210) writes that Jang Bahadur “decided to segregate the different groups in their own regiments. The intention... was to minimize the danger of mutiny...”

Under Jang Bahadur, the *mise en scène* of the execution of the rebels is particularly symbolic and sets a striking example. It explicitly connects an individual with the group to which he belongs, as a reminder that from the king's bird's-eye view only communities can be seen, rewarded or punished when they, or any of their members, commit a misdeed.¹³ Such was the case of the Gurung soldier mentioned by Ramsay, whom Jang Bahadur planned to see executed by the 1700 men of his own battalion, who were themselves surrounded by 52 guns which were ready to fire. The case of the man who was forced to confess his crimes on the Tundikhel in front of the army before having his tongue cut out and being paraded in this state in all the villages he had visited was also symbolic; as was the case of the five people who were beheaded at the five gates of Kathmandu for having plotted to assassinate Jang Bahadur. Lakhan Thapa's execution was symbolic as well, as we shall see.

As a leitmotif, the Magars tell of the military bravery of their ancestors, claiming that it has not been recognized by the state, whatever high-caste leadership they helped to create. For example, in the history of the unification of Nepal, they picture themselves as heroes who built the country, without considering the possibility that they themselves cut the branch on which they sat by annihilating the power they had in petty kingdoms such as Palpa where they were numerically dominant and closely linked to the royal family. This situation is perhaps due to the fact that the petty kingdom which grew into a nation by swallowing its numerous neighbours was precisely a former Magar territory, where members of this group were numerous and closely related to the royal family through their cults. In a way, the Magars undoubtedly have the feeling that Gorkha's victory is also their own. In current historical reconstruction, the Magars present themselves as the champions of the Thakuri, welcoming them in their territories, protecting them against the Muslims, consecrating them as kings in many places, offering them their princesses, and serving them faithfully in their temples and their armies.¹⁴ In many regards, Lakhan

¹³ Whether mono-ethnic or not, the company was a single body. Thus, when Bakhtwar Singh Thapa was dismissed and imprisoned by Bhimsen Thapa, the Samar Jung Company he had commanded was equally punished: "Men of all other companies were given a weekly holiday on Saturdays, but the Samar Jung Company was denied this privilege. Even its flag, known as 'Devata' was not spared, and was treated in an undignified manner. The flag-bearers... used to raise the flag above their shoulders, and install it on the ground when necessary. Bhimsen Thapa enforced rules requiring the flag of this company to be carried on the shoulders in a low position, instead of being raised, and to be thrown on the ground as occasion demands... These rules were strictly followed even by the Rana rulers and remained in force till democracy was proclaimed in Nepal" (Acharya 1972 : 66-7).

¹⁴ On this subject, see Lecomte-Tilouine (1997).

Thapa's action, as recounted by Magar scholars, is fully in continuity with this relationship between the Magars and those who hold power.

Lakhan Thapa's rebellion and the 'kingdom' of Bungkot

In 1869 or 1870 Lakhan Thapa and his faithful friend, Jaya Simha Cumi Rana, received three months' leave. They went together to Bungkot, where his friend's family—and maybe also his own—lived. There they decided not to return to the army and started to build a utopian and rebel kingdom. It is said that they constructed a palace and an exercise ground to train their 'soldiers' in Bungkot. A report on Lakhan Thapa's arrest dated March 1876 provides a more precise description of this palace (Regmi 1980). Written by soldiers sent to Bungkot by Jang Bahadur, it reads, "The house in which Lakhan Thapa lives is surrounded on all sides by a wall 8 cubits wide and 16 cubits high, like that of a fort." The building boasted five floors, as is indicated in an extract from a chronicle published by Joshi and Rose (1966: 43-4). Lakhan went still further and was consecrated as king by the local population, according to some sources (Shivalal Thapa, V.K. Ranamagar). The biography of Jang Bahadur written by his son Pudma Jung Bahadur Rana reports this fact, but in a more ambiguous way: "...a rebellion of a somewhat curious nature disturbed the peace of the country. A certain Gorkha, formerly a soldier in the army, set himself up as a king..." (Rana 1974: 302).

This point seems to trouble some Magar scholars, such as Harsabahadur Buda Magar (1997: 23). Without providing any historical reason, but simply because it seemed unthinkable for him that such a 'devotee of the king and the country' (*rājabhakta*, *deśabhakta*) could proclaim himself king, this author denies the reality of this consecration. Bringing Lakhan Thapa to a more suitable position in his view, he states that he merely declared himself Prime Minister. V.K. Ranamagar (1997: 77) does not deny the reality of the royal consecration, but tries to find an excuse for Lakhan Thapa's pretension, attributing it to the influence of the royal blood which flowed in the veins of the Magars of Gorkha:

When he said, "Having killed Jang Bahadur, I must reign", Lakhan Thapamagar was perhaps more motivated by his blue blood [in English in the Nepali text] than by anything else. Indeed, there was a time when the Magars were the kings of Gorkha. They were kings and their descendants acted in this way from the effect (*prabhāva*) of their blood. There is nothing ridiculous in this.

However, the royal consecration is not mentioned in all sources and remains unconfirmed. Whether it happened or not, it fits well in the political context of the time, when the seizure of power was usually marked by the accession to the title of Raja.

Jang Bahadur himself felt the necessity to be consecrated as the king of two provinces of Nepal (Kaski and Lamjung) by the king of the country or the 'king of kings', in order to legitimate and make permanent his ambiguous and fragile position as omnipotent Prime Minister. In the same way, numerous rebel leaders of the Sepoy mutiny proclaimed themselves kings. These leaders are even said to have offered Jang Bahadur the kingship of Lucknow if he would join their side, as reported by a British resident in Nepal:

From the moment he reached Gorakhpur, on his march towards Lucknow, Maharaja Jung Bahadur, by his own account, was in communication with the rebel leaders, who offered to make him the king of Lucknow if he would join their cause and turn upon the British army. This had an ill-effect upon the Gorkha soldiery, many of whom openly gave out that they would return to the plains during the next cold season to annex certain of our districts. (Hasrat 1971: 336)

Lakhan Thapa was among those Nepalese troops who were in contact with these rebels and perhaps found in them a model for his own political programme.

Whatever the historical veracity of Lakhan Thapa's consecration, he had built a fort or palace and gathered weapons and men, thus building a veritable utopian kingdom within the kingdom, and indeed at its most symbolic point, in the vicinity of Manakamana's temple. Obviously, Lakhan Thapa did not merely provoke an unorganized and spontaneous revolt. He seems, on the contrary, to have worked methodically, following a well-established programme, to build an alternative government, as his fort, his army and his accumulated wealth attest. His proposition to the emissaries of Jang Bahadur is another clue showing further evidence of the institution of a government within his 'kingdom'. In their report dated March 1876 (Regmi 1980), these emissaries noted:

Lakhan Thapa has promised to appoint some of us as generals, and others as colonels and captains. He designated Jahare Chumi as a general, and Biraj Thapa Magar, Juthya Thapa and Jitman Gurung as colonels.

This short extract is particularly interesting. Taken from a report written by Major-Captain Shumshere Jung Thapa Chetri, who led the expedition, it shows Lakhan Thapa trying to engage these men in his own army, and offering them very prestigious positions. As a matter of fact the proposition was made to Magars and Gurungs. With regard to the reported attitude of Lakhan Thapa, one wonders under what circumstances this first expedition to arrest him was conducted. We may legitimately suppose that these soldiers were strategically chosen from among the Tibeto-Burmese populations and that they acted as spies, pretending to adhere to

Lakhan Thapa's cause to show him up more easily.

The utopian kingdom of Lakhan Thapa was centred around his palace, which combined a royal aspect with a military aspect, as it was not only a palace but also a fort surrounded by a thick, high wall as well as an arms depot. In addition to these two aspects, and on the model of every Nepalese fortress, Lakhan Thapa's palace also had a highly religious dimension. It is said repeatedly that Lakhan Thapa claimed to be the reincarnation of the saint Lakhan Thapa, the latter being called the first, and the former the second. We will never know for certain whether Lakhan Thapa the Second was a descendant of Lakhan Thapa the First, a fact which would have facilitated his pretensions. If his adoption of the name suggests that he was from the lineage of the priests attached to the Manakamana temple, as noted by H. Budha Magar, other facts suggest the opposite. First, he was recruited as 'Lakshman Thapa' (Buda Magar 1997: 13), which shows that he adopted the name 'Lakhan' later, in keeping with his new pretensions. A second and more revealing fact is his establishment of a temple dedicated to Manakamana inside his own fort. An extract from a chronicle (Nepal 1983) relates clearly how Lakhan established a new cult of Manakamana:

Again under the reign of this king, in the area of Gorkha, a plotter (*luca*) of Magri caste declared: "I am the avatar of Lakhan Thapa, it is not necessary to go to Srimanakamana to offer the *pūjā*, I will do it here; I worship her by making the *sandhīpūjā*, having myself built a house with several floors and having placed a sacrificial post in it." In this way he gained the confidence of people, who flocked from many villages to offer *pañcabali* and other sacrificial ceremonies. By doing this, the villagers ceased going to worship in Srimanakamana's temple, causing the anger of the goddess.

This account shows that Lakhan Thapa made a point of separating the worship of the goddess from her famous temple, and consequently from her traditional priests. This fact still reinforces the assumption that he was not the legitimate priest of the goddess, and that he was even opposed to the latter by diverting the devotees from the path leading to the Manakamana temple and inducing them to come to him instead.

As can be seen, this chronicle reproaches Lakhan Thapa most strongly for having founded a new cult to the goddess in an illegitimate place, thus usurping a significant aspect of power. The diversion of worship from an instituted temple to a private residence seems to have constituted a serious offence and an act of political bravado. A chronicle relating the history of the Newar kingdoms reports a similar case, which was severely punished (Wright 1970: 250-1). During the reign of Jaya

Prakash Malla, a certain Sodhan, the head of the monastery of Bu Bahal in Patan, acquired a particular authority over his disciples through the tantric powers he deployed when he sat on the body of a man sacrificed by a yogi. He then settled with them in a house where he gathered the emblems of the gods and made each of his disciples the incarnation of a divinity. He diverted the devotees from the temples to make them come to his place, where, he said, all the gods were. It was sufficiently serious as an offence for him to be sacrificed on the command of the king of Patan, along with his disciples, who were each offered in sacrifice to the sanctuary of the divinity they were supposed to incarnate. The chronicle does not report any other crime apart from this diversion from the legitimate place of worship.

To understand the significance of the diversion operated by Lakhan Thapa (the second), it is necessary to emphasize the role of Manakamana and her priest Lakhan Thapa (the first) in the history of the kingdom of Gorkha, and by extension that of the country (Nepal) which was unified by the sovereigns of Gorkha. According to many legends, whether oral or contained in the chronicles of Gorkha (*Gorkhāvamśāvalī*), Manakamana is the form taken by the wife of Ram Shah, who reigned over Gorkha during the first half of the 16th century. According to the chronicle of Gorkha, this queen was venerated during her lifetime. She exhorted the men of Gorkha to fight against the powerful army of Lamjung, telling them that they would be protected by their dharma. The Goddess and Gorakhnath are said to have marched in front of the men of Gorkha, who were not wounded by the enemy's weapons, even when they were hit. After the victorious outcome of the battle, the chronicle says, offerings were brought to the queen (Naraharinath 1964: 42).

The queen maintained close relations with Lakhan Thapa, a Magar ascetic who was her servant and advisor. The eminence of the political role he played in the kingdom may be measured by a brief mention of him in the Gorkha chronicle. The chronicle records that it was Lakhan Thapa who took over the reins of government during the prolonged absence of King Ram Shah, who went away for several months in order to practise austerities (Hasrat 1971: 109). Gorakhnath himself, in an audience he gave to the king and Lakhan Thapa at the top of a wooded slope, entrusted the protection of the royalty of Gorkha to Lakhan Thapa. Many episodes in this text refer to this ascetic, of whom numerous feats are reported, such as the ability to be in two places at the same time. One day the king asked him whether he could obtain for him the favour of reigning over the territory of Nepal, and Lakhan Thapa answered, "It is not for you, but for your descendants (*santān*); but why do you ask me this? Ask it of your wife who is an incarnation of Devi." The text relates that one day the Magar ascetic saw the latter in the court of the palace, accompanied

by her divine troop. He then followed the divine queen, who was mounted on a lion, up to Beni, where Gorakhnath and other gods were having a meeting. That day, the queen revealed to Lakhan that she was the goddess Manakamana and told him her wish that he and his descendants would offer her worship. One day Lakhan Thapa suggested that the king should touch his wife's body in the middle of the night on certain dates. He would then realize that she was cold. He also advised him to remain awake during the night of *Bhaumāṣṭami*, which is the day of the *pūjā* addressed to the goddess-queen. The king did as suggested and saw the queen in her divine form, accompanied by Lakhan Thapa and Gorakhnath. On this occasion he obtained from her the promise that one of their descendants would rule Nepal (Naraharinath 1964: 33-9). Finally, when Ram Shah died, according to the chronicle, as soon as the queen threw herself onto her husband's burning pyre their two bodies disappeared, to the astonishment of the crowd. At the very same time, Lakhan Thapa also disappeared (Naraharinath 1964: 54). Lakhan Thapa's role and his relations with the queen are therefore exceptional and enigmatic.

Another version of the origin myth of Goddess Manakamana relates that the king was surprised one night when he found that the queen was not in her room. He then discovered her in the form of the Goddess, accompanied by Lakhan Thapa who had assumed the form of the lion upon which she was mounted.¹⁵ The prosaic reader of the chronicle will be astonished by the queen's nocturnal escapades with this Magar, and will perhaps suspect a more ordinary adventure, rendered strange by this deification. Was the infidelity of the queen unthinkable, was it a precaution against a possible rise of the Magar community, was the king weak, or must one quite simply believe in wonders? Whatever the case may be, other queens of the Shah line of Gorkha, such as the wife of Krishna Shah, Ram Shah's grandson, were thereafter regarded as incarnations of Manakamana. More generally, this goddess provided the kingdom with her protection throughout its history. These stories show how the relation of the Thakuri kings with the goddess was mediated by this Magar ascetic and his descendants. This configuration is not unique, but corresponds with a widespread model in the old confederation of the 24 kingdoms of central Nepal.¹⁶

¹⁵ These oral myths are reported by Unbescheid (1985) and Shrestha (forthcoming).

¹⁶ A comparison with Lecomte-Tilouine (1997) shows that the same mythic motives are present both in the Lasargha shrine dedicated to Alam Devi and in the Manakamana temple. In both cases the goddess is most important for the royal Thakuris and is served by a Magar priest. In both places the *Buddleia asiatica* tree is venerated: as the tree on which the palanquin of the goddess was placed in the middle of the Lasargha shrine, and as the walking stick of Lakhan Thapa, which grew as a tree after his disappearance, in

By presenting himself as an incarnation of this famous mediator, did Lakhan Thapa aim to restore the power of the Shah kings, which had been usurped by Jang Bahadur, or was this an act of self-promotion? Without doubt, he intended to get rid of Jang Bahadur. According to Pudma Jung Bahadur Rana,

His graceful manners and persuasive tone soon procured him an armed following of 1,500 men, at the head of whom he threatened to march to the capital, and after assassinating Jung Bahadur, to seize the reins of government, and inaugurate the golden age of Nepalese history. On receiving news of this insurrection, the Maharaja at once despatched a few companies of the Devi Dutt Regiment to put down the fanatic, instructing them not to use force unless they were met with force. Happily the rebels surrendered their arms after a brief resistance, and were soon caught and sent over to Kathmandu in chains. The ringleader 'Lakhan' and twelve of his firmest supporters, whom he probably called his 'apostles', were brought in bamboo cages, and the rest on foot. Subsequent investigation brought to light the details of the whole plot. They were then to march to the capital, where Lakhan was to be proclaimed king amidst the shouts of the whole population.¹⁷

The chronicle quoted by Gyanamani Nepal does not report any endeavour to launch an assault on the part of Lakhan Thapa and his troops, but only one arrest for an illegal gathering of weapons.¹⁸ However, the report of Major-Captain Shumshere Jung Thapa Chetri specifically devotes a passage to the action:

Manakamana. In both places, a hole is considered holy: this is a hole into which the goddess disappeared in Lasarga, and into which Lakhan Thapa disappeared in Manakamana. These two shrines appear as variations on the themes of the Goddess, the Thakuri king, the Magar priest, the Buddleia tree, and the hole. This suggests a common underlying structure which should be investigated in other similar places.

¹⁷ This is the same text as the one quoted by Rose and Joshi (1966: 44): "According to a semi-official account, the leaders of the agitation had planned to kill Jang Bahadur at Deoralí on his return from a hunting expedition with the Prince of Wales in the Terai and to 'march to the capital, where Lakhan was to be proclaimed king amidst the shouts of the whole population'."

¹⁸ "At this time, in the year 33, this cunning Magar having said, 'I am going to take my revenge against Shri 3 Maharaj', held a counsel with bad men who were obeying him. They gathered swords, rifles, bows and arrows. The people of Gorkha learned about that and having spied them and verified the facts, went to Nepal to bring the news to Shri 3 Maharaja who sent soldiers and officers to bring him back" (Nepal 1983: 45, n.9).

On Falgun 26, 1932 (approx. March 9, 1876), Lakhan Thapa, accompanied by a large number of Bhotes armed with muskets and swords, proceeded toward the west pretending to join (Prime Minister Jung Bahadur's) entourage, but actually with the intention of making an attempt on his life. (Regmi 1980)

This report then discloses Lakhan Thapa's project as follows:

He has announced that Prime Minister Jung will be assassinated, that the Second Prince (Upendra Bikram) will become king, and that he himself will succeed (Prince Upendra Bikram). He said he would assassinate (Prime Minister Jung Bahadur) at an opportune moment either at Tarku or Manang-Besi (in Lamjung district). If this was not possible, he would go to Tibet, secure the help of the Tibetans, accomplish his mission, and then become king. (ibid.)

As reported here, Lakhan Thapa's project fits perfectly within the context of the time, as it exploits the conflict between Nepal and Tibet and the eternal competition between the brothers for the throne. In this document, it looks more like a realistic political programme, using the various forces which were involved, than a simple utopia born of the imagination of an isolated villager. Interestingly, his plan consisted not only of killing Jang Bahadur, but also installing King Surendra's younger brother Upendra on the throne, and in the longer term, of sitting on the royal throne himself. This ambition does not fit well with the status of a martyr, that is, with the supposedly disinterested sacrifice of oneself for one's country, but we should emphasize that the report quoted here may have blackened Lakhan Thapa's reputation intentionally.

Lakhan was arrested by the army, apparently while he was still in his fort. This detail either contradicts the claim that he was marching towards the west in order to lay an ambush, or else it should be presumed that this attempt failed before he was arrested. The chronicle published by Nepal states precisely:

Having encircled the house of this conspiring Magar, nearby Gorkha, they put under iron all his henchmen and seized all the weapons they had gathered, then led them to Thapathali. The examination of the facts took place during a lawsuit and [Lakhan Thapa] was put in jail as well as his principal accomplices, while all the others were left free. Later, in the month of Paus of the year 33, this plotter Lakhan Thapa was hung in front of his house as well as alongside his principal accomplices. His house and his temple were destroyed and razed to the ground. (Nepal 1983: 45-6)

M.C. Regmi adds some interesting detail:

The Prime Minister ordered Colonel Tek Bahadur Rana to reinforce the troops under his command with those in Palpa, if necessary, and capture Lakhan Thapa and his accomplices. Major-Captain Shumshere Jung Bahadur Thapa Chetri was ordered to render necessary help to Colonel Tek Bahadur Rana, capture Lakhan Thapa and his accomplices if they passed through Palpa, and send them to Kathmandu, and report the matter to Prime Minister Jung Bahadur through the Indrachok Police Station. In addition, he was ordered to take necessary security measures to protect Prime Minister Jung Bahadur from assassination in case he visited Palpa in the course of his tour. (Regmi 1980)

Pudma Jung indicates the sentence which was passed on Lakhan and his close relations:

Lakhan and six of his followers, who had taken an active part in the conspiracy, were sentenced to death; the others whose offence was merely that of passive participation were pardoned, and allowed to go back to their homes. Lakhan was hanged on a tree in front of the shrine of the goddess Manokamna who, as he alleged, had inspired him to the deed of blood. (Rana 1974 : 303)

These ‘historical’ texts, produced rather soon after the event, dwell only briefly upon the end of Lakhan Thapa, but note that he was hung on the site where he had conducted his action—beside his house or the temple of Manakamana—after he had been judged in Kathmandu. It is significant that the execution took place there, as if to show to his former partisans the particularly striking symbol of his defeat and his imposture. The goddess herself was made a witness to the death of her alleged elected devotee, in accordance with an extremely humiliating and cruel idea of Jang Bahadur.

Before comparing the above with the contents of Magar publications on Lakhan Thapa, it should be noted that in his book on the Josmani sect Janaklal Sharma (1963) offers another interpretation of Lakhan’s political action. According to this author, Lakhan Thapa was a *siddha* of the powerful Josmani sect, which developed under its sixth *santa*, Shashighar, during the reign of Prithvi Narayan. These ascetics initiated many influential people at the court of this king and later received several land grants from Jang Bahadur to establish monasteries in the Gulmi area. Shashighar is known to have had eleven gurus and the Josmani sect, as it developed in Nepal, seems to have been a mixture of different streams, such as Nathism and Haṭha Yoga. This sect was not restricted to the twice-born castes and recruited

many adepts from among the Nepalese tribal groups. Shashighar had four famous disciples, whom he sent in the four directions to preach: one was a Magar, one was a Gurung, and one was a Sunuwar. Lakhan Thapa is said to have been initiated by Mokshamandal, the Magar disciple of Shashighar. The most famous of Lakhan Thapa's Josmani *santa* contemporaries was Gyanadil Das. He was born in Ilam and initiated in Okhaldhunga and he founded a new monastery in the Gurung village of Rumjatar. Janaklal Sharma (1963: 87-8) reports that there were numerous Matwali in his monastery and that this provoked the anger of the local Brahmans. This author describes Lakhan's fort as a Josmani monastery and writes that Jang Bahadur arrested him because he felt that this sect represented a threat. As a matter of fact, Gyanadil was arrested and led to Kathmandu at the same time as Lakhan. If the latter was sentenced to death because of the army and the weapons he had gathered, no such charge could be found against Gyanadil, who spent six months in jail and soon became very influential in Jang's entourage. He initiated many prominent people, such as Ranaudip, Jang's younger brother. He finally left the Kathmandu valley carrying a white flag and a *nagara* drum offered to him by Jang Bahadur, which he installed in his monastery. In this account, Lakhan's political action seems to be inserted into a wider religious organization which took the revolutionary step of treating the Twice-Born and the Alcohol-Drinkers as equals. Lakhan's membership in the Josmani sect explains why he was 'parading disguised as a holy man', as recounted by Pudma Jung Rana.

We shall now compare this tentative reconstruction of Lakhan Thapa's life, which has been based on contemporary and ancient sources, with recent presentations by Magar scholars, which are apparently based on oral traditions.

I shall base my discussion mainly on an article by Shivalal Thapa Guruchan Magar, whose writings on Lakhan Thapa (e.g. S. Thapa 1996) are particularly significant, because they are often reproduced, summarized, or discussed by other Magar authors. Furthermore, this author is the secretary of the central committee of the Magar association of Nepal (Nepal Magar Sangh), a fact which gives some official weight to his writings. The psychological portrait of Lakhan Thapa is much more developed than it is in the preceding writings, and it goes without saying that it is of a radically different tone. He is described as "small of size, but having much wisdom", "solving problems quickly", "skilful in combat, the handling of weapons, and horsemanship"; "going everywhere himself during the combat", and "disciplined and friendly". As a loyal son, says Shivalal Thapa, his project was to found a family on his return to Nepal and to bring his parents there with him. Moreover, this author insists on his faithful friendliness, and repeatedly mentions the close friendship between Lakhan and Cyami, which led them both together to the same

death.

In this posthumous psychological portrait and biography, Lakhan Thapa is presented as the very archetype of the Magar: a modest villager who emigrated to India, a valiant soldier and faithful friend, moved by the suffering of his people, and, finally, a martyr. All of these aspects link him with the self-portrait the Magars make for themselves: with their supposed ‘rightness’,¹⁹ and to their shedding of their blood for the motherland which they have established as a symbol of their identity, as their insoluble print on the country. Lakhan Thapa is described as an enterprising and very generous man. He not only took the initiative to build his palace, but, according to Shivalal Thapa, he also built himself a temple equipped with four gates. There he placed a round stone icon and other stone statues, and installed various divinities in them through his tantric powers, including Gorakhnath and Gorakhkali. His palace contained great riches, which he also produced through his supernatural powers. This extraordinary man, says M. S. Thapa (1992), used each day to assume the form of a child in the morning, an adult in the afternoon and an old man in the evening. He displayed his powers spectacularly on an occasion reported by Shivalal Thapa:

When Jaya Simha Cumi decided to follow the example of his friend Lakhan Thapa and did not return to the army after their three months of leave, he was reprimanded by his grandmother who told him, “Whence came this Lakhan Thapa to die here? He perverted our Jaya Simha. Our grandson, who was very well employed, is to become a good for nothing like him.” Having heard that, Lakhan Thapa addressed her. “What do you need grandmother? Rice?” And he touched an empty basket and filled it with rice. Then he added, “Do you need vegetables?” and he filled the house with the vegetables she desired. Having thrown sacrificial rice, he even made the stones and the wood move, and these arrived of themselves by walking. This is how he gathered riches. After having filled up his great reserves of rice he distributed some. When they saw these acts, all were surprised. (S. Thapa 1996: 6-7).

In this account by Shivalal Thapa, the intervention of the supernatural allows Lakhan Thapa to be described in a completely royal role of rich benefactor and spendthrift, concerned to ensure, like Ram Shah or Henry IV, that no one should suffer hunger in his ‘kingdom’. As for the incredulous reader, he may wonder how

¹⁹ The adjective *sojho* is often applied to the Magars. It means ‘uncrooked, straightforward, open, frank, honest’, but has also the negative connotation of ‘simple-minded’.

Lakhan gathered the money to finance his rebellion. The speech credited to the grandmother is revealing. It offers a view which is the opposite of the author's general presentation of the events. This embedded counterpoint suggests from the very start the fate of Lakhan's rebellion.

According to Shivalal Thapa, the reaction against Lakhan's revolutionary kingdom did not emerge from the government but from the local high castes.²⁰ Very symptomatically, in the present context of ethnic revivalism, he ascribes this reaction to a conflict of caste:

All these acts [of Lakhan Thapa] displeased the local Bahun-Kshetri. They were jealous to see that those who were their herders and ploughmen had become kings and ministers. (Thapa 1996: 5).

To show the reader the extent to which the local Bahun-Kshetri had subjected the Magars within their own territories, Shivalal Thapa notes, "They were so deeply established in Gorkha that even the place names consisted of their clan names (Devakoṭā Gāun, Thāpā Gāun, Vāgle Gāun)." Interestingly, Lakhan Thapa's arrest, and even his death, is now attributed by Magar authors to the high castes and not directly to Jang Bahadur. Shivalal Thapa recounts how the Thapa Kshetri of Simudipani stole a box containing documents from the palace of Lakhan Thapa: "On one of these documents was written 'I am a devotee of Gorakhkali. The goddess sent me here to become the king. Jang Bahadur governs the country tyrannously, I must raise my weapons against him. My faithful minister is Jaya Simha Cumi. We must prepare a good army.'" (Ibid.)

The Kshetri of Gorkha, he continues, went to Jang Bahadur with these documents. As a result, the latter sent his soldiers to Gorkha with orders to hang Lakhan Thapa. But just after that, reports Shivalal Thapa, Jang Bahadur's wife had a dream. She saw a man with white moustaches and a beard, who told her, "If Lakhan Thapa is killed, your husband Jang Bahadur will die exactly seven days after. If you want to spare your husband, tell him not to kill Lakhan Thapa." The queen, so the story goes, woke up and told her dream to Jang, who did not even listen to it. Then she wrote eight letters to her husband, but he did not read them. While she was bringing him the ninth letter, she fell unconscious at the feet of Jang Bahadur, who finally asked one of his guards to read it. When he had heard its contents, he declared, "I have made a serious mistake" and immediately sent soldiers with new orders: "Go and tell them that Lakhan Thapa should not be hung." The soldiers rushed to

²⁰ The chronicle quoted by Nepal attests that Lakhan Thapa was denounced by the 'people of Gorkha' (see note 20).

Gorkha but when they reached the Budi Gandaki river they were prevented by the felon Thapa Kshetri from crossing it. Indeed, when they learned that soldiers were approaching with the order to spare Lakhan's life, the Thapa Kshetri ran to the river and for three days prevented the Bote and Majhi ferrymen from taking them across. Meanwhile, the army of Jang Bahadur surrounded the rebel army and seized Lakhan Thapa as well as Jaya Simha Cumi. "They could have escaped, but they were not fleeing death, and as heroes they were ready to die." The soldiers read out the death sentence which had been pronounced by Jang Bahadur and took the two men to hang them from nearby trees.

These events are reported in a similar way by M. S. Thapa (1992), who states, however, that it was the Bhusal Jaisi of Bungkot who prevented the soldiers from crossing the river, and adds that when the Magars of Bungkot came to know what they had done, they expelled them from their village.

The most striking part of Lakhan's life in the Magar writings is certainly his death. Most of them report the same facts, but here I will again quote from Shivalal Thapa's account. Before his execution, Lakhan Thapa addressed the crowd thus: "If my body rots and falls to the ground after my hanging, know that Lakhan Thapa is dead. But if my body dries and shrinks, know that Lakhan Thapa is alive. Keep preciously the cord with which I was hung, I will come back one day" (Thapa 1996: 6).

Even now, local people tell of how Jaya Simha Cumi's body rotted and fell to pieces whereas Lakhan Thapa's body dried up and remained tied to the tree, as he had predicted. In a similar account, written by Samjog Lapha Magar (1997), Lakhan Thapa is also supposed to have said before his execution, "Jang Bahadur will be my sati", thus predicting the supernatural deed which is nowadays attributed to him: the death of Jang Bahadur. Indeed, Lakhan died on the second day of the month of Phagun, and seven days later, as had been predicted, Jang himself died in strange suspicious circumstances. It is sometimes said that he was killed by a tiger, but for Shivalal Thapa (1996: 6), "It is probably because it was difficult to write that Jang Bahadur was killed by the tantric powers of a Magar, that some historians say that he was killed by a tiger." M. S. Thapa (1992) reports that some people believe that Lakhan Thapa assumed the shape of another man after his death and killed Jang Bahadur. He mentions a story according to which Jang was killed by a young Magar whose wife had been seduced by the Prime Minister.

Through his own death, followed by Jang's death, Lakhan becomes a prophet and a messiah. He announces the signs of his immortality which are to be read on his own corpse, which he intends to prevent from rotting, as a manifestation of his peren-

nality. He confers the status of a relic on the instrument of his death when he asks that it should be carefully preserved. And, finally, he presents his death as his victory over Jang, who is described as his *sati*. The fate of Jang is thus closely attached to that of Lakhan through this apotheosis, this grandiose victory of a victim transformed through his death into a divinity.

In a way, the current Magar presentation of Lakhan's life tends to exonerate Jang Bahadur, who is presented merely as a Pontius Pilate. He is shown to be frightened by his own decision, and to recognize that he has made a mistake. In fact, he is even said to have gone himself to Bungkot to beg Lakhan's corpse for a pardon: "When Jang learned [from his soldiers] the news [of Lakhan Thapa's execution], he had no more peace of mind. He jumped on a horse and, followed by his army, reached the spot where Lakhan Thapa had been hung. He then asked for pardon from the hanged corpse of Lakhan Thapa" (Thapa 1996 : 6).

Lakhan was deified through his death. Several Magar authors note that the villagers of Bungkot worship him every year during the month of Paus, offering him animal sacrifices. He is worshipped as a Bhayārī Devatā, a member of a category of divinities related to the earth which come into being as a result of a violent death. If the nineteenth-century texts specify that the palace of Lakhan was destroyed by the army, the local tradition, as reported by Shivalal Thapa, states that it remained uninhabited for a long time because people thought that "one day Lakhan Thapa will come back alive" (Thapa 1996: 6).

Lakhan Thapa's rebellion was obviously a messianic movement. It is significant that the local tradition remembers the leader's charisma and supernatural powers much more than his strategic or political programme. Numerous parallels can be drawn between this rebellion and revolts organized during the same period among the tribal groups of India. The leaders of these revolts were ascetics, holy men, reincarnations. They were endowed with magical powers, notably the ability to transform bullets into water. They promised their followers the return of a Golden Age when the tribes were not dispossessed of their lands.²¹ All of these attempts ended in blood.

These messianic and utopian rebellions took no account of the reality of the structures they would have to fight, or the gap between the two sides' weapons and organization. As Fuchs underlines (1992: 22), the tribal groups "had no material and political resources to defend themselves, and thus were forced to take refuge in religious and magical means to find redress." This is Mannheim's famous thesis

²¹ On this subject, see for example Fuchs (1992).

according to which the non-consideration of reality is characteristic of utopia and typical of the dominated classes. Should we then take it that a utopian movement is a still-born form of rebellion, the desperate and final reflex of an oppressed group, which has no effect? I shall answer in the negative, because if utopia does not take reality into account²² it is then by nature revolutionary. Now, as Polack and Bloch have shown, utopia is also an anticipation of the future.²³ That which is a utopia in the 19th century may well become a realistic ideology in the following centuries, because utopia shakes up reality. Thus, messianic utopian revolts annihilated in blood are not mere checks, but models. They are in fact sacrificial models, and of the same nature as those which, in the Hindu world, are the foundation of the universe and royalty. As such, they confer power, they are generative.

It is said that through his 'sacrifice' Lakhan was thus able to get rid of Jang Bahadur. The initial sacrificial model also confers another type of power. It becomes for future generations the founding myth and model upon which new types of political action, more realistic or less idealistic this time, can stand.

In his story as presented by Shivalal Thapa or M. S. Thapa, Lakhan Thapa appears more as a martyr of caste conflict than of the Rana regime, which is his official 'title'. The demand that the government should nominate Lakhan Thapa as the 'first martyr' was thus not a neutral claim from the Magar Association's point of view. Rather than being just another condemnation of the already much-blackened Rana regime, it was a political act aiming at competing with the high castes on their own ground. Indeed, martyrdom became a new form of political legitimacy after the fall of the Rana regime in Nepal, just as the 'résistants' took all the political positions in France after World War II. The martyrs and the individuals associated with them have acquired, so to say, a symbolic right as compensation for what they have endured. Interestingly, each party has its own martyrs and is also seen by opposed groups as creating new martyrs when it is in power. Thus the communist parties, which were martyred under the Panchayat Regime, are now creating martyrs for the Maoist groups.²⁴ Even when they do not suffer a violent death, political leaders transform their natural deaths into the gift of their selves, by offering their corpses to the country, in the political act which consists of offering one's eyes. This act is highly visible: for instance, the removal of Man Mohan Adhikari's eyes featured

²² It would be more exact to say that utopia does take reality into account but in a different, shifted register. Thus the leaders of Indian tribal messianic rebellions used to say that they would transform British bullets into water. Reality was known but understood in a different register: a religious or magical one versus a technical one.

²³ On the history of utopia, see Tower Sargent and Schaer (2000).

²⁴ On martyrdom in Nepalese communist ideologies, see Ramirez (1997).

in large colour photographs on the front pages of Nepalese newspapers. Although political parties founded on ethnic or caste grounds are denied a legal existence, ethnic activists have noticed that most of the martyrs come from high castes. M. S. Thapa (1992) thus writes in the prelude to his article on Lakhan Thapa: “Whereas Tanka Acharya, who was not executed because he was a Bahun, was called a ‘living martyr’ and paraded on a cart, the Nepalese make fun of Lakhan Thapa Magar, Thiravam Malla, Bhimadatta Pant, Laldhvaj Gurung, Chokabahadur Gurung, Ramprasad Rai, Ratna Bahadur Bantava (Rai)...”

In their different versions of Lakhan Thapa’s life, the Magar ethnic activists reveal their political positions. The Magar associations include both individuals acting to promote the dignity of the Magar group, such as Harsabahadur Buda Magar who plays down Lakhan Thapa’s personal ambition in order to raise him to the level of a defender of the country, and individuals of a more revolutionary bent who aim to fuel communal conflict on an ethnic basis by interpreting their history as a simple and unidirectional subjection. This may lead to the identification of one group as the oppressive ruling class and of the others as the oppressed proletariat.²⁵ As if to

²⁵ An article published in the *Kathmandu Post*, January 12, 1999, suggests a close link between ethnic and political activism among the Magars: “Kathmandu, Jan 11. Nepal Magar Association (NMA), member of the Nepal Nationalities Federation, today announced that they have no affiliation with the underground Nepal Communist Party (Maoist). The association announced this at a press conference organized today. Addressing the press conference, Gore Bahadur Khapangi Magar, chairperson of the association, said though the association has no affiliation with the Maoists, the Magars are being victimized. He said most of the victims of the Maoist Movement have been Magars. ‘If you look at the number of those who’ve died in the police-Maoist clash you’ll see that most of them were Magars’, he said. In a press release distributed today, the association has condemned the government for arresting its members on false charges. The association has demanded that the government release those who were arrested on charges of being Maoists, resettle those who were displaced by the conflict and compensate those who have lost their family members. Khapangi said the association had submitted a memorandum to this effect to the government three months back. He added that none of the successive governments have been serious about the nationalities movement. Citing one such example, he said, ‘When the association apprised the then Home Minister Khum Bahadur Khadka about the high incidence of Magar killing he said in a place where Magars are the majority who do you expect to die? Certainly not the Brahmins.’” In the same way the *Kathmandu Post*, Jan 10, reports a similar suspicion addressed to the chairman of the All Nepal Nationalities Association: “Newly elected chairman Ale Magar, when asked if his group was associated with communist parties, denied any such link. But he admitted that ‘though the association shares beliefs with leftist parties, we have no affiliation with any political party.’”

illustrate Mao's writing as quoted by the Nepalese Maoist party,²⁶ Magar scholars aim to change their current status by revising the history as written by the dominant castes. This idea is expressed by numerous authors, such as Samjog Lapha Magar (1997): "That which is called the history of Nepal is a partisan and illusory history, which we reject. History is the writing down of that which is dead, but history itself never dies. This is why it is time now for all the Magars to write down their history." However, the history they have chosen to dig up is the story of a popular (and ethnic) rebellion, as if they are speaking of the present situation through the past.

I would like to end with a poem written by Lakshman Alemagar²⁷ in which the suffering of a group deprived of its own history is beautifully rendered. When nothing else is left, an attachment to the land is the major link to an identity, through the striking image of the soil imbued by the blood of the ancestors, which combines the two basic forms of identity which are distinguished in Europe. This image comes back as a leitmotif in Magar writings and sheds new light on the importance of martyrdom and violent action: on the dire necessity which perhaps compels them to 'write history with warm blood'.

²⁶ "...The only intention of the proletariat to know the world is to change it" (sic). See 'Strategy...'

²⁷ This poem, entitled 'Lekhnu cha itihās hāmīle', is published in *Gyāvat*, Baisakh 2050, p. 69.

We are writing history ourselves

We are the priests of this country,
It is we who were the kings here,
History was given to be ours,
Why is it now out of our reach?

If we look and search in history
Our name is in the first place.
We are the protectors of this country,
Nobody should think that we are weak.

We are the original inhabitants of this land.
We know everything over there,
We take care of them all.
History brings us its help.

Our power is boundless,
Equal to the heroes and valiant warriors.
History, we write it with warm blood,
As did our immortal ancestors.

...

Look, all these hills, all these fields,
All are imbued with our ancestors' blood,
Saying: "Where is the karma of our descendants here?"
Today they are worrying.

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