

Workshop on ‘Authoritative Speech in the Himalayan Region’ organised by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine and Anne de Sales, Paris, 26-27 November 2011.

Anne de Sales

This conference was the third opportunity to gather European specialists of Himalayan oral traditions around common questions. The project was initiated by Martin Gaenzle, who organised a workshop on ‘Ritual Language in the Himalayas’ at the University of Vienna on 22-23 May 2009. This was followed by a second workshop on the occasion of the ‘World Oral Literature Project Workshop’ organised by Mark Turin at the University of Cambridge on 9-10 December.

The Paris conference aimed at exploring the social and political dimensions of linguistic interactions in the Himalayan region. According to Bourdieu, a linguistic community is the outcome of political processes; consequently, any position within a given community is bound to involve power relations expressed in the linguistic interactions of its members. Speech acts should therefore be understood as signs of authority that are intended to be believed, or even obeyed. These power relations are most clearly revealed in the case of performative statements: the efficacy of these statements depends on the speaker’s social function, which must match his or her speech act, something that has often been neglected by followers of Austin’s seminal work. According to Bourdieu, it is always the *function* of the spokesperson of a group that is invested with authority, rather than the individual who fulfils that function. The power of the spoken word comes from the ‘symbolic capital’ that the group confers on its spokesperson. Acts of authority are ‘authorised’ and through this process of ‘social magic’ the spokesperson produces the group as much as the group produces its spokesperson.

In Nepal, we observe that great linguistic diversity and the traditions of hierarchical caste society continue to be important alongside characteristic processes of centralisation, nation-building, and the emergence of a class society. These phenomena mean that there is unlikely to be a single language of legitimacy. Within this complex society, various spokespersons are recognised either as especially competent speakers or

as specialists of particular oral traditions. However, their social statuses vary greatly and their speech is not always addressed to their own group: shamans, for example, officiate for all, regardless of ethnicity; the Damai bards or the Gaine minstrels whose status is located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy perform for their high-caste patrons; revolutionary leaders profess values that are contrary to those of the high castes from which most of them come. On what does the authority of a speech rest, when the spokesperson of a group does not belong to that group?

Comparative questions such as these, concerning the various oral skills or forms in the Himalaya, their social dimensions, the sources of their legitimacy, and the various techniques by which their ends are achieved, can only be answered through a collective scholarly endeavour. The conditions of enunciation (where and when do performances take place, what are the events that trigger the performance?) must be explored as well as the roles of the speakers in their respective groups and in global society. What are the oral techniques that are used in order to mobilise people, convince them, and make them obey or believe in the speaker's speech? Several language registers, specific vocabularies and temporalities, scansion, gestures, narrative motifs, and various representations of reality must be investigated. Emotions, fascination, but also humour, farcical episodes and derision are many of the effects that speakers may have on their audience. Finally, these techniques convey values such as authenticity, heroism, antiquity or scientific authority, that must be explained in relation to the power relations that structure society. These questions are especially interesting to investigate at a time when Himalayan societies in general and Nepali society in particular are going through an epochal reorganisation.

A book including a selection of the contributions is in preparation.

List of presentations:

Friday 25th November

Chair person : Michael Hutt, SOAS, London

— GREGORY G. MASKARINEC (University of Hawai'i)

'Nepalese Shaman Oral Texts: Does knowing and knowing how to use ritual language confer convertible 'cultural capital' on practitioners who use it?'

- ARIK MORAN (University of Haifa):
'On Speech and Historical Truths: A case study from Himachal Pradesh'
- JOHN LEAVITT (Université de Montréal):
'Central Himalayan Oracular Discourse as Evocation and Injunction'
- WILLIAM S. SAX (SAI, Heidelberg):
'Oracular Speech, Collective Consciousness, and the Ideology of Absence'
- DANIELA BERTI (CNRS, CEH, Villejuif)
'Oral Dialogues and Legal Records in Shimla District Court 2/3'
- BARBARA BERARDI-TADIÉ (EHESS, Paris):
'The Ambiguous Power of the Legal Discourse and its Mobilization by Women's Associations in Nepal: A case study (daughter's property rights)'
- PUSTAK RAJ GHIMIRE (Oxford University):
'Authority, Status, and Caste Markers in Everyday Village Conversations (eastern Nepal)'
- MARIE LECOMTE-TILOUINE (CNRS, CEH, Villejuif):
'From the Bottom to the Top and Vice Versa: The bard and his patron in western Nepal'

Saturday 26th November

Chair person : CK Lal, editorialist, Nepal

- CHARLES RAMBLE (EPHE, Paris)
'The Babbling Lark and the Dragon that Defines the Seasons: Recipes for powerful speech in the Tibetan historical tradition'
- CHRISTIAN JAHODA (Institute for Social Anthropology, AAS, Vienna)
'Authoritative Speech Traditions and Socio-political Assemblies in Spiti, Upper Kinnaur and Purang in the Past and Present'
- MIREILLE MAZARD (University of Regina)
'Gendered Forms of Persuasion and Authority on China's Tibeto-Burman Frontier'
- FRANCK BERNEDE (CNRS, CEH, Villejuif):
'Authoritative Speech in the Musical Apprenticeship of Newar Farmers (Nepal)'
- MARTIN GAENZLE (University of Vienna)
'Meaning and Intention in Rai Divinatory Discourse'
- JUDITH PETTIGREW (University of Limerick):
'Contested Authority: Who speaks for the Pyetā Lhutā?'

– MARK TURIN (University of Cambridge & Yale University)

‘Performative Plurilingualism and Competitive Codeswitching: the Register of the Thangmi Shaman’

– ANNE DE SALES (CNRS, LESC, Nanterre)

‘The Sources of Authority of Shamanic Speech: Examples from the Kham-Magar’.

The conference was sponsored by Région Ile-de-France-Centre d’Etudes Himalayennes (UPR 299, CNRS, Villejuif)-INSHS-CNRS-Ecole doctorale MCSPP (Université Paris Ouest Nanterre)/ Laboratoire d’ethnologie et de sociologie comparative (UMR 7186, CNRS) - ANR JustIndia.