

Nature, Culture and  
Religion at the Crossroads  
of Asia

Edited by  
Marie Lecomte-Tilouine



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Edited by  
Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

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# Introduction

MARIE LECOMTE-TILOUINE



Grazing the cattle from a high view point, Western Nepal  
(Photo: Marie Lecomte-Tilouine)

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For those who wish to venture into the Himalayan region a number of Indian or Nepalese travel agencies offer 'nature and culture tours'.<sup>1</sup> A 'nature tour' includes trekking or rafting, while a 'culture tour' offers tourists visits to temples or the opportunity to attend festivals. The activities in each category come as no surprise and attest to a broad distinction or categorization now commonly used. Yet interestingly, parallel to the growing use of these categories, they have been the object of heavy criticism over recent decades.

The definition of man as a cultural being as opposed to wild categories of living creatures has long been essential in Western philosophy. This definition was first challenged by the discovery of features in the realm of nature that were once exclusively associated with 'human' culture or civilization. With the discovery of the new world and the wars of religion in Europe, the notions of barbarity and civilization were first relativized from a moral point of view. They were later fully re-evaluated in view of the complexity of 'primitive cultures'. More recently, the notion of 'animal culture' in Ethology has contributed to further blur the limits of what is cultural and what is natural. Similarly, ecologists have emphasized the essential part of human action in many ecosystems hitherto considered natural and have underlined this dimension as being 'anthropogenic environments'. On the other hand, a less widespread school of thought, notably represented by socio-biology, has explored the natural part of culture or the influence exerted by the environment on human societies. Consequently, we are led to consider that animals and landscapes are more cultural than we thought, while humans are more natural.

The boundary separating the two domains of reality called 'nature' and 'culture' in Western languages is therefore subject to considerable interplay on one side and various upheavals on the other. At the same time, several anthropologists have recently shown that these categories are far from universal,<sup>2</sup> and have

<sup>1</sup>See for instance *visitnepal.com* or the website of the Nepalese Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation.

<sup>2</sup>Strathern, 1980; Descola, 1992.

argued that their use introduces an ethnocentric bias in the understanding of non-Western societies.<sup>3</sup>

This position raises several issues concerning first, the legitimacy of the use of a concept unknown in a culture to describe its reality, and second, whether or not it may throw light on the culture being studied. In fact, this is also true of numerous notions and concepts which are commonly used in Social Anthropology,<sup>4</sup> and more generally, of the use of a particular language to describe a human reality which is not formulated in it. Yet, before reaching this dead end, another problem emerges that is becoming increasingly difficult to set aside in current anthropology: it involves the introduction of new ideas or the modification of local concepts in most human societies, due to the influence of Western languages through globalization. This striking phenomenon occurs when in some parts of Social Anthropology, the tendency is to privilege the study of groups least contaminated by other cultures or to select only seemingly 'genuine' material.<sup>5</sup> This has resulted in a paradoxical situation with regard to the 'nature and culture' issue. Indeed, we now face a situation whereby traditional subjects for anthropological study, i.e., groups calling themselves Indigenous Peoples, have started organizing themselves politically on the basis of their specific link to nature (whether or not they have borrowed the concept),<sup>6</sup> and to oppose the groups and institutions whom they accuse of having deprived them of their land and rights. This opposition is expressed by the very opposition of nature and culture, but this dichotomy is denied as being part of the Indigenous Peoples' world conception.

<sup>3</sup>Descola and Pálsson, 1996.

<sup>4</sup>Thus, an important field of study in Anthropology, namely kinship, lacks its exact translation in many languages.

<sup>5</sup>On this subject, see A. Bensa, 2006.

<sup>6</sup>See B. Campbell (2005: 286) on the encounter between the modernist objectification of the environment and its effects on local understandings of people's environmental relations, particularly the case of the Gujjars (northern India), who 're-invented' themselves as a 'forest people' when threatened by the establishment of a forest protected area (Gooch [1998] quoted in Campbell 2005: 286).

Following a long and complicated history of the uses and understandings of an expression such as 'children of nature', for instance, a point has been reached where, when an aboriginal poet recalls, 'Children of nature we were then',<sup>7</sup> an anthropologist speaking of the same people asserts,<sup>8</sup> 'Children of nature they are not.' Of course, when placed in their contexts of enunciation, the former explains that they were happier before colonization, while the latter seeks to show that the people he studies are of a complex culture. Yet, the question remains that the debate regarding nature in Social Anthropology seems out of phase, even in contradiction with contemporary Indigenous Peoples' statements.

Numerous publications emanating from all over the world, including Europe, attest to the existence among Indigenous Peoples of a political trend using an opposition or dichotomy 'nature versus culture', even if, in many cases, the dichotomy is ascribed by Indigenous Peoples to groups from whom they are willing to distance themselves. To take one example among many, Katerina, an advocate for the Macedonian Indigenous People's rights, claims:<sup>9</sup>

The indigenous peoples ... sprang from the land they live on. [T]hey feel they belong to the land ... They are Nature's children ... Their survival, their culture, their way of life is viewed by themselves as the natural life cycle. [By contrast, Greek] society is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but a man-made one, its survival depends on codes and rules that must be adhered to.

With its appropriation by Indigenous Peoples the expression 'nature's children' has obviously acquired a new meaning, which is both responsive and political. Although it was criticized by many Westerners as aiming to infantilize them or sometimes

<sup>7</sup>A poem by Noonuccal, quoted in A. Shoemaker 2004.

<sup>8</sup>K. Ackerman: 'The Dreaming, an Australian World View', [www.udel.edu](http://www.udel.edu).

<sup>9</sup>Katerina: 'Concerns', *The Macedonian Digest*, Feb. 2006, [www.maknews.com](http://www.maknews.com). I purposely chose a European example, but the same arguments can be found on all continents among groups who have adopted an Indigenous Peoples identity.

used as in Diderot's argument, whereby all human beings as 'children of nature' have the same rights, its present usage in the first person brings about a reverse appropriation of nature, and signifies greater legitimacy. Katerina, the above-quoted author, formulates the idea explicitly, by evoking the Indigenous Peoples' love for the nature they inhabit, and the concern for its preservation:

Conquerors understand how to 'own' something but not how to 'love' it. This is the main difference between conquerors and indigenous people, who are less hostile, less aggressive, more tolerant and peaceful, as they are generally more concerned with the preservation of what they truly love.

Along with Indigenous Peoples portraying themselves as nature's children, they now also commonly use the notion of 'indigenous mentality' (as well as Indigenous knowledge and spirituality). This is close to Lévy-Bruhl's much criticized 'primitive mentality', since it is defined as ignoring dichotomy and linearity.

These self-definitions have a clear utilitarian or political aspect: they are indeed often formulated to obtain specific rights, such as autonomy (as in the example quoted above) or a privileged status.<sup>10</sup> This dimension, however, does not nullify their value, as this is equally true of all definitions to varying degrees. On the other hand, the question as to whether or not these self-definitions correspond to a reality in people's practices is the subject of quite a different debate, which we deliberately set aside here since it does not fall within the scope of Social Anthropology. It particularly concerns Ecology, in its attempt to evaluate the compatibility of Indigenous Peoples and the preservation of biodiversity.

<sup>10</sup>To quote one example among thousands, the Indigenous Peoples of the Kamchatkan Region claim (when demanding to have their region recognized as Territories of Traditional Nature Use): 'Aboriginal mentality should be known and taken into consideration; ... who else, if not the indigenous inhabitants as genuine children of nature would be vitally interested in the preservation of biodiversity of these inimitable landscapes?' *Indigenous Peoples' World—Living Arctic*, No. 14, 2004 (English translation from Russian), [www.npolar.no](http://www.npolar.no).

With the development of Indigenous intellectuals dealing with their group's self-determination, Social Anthropology has acquired *de facto*, a dialogical form, not only during the data collection phase, as has always been the case, but also following the reconstruction of these data. One example of this with regard to the Indigenous Peoples of the Himalayan region—the focus of this study's context—emerged during the workshop which prompted the publication of this volume. While one Western scholar developed the idea that the categories of nature and culture were unknown in the group he was studying, my neighbour, a foreign-educated Nepalese scholar of the same 'tribal origin', raised her eyebrows, and whispered to me: 'of course we have these notions...'. Her reaction reminds us that denying certain concepts to a particular group of population may displease its members. Besides the fact that it may naturally be felt as a lack of some sort, it also appears to suggest that the concepts of nature and culture being used by the Indigenous Peoples as their main political argument is a borrowed one.

This idea is sometimes clearly formulated. Thus, after quoting a young Kanak woman who said: 'We come out of nature ... and that's what makes our culture, that's what sets us apart,' an anthropologist offers the following interpretation:

The concept of nature/culture derives from a Western worldview (Descola and Pálsson 1996; Escobar 1999). Thus, in defending a privileged relationship to their natural surroundings, Kanak necessarily adopts Western terms and ideologies.<sup>11</sup>

This borrowing may in turn be interpreted as a sign that its users are not genuine representatives of the people they belong to, and it therefore contributes to discrediting the recent reflection carried out by Indigenous intellectuals. Indeed, it conveys the idea that their argument is fallacious, given that together with their specific link to nature, Indigenous Peoples all over the world choose to present themselves as guardians of ancient and

<sup>11</sup>L.S. Horowitz, 2001: 244–5.

authentic traditions, even when using Internet to sell their products or when active in international organizations.

Among the recent attempts to render the complexity of such a diffused notion as 'nature', A. Escobar's suggestion (1999) to account for the coexistence of various constructions of nature within an individual is worth noting. Escobar distinguishes the numerous overlapping landscapes a social activist would have in mind as 'the organic landscape of the communities', the 'capitalist landscape of the plantations', and the 'technoscape'. These constructions, he notes, do not form distinct autonomous entities, but are relational and co-produce each other. He hereby pinpoints what appears to be the fundamental dimension of the formulated definitions of the group's relationship with nature, in which the relational or even reactional dimension indeed seems determining. This, for the simple reason that this relationship itself is part of a self-determination process, which in turn is constructed in opposition to some other group taken as the referent *alter ego*.

The relational dimension of the conception of nature is well illustrated by one of the most striking aspects of Indigenous Peoples' self-determination, namely their similarity, even though they emanate from an extraordinary variety of groups in terms of languages, social organizations, environments, etc. The fact that they all developed similar ideas about nature and culture at the same period of time not only means that they influenced each other within international organizations, through printed matter, etc., but also that they all found themselves in the same colonial or semi-colonial situation, and in the same marginal and subaltern position within it. Indigenous Peoples' focus on nature/culture concepts, which are not actually formulated in their indigenous languages (even when they have had no experience of Western colonization), is still puzzling. In this respect, Roberte Hamayon's suggestion that among Siberian peoples, nature and culture may be viewed as 'implicit categories', which used to be formulated differently in the past, according to various groups' practices *and* self-definitions, provides a path for further exploration.

The study of conceptions and the way they are expressed through language and practices necessarily includes a historical

dimension, which is both decisive and difficult to document in the absence of written testimonies. It is striking that even in one region of the world such as Nepal, where no foreigner was allowed until 1951, where until 1990 religious converts were punished by prison sentences, and where many villages are still difficult to access, people, languages and ideas have always circulated widely. There, the relationship between the mother tongue and the Nepali language among Indigenous Peoples represents a first stumbling block in trying to apprehend the latter's worldviews. Indeed they often master several languages, and Nepali, the national language, has become a *lingua franca*, if not the mother tongue, of many Indigenous Peoples. In addition, a growing proportion has access to English via education. Parallel to this widened and composite knowledge, new actors, such as Indigenous scholars, have emerged and given shape to newly constructed world-views. These have been formulated over the last two decades in a vast set of literature devoted to ethnicity, elaborated by urbanized members of the various Indigenous Peoples, whose ideas form a bridge between the global world and the groups they represent and in turn, influence. In spite of the fundamental role played by this type of material, this is not yet sufficiently taken into account in Western analyses, which are usually based on written texts only concerning philosophy or great religions, and on rituals, myths or oral narratives as regards contemporary non-Western societies deprived of a literate 'Great Tradition'.

Before the recent means of disseminating ideas thanks to world capitalism and globalization, religions influenced—and still do—a great diversity of populations to varying degrees. The adoption of the world-views conveyed by these colonizing ideologies, as well as the specific distortions they have been subjected to, have been significant in Asia. The Himalayan region proves to be a most interesting place for observation to address these questions, as it forms a crossroads where three great religions and a multitude of shamanist and animist practices converge.<sup>12</sup> In

<sup>12</sup>We have not considered recent Christian influence, which is mainly found in North-East India.



addition, groups with different languages and ways of life coexist in a great diversity of environments due to the various altitudes and the contrasted climates on the two southern and northern slopes of the range. It is particularly difficult for just one specialist to undertake the task of comparison and generalization in such a context.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps its complexity has kept this region somewhat removed from the recent debate concerning categories of nature and culture, as exposed for instance in the remarkable volume by P. Descola (2005), who offers a typology of the various kinds of human relationships with nature.

To address the Himalayan diversity without over-simplifying it, the present volume offers different scales and angles of study. The first part gathers distant points of view, insofar as they are based on non-contemporary textual traditions or on comparative studies on the four main religious streams which were, and still are, influential in the Himalayan range: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Shamanism. This set of studies serves as a framework for the second part, made up of case studies and reflections based on more localized ethnographies of contemporary groups living in different regions of the Himalayan range, from Northern Pakistan in the West to Southern China in the East.

The nature/culture opposition encompasses several sets of dualities: the contrast between a cyclical time ruling nature and a linear time ruled by events (history), between the regular and the unforeseen (laws versus contingency), between the spontaneous and the fabricated, the innate and the acquired or transmitted, the raw and the refined, the wild and the domesticated, what can be appropriated and what cannot, what is common to all living beings and what is specific to human beings.<sup>14</sup>

The philosophical and religious worldviews in each of the four great religions which have been dealt with in these pages develop some of these oppositions.

<sup>13</sup>And the local complexity may explain that most studies dealing with this region focus on ethnography, to the detriment of generalization and theorization, which are difficult to extend across various contexts.

<sup>14</sup>A. Roger and F. Guéry eds, 1991.

The Hindu tradition possesses categories close to nature and culture in the Sanskrit terms *prakṛiti* and *samskṛiti*, which are still used in modern Indo-Aryan languages. Both *prakṛiti* and *samskṛiti* are expressed with the notion of action, *kriyā*. *Kriyā*, the action, also designates the rite. Built on this root, *prakṛiti* or nature is both what is pre-acted and a productive form, while *samskṛiti* or culture literarily means perfection. As their common root suggests, both 'nature' and 'culture' were created by ritual action. Charles Malamoud explains this in his opening contribution on how the categories of nature and culture revolve around each other in ancient Indian normative and poetic texts. Malamoud explores these categories through the theme of the retreat into the forest. Presented in the normative treatises as a means of access to a purer or stronger form of being, a stay in the forest is the third stage in life and even more so in the fourth stage during which the individual abandons social life and sacrificial rites. The aim is to quash desire in order to obtain liberation. However, Malamoud shows that poetic creation blurs these conceptions and presents a paradoxical situation in which the individual undertakes ascetic practices in the forest not to dampen but to fulfil his desire. Furthermore, he depicts utopian societies of ascetics who have solved the contradiction between the requirements of social life and respect for nature (a contradiction which is illustrated by the fact that sacrificial offerings are by definition cultivated vegetal and domesticated animals). Moreover, some poetic works describe an osmosis with nature which is obtained not by putting an end to ritual activities but by total devotion to them.

Charles Malamoud's observation echoes Roberte Hamayon's remark on the concept of nature in Siberia, which, she says, is quite different within the same population if one considers a particular type of material, such as ritual or actual hunting practices. More generally, it strongly parallels the coexistence since Greek antiquity of two contrasted human relationships with nature in Western thought, as highlighted by Michel Hadot.<sup>15</sup> The author characterizes the two opposed approaches to Heraclitus' formula,

<sup>15</sup>*Le voile d'Isis. Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de nature*, Paris: Gallimard, 2004.

'Nature loves to hide', as on the one hand, the Promethean approach, which is linked to experiment, curiosity, science, and violence, and which promotes man's domination over the natural realm; on the other hand, the Orphic approach, which includes mysteries, secrets, art and respect, and which is based on harmony and fusion.<sup>16</sup> Michel Hadot's fascinating study examines the underlying tension between these two approaches in the Western world, which could not be revealed by examining just one type of material. And, in view of the warm reception of the idea that Westerners are distinct from the rest of humanity because they alone distinguish between nature and culture we cannot but agree with Per Binde (2001: 26) who notes that the models used in Anthropology are constructed in opposition to supposed Western conceptions that are 'seldom discussed in depth'. Binde warns: 'It would be unfortunate if another sharp dualism were to be introduced: that between conceptions of nature in the West and the non-West.'

Charles Malamoud shows that in ancient India, 'man, because he performs rites, builds a "made-up" world, which is thus distinct from the given or natural one'. However, Vedic texts hold a double discourse on action: sacrifice is on the one hand rendered possible by ritual knowledge, which is acquired, and thus cultural, yet man does not *perform* sacrifice, he *deploys* it, as a continuation of the initial sacrifice which created the world. In this schema: 'It is rite which precedes nature and society and determines them both.' This is why rituals act on both registers in this tautological world-view where 'the rite reveals and deploys nature, which is itself already instituted by the founding sacrifice'.

The following chapter, by Stéphane Arguillère, focuses on the notion of time in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. In this tradition,

<sup>16</sup>Per Binde (2001), identifies three views of nature within the Roman Catholic Tradition: first, as 'matter' opposed to the 'spiritual' (i.e. man should dominate nature as the spirit dominates the body), second, as related to the divine (and therefore to be respected as part of creation), and third, as the realm of supernatural forces (i.e. catastrophes as divine messages, etc.).

as in Western thought, there exists a distinction between linear and cyclical time. However, although culture is conceived as a linear time which emerged from the cyclical time of nature in Western philosophy, in Tibetan Buddhism, the cyclic and the linear are not related to nature, history and culture in the same way. Indeed, human beings are not separate from other beings, but are encompassed within the broad category of sentient beings, which includes animals and humans, as opposed to non-sentient things. For sentient beings, there exist two distinct temporalities: the wandering in the repetitive time of the *samsara* and a linear progression towards liberation, *nirvana*. Nevertheless, this opposition displays an inversion of Western conceptions, because the cyclic has to be produced while the linear path to *nirvana* is immediate. As S. Arguillère notes, the cyclic *samsara* may thus be assimilated to nature, not to a nature that is opposed to culture, but instead to 'transnature', or metaphysis.

Similarly, the contribution by Marc Gaborieau recalls that Arabic has several equivalents for nature but none for culture. God is the main agent of both the natural world and human destiny: therefore 'nature is opposed not to human agency, but to God's omnipotence'. The various schools of Islam have developed quite different ideas related to nature. Arabic philosophy views God as a remote creator, whereas in apologetic theology, god is omnipotent and everything is a miracle. The regularity observed in natural phenomena is attributed either to the role of the saints, who fulfil human desire (for rain in particular), or to God's regular habits. God's omnipotence is the sole source of legislation, and the only real agency in cosmological events and human actions. Culture is therefore not what refines nature, since the world was made perfect by God, but rather a degeneration, which is not designated by any name.

The last contribution in the first part, by Roberte Hamayon, deals with Shamanism in its alleged place of origin: Siberia. We have chosen to place this unwritten religion on the same footing as Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam for the prominent role it plays in the Himalayan regions and to draw a model from Siberia

because of the similarities between Himalayan Shamanism and Siberian Shamanism.<sup>17</sup> Roberte Hamayon observes that all Siberian peoples have borrowed the concepts of nature and culture from the Russian. Today they claim to be 'children of Nature' and to be 'in harmony with nature', be they urbanites or not, a claim which may be interpreted as a refusal to yield to any power. For R. Hamayon, nature may be described as an implicit category, which was expressed by 'wilderness' by the Siberian peoples before they adopted the Russian language. As she demonstrates, the notion of wilderness itself is also relative since hunters and herders' shamanic practices respectively display an inversion in relation to natural resources and the environment. In fact, even self-determination as hunters or herders is a deliberate choice, rather than being determined by activities.

The Eherit-Bulagat herders, a native population of Buryat, emphasize the riches of the forests and the lakes rather than their wilderness. Their hunting season is opened by epics, which narrate the hero's quest for a spouse whom he receives after much difficulty from his 'rich' father-in-law.

Hunters, on their part, open the hunting season with a long shamanic ritual which stages a hunt, and which ends with the shaman's marriage to a spirit, who is described as the daughter or sister of the Master of the Game.

In both cases, the wedding is a hunting metaphor, and is made possible through an alliance with the spirits or with the in-laws. However, the relationship is reversed in the two cases as the herders' starting point is alliance, whereas the hunters' is the hunt.

For hunters, men and animals are part of the same food chain. Their souls and spirits are similar and are to be found in the bones, which are always kept intact for reproduction. Yet their relationship is not fully reciprocal. Men try and take more than they give. They delay payment of their debts by trickery, which they say they borrow from animal tricks, and which they then combine with their human nature. Thus, 'Shamanism is a type of "culture" that takes its shape from "nature", but ... with the

<sup>17</sup>John Hitchcock, 1967.

result that man's behaviour permanently differs from that of the animal being imitated.'

The first contribution to the second part takes up Roberte Hamayon's remarks in the Himalayan context. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine explores the recent claim of the Indigenous Peoples of Nepal that they belong to nature, as opposed to Hindu groups who, they say, colonized their territories. She documents the construction of this new identity and the opposition, expressed through an opposed relationship to nature, which forms its basis. The indigenous relationship to nature is positively characterized by harmony, fusion and participation, while the Hindus' relationship is viewed as negative and distant: a distance which goes from the transformation of nature to the non-intervention in nature. These ideas, though newly formulated within an international context, play a fundamental local political role for they do not oppose the dominants' views, but bring about their reversal, through the reification of a vision projected onto 'tribal groups' by the Hindus since ancient times.

Ben Campbell reacts to this approach, which uses the discourse of indigenous activists and intellectuals as anthropological material, and warns against their biases. By discussing A. Agrawal's concept of environmentality and E. Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism, B. Campbell's concern, through the exploration of a group of Tamangs in Nepal, is to characterize a relationship to the non-human, similar to animism, which illuminates villagers' resistance to nature protection. To this end, he suggests introducing the notion of 'environmental subjectivity', which includes both human-environment relatedness and the way the environment is made an explicit category. The task is re-constructive since environmental subjectivity is not a body of knowledge, but fragments, which, when put together, may allow for analysis by anthropologists.

In Nepal, worship of earth-gods by Tibeto-Burmese speaking groups often seems modelled on a reaction to political dominance, once their territories have been invaded by foreign groups.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>See Lecomte-Tilouine, 1996.

Martin Gaenzle's study shows that among the Mewahang Rais, 'political power derives from the subjugating power of the "civilizing" process' over 'the territorial forces of nature and wilderness', which are embodied in the divinities of the soil. Interestingly in this case, the worship of these divinities not only excludes latecomers (though the Kulunge Rais settled 'seven generations ago'), but also the 'illegitimate' first settlers, the Sampange Rais. The Sampange Rais were troubled and killed by the local divinity, whereas the Mewahangs, who had proper ritual knowledge to worship it, chased them away and settled there under the protection of the god. This ritual order persists even today, but tends to have become secondary with the development of new territorial cults, which are less exclusive, and in which newly empowered patrilineages are integrated. Like most 'Indigenous peoples' in Nepal, the Rais have developed the cult of earth-gods whom the Hindus themselves neglect, though the latter have established their political power over their whole territory. This suggests more generally that the various indigenous groups placed in a similar position of 'subjugation' developed similar answers to counter it, namely by emphasizing their exclusive relation to the local environment, and by ritually constructing the environment as a territory.

The world conception of the Jads, a small group of Tibeto-Burmese speaking people inhabiting the region located at the source of the Ganges, equally seems strongly influenced by the socio-political relations they maintain with a dominant Hindu population. However, instead of developing exclusive ritual links with the figures embodying their territory, the Jads choose to hide and keep their distance from the dominant culture. Subhadra Channa shows that except for the separatists who adopted Buddhism as a clear way to oppose the dominating Hindu world, the Jads do not have a named religion and use all kinds of ritual specialists. They have developed a tendency to keep their distance both mentally and physically from the Hindu world. Instead of altering their culture and knowledge in response to their negative perception by the dominant Hindu population, the Jads conceal

them, just as they conceal their habitat when settling to the south, near the Hindus. The Jads view themselves as being close to unspoiled nature, i.e., altitude pastures and forests. However, a clear distinction is made among them between the males, who are more closely related to this domain where they spend some months with their herds, and the women, who must be careful not to anger spirits when venturing into the forest and are not allowed to spend the night there. The Jads valorize their own environment, which they view as nature, and devalorize culture, which they understand as being that of the dominant Hindus.

In the region of Kohistan (Northwest Pakistan), recent Islamization has led to a ban on regional traditions, such as the singing of epics and performance of shamanic rituals. However, Islamization has not affected, in the same manner, the different categories of the landscape, which are highly contrasted. Thus the high mountains, which form other worlds inhabited by fairies and giants, have not been Islamized. Kohistanis use these remote places for rendezvous with their lovers. Claus Peter Zoller uses the nature-culture opposition as implicit knowledge, and as a hermeneutic strategy or tool, which offers a possible way of reading the Kohistani practices of love. In this context, love is a liminal experience, which is 'legal' only in the wilderness and excluded from the settlements where respect, but not love, prevails between husband and wife. The married lovers meet secretly in the high meadows where their love is bereft of any social consequence as it is strictly platonic. All Kohistanis have lovers, yet this has to remain strictly secret, otherwise they will be killed by their kinsmen and transformed into fairies. If love enters the settlement which is the sphere of respect, it creates wilderness within society: killings and rapes, with no emotional restraint and a total lack of control over actions. There is thus a 'close correspondence between the oppositional notions of culture and nature on the one hand, and the Kohistani practices of secret love affairs and vendettas on the other,' says Zoller. Somehow, wilderness here serves as the framework of pre-Islamic elements whereby Kohistani society gave a particular shape to their Islamization. Surprisingly enough,



it has resulted in an institutional game of playing with fire, where the forbidden values of the wilderness are so attractive that one risks his life for it.

Tibetans are mainly known through their vast religious textual tradition, yet, as Rachel Guidoni shows, present-day Tibetans share common knowledge about relics which find few echoes in this written corpus, even though relics play an essential role in Tibetan religious life. Although relics are highly thought of, their spontaneity or naturalness is crucial; if they are the product of some artificial procedure or intention, they are devalued. Except for holy scriptures, any sacred source may produce relics, which manifest the virtues of both its emitter and of its receptor. Relics are usually pearl-shaped whitish balls emitted by the body of holy persons (whether dead or alive) and are commonly found in sacred places which also produce them. They are carefully kept in dark places where they are said to grow and multiply, or even to move. While Buddhist philosophy groups together the various kinds of sentient beings, as far as relics are concerned, a clear distinction is drawn. Indeed, like humans, animals may also generate relics, but these are black, and if kept by humans, they lead to hell.

The last three contributions focus on socio-cosmological models which preside over different scales and domains of human societies and their environment in the Himalayan region. These represent broad explanatory systems in which energy flows circulate along networks structuring living beings, their settlements, environment and the whole cosmos alike. The all-encompassing nature and the circularity of these explanatory models do not allow the determination of any starting point from which they can be constructed, but highlight a conception of the universe and all its components as being ruled by the same phenomena and in relation to each other. This material blurs both scales and categories by focussing on processes and networks, in which humans are included but which they also reproduce.

The practices of pastoralists from Yunnan are based on two alternative explanatory models of the processes that affect plant growth as well as the health of animals and humans. Andreas Wilkes shows that the same explanatory models were found

relevant in experiments on exotic fodder technologies and on methods to control weed infestation in alpine meadows. These ideas underlie villagers' understandings of the value of these new technologies and their plans regarding their use. They also explain why they attempt to maintain the productivity of their herds of cattle by the specific custom of feeding meat to cows.

Pascal Bouchery's study focuses on the models governing the irrigation system and the conception of the social and physical environment among the Hanis of Yunnan. The author shows that their similarities are striking. The local environment is seen as being crossed by two types of energy flows: the first ones originate from the mountain tops (the realm of the gods) and follow their 'paths', from one summit to another, down into the valley; the second ones follow the streams from their sources, which are the habitat of deities named 'water owners'. Human settlements are located on these flows, or even better, at their place of convergence, to benefit from their energy, exactly in the same way that the parcel of land achieves its degree of fertility from above through irrigation channels, into which manure is thrown. Like the energy flow, the irrigation system is oriented downwards and its flux should never be interrupted: a principle which is regulated by social laws and carefully monitored. In this conception, human techniques closely parallel the world's perception and both are fully interlinked.

The energy networks among the Hanis recall the visible and invisible networks which cross the cosmos, the earth and the human body in Hinduism. Chiara Letizia shows that the common structure of these networks is made up of threads and knots representing passages. The structure relies both on the physical world and on the imaginary, since invisible elements are also part of the networks. Humans circulate along the river network, and towards holy confluences, which represent passages or *tirtha*, in the same manner as air is said to make a pilgrimage through the human body, along its channels and *cakras*, and to make ablutions in its interior holy passages (*tirtha*). In this vision therefore man is both 'pilgrimating' the world and 'pilgrimated' from within. He does not differ from his environment.

## Himalayan Hindu and Indigenous Views on Nature and Culture

Some remarks on the Hindu world in its relation to these populations in Central Nepal will provide an understanding of the context dealt with in this set of contributions dealing primarily with indigenous groups inhabiting the Himalayas, as well as the data for investigating the reactive dimension of the conception of nature and culture. The specific Hindu social organization in a caste hierarchy is generally presented as being fully independent of a historical process of settlement and of any territorial dimension, though the caste with the greatest numerical strength, and/or the caste owning the largest part of land in a given locality or region is recognized as the dominant caste. In the Hindu Himalayan context, caste organization was imposed on all groups during the Middle Ages as a common framework, and spread its correlated ideas on purity and hierarchy. However, in this context, these notions are not fully exempt of the geographical setting and especially of the criterion of autochthony. Autochthony, which is closely associated with wilderness and nature, distinguishes the 'elders' within local societies. In many regions, and especially in Western Nepal, the first settlers maintain a specific political or ritual status and role, even if they are of a low caste. In the hilly regions inhabited by both caste and tribal groups, the elders are usually found among the latter and are viewed as more savage and closer to nature than the former. They often claim to have emanated from nature, to be the local 'men of origin'. Low-caste groups play an analogous role in the Indian Western Himalayas, where they are seen as autochthonous in comparison with the upper castes who describe themselves as latecomers.

At first sight, the autochthony criterion, as a source of prestige and of ritual or political prerogative, reveals a worldview that is independent of the functioning principles of the caste organization based on the pure and impure. Alternatively, it may be that this dimension has been neglected in the way social anthropologists have theorized about this organization. Indeed, in the Hindu

myth of the creation of the social hierarchy, the most eminent class, that of the Brahmans, is also the first-born. Hence pre-eminence is expressed by (or co-extensive with) primacy. However, Hindu social order is not maintained by mere abstract principles, and the Hindu myth of the creation of kingship offers another, more complicated scenario, where an evil and barren Hindu king, then a tribal king, are respectively killed and expelled before a good Hindu king is enthroned by the Brahmans. Absolute eminence is thus aptly transcribed by absolute anteriority in the Hindu myth of human creation, yet ruling over a territory and society—or kingship—is the result of a series of adjustments dealing with different pre-existent categories of beings.

In present-day practices, when they have not been killed or expelled, autochthonous groups of Nepal are recognized as having a right over the territory. This is often expressed in rituals but has nothing to do with the criteria of purity, and even transgresses it. This phenomenon is not restricted to the Himalayan area. The Brahmans of the village studied by Jean-Luc Chambard (1994: 69–70) in Central India, for instance, are said to have eaten the half loaf of bread offered by the Chamar impure caste, the original inhabitants of the place, in order to be able to settle on the same territory. Though not absent in the Gangetic plain, the chronology of settlement is more systematically used to describe and explain local power struggles, as well as ritual organization in the Himalayan area. This fact is explained locally by the late coming of Hindu groups to territories already occupied by numerically important autochthonous groups. Whatever the reason, one of the consequences of this right is that Himalayan Hindu kings are closely associated with those who represent autochthony: they have wild counterparts, the Raute or Kusunda hunter-gatherers with whom they maintain a fraternal joking relationship, or they themselves are seen as the offspring of local tribes. The Hindu king thus partakes in the wilderness, and he may freely intermarry with tribal women. When seen as being good, the king is viewed as a god who indulges in the accumulation and redistribution of wealth and pleasures; when evil, he is to be slaughtered like a dog. The Brahman, on the other hand, is an ascetic god and when

guilty, he becomes an untouchable to be expelled, not an animal to be killed. Whereas the Brahman thus crosses the social hierarchy along the pure-impure axis, the Hindu king evolves along another axis ranging from civilization to wilderness.

Geographic rooting is not only fundamental for Hindus with respect to settlement chronology, but also regarding their 'culture'. High-caste Hindus inhabiting the Himalayas frequently express a feeling of having migrated from a civilized place, northern India, towards a more savage region, the Himalayan Mountains. This statement comprises numerous dimensions, since wilderness is a complex and paradoxical notion for Hindus. On the one hand, it is clearly characterized by social un-differentiation and this feature is usually negatively connoted: a wild place is inhabited by *ajat* people, or people with no caste. This feature is attributed to all inhabitants by the environment, and high-caste individuals inhabiting remote Himalayan areas express the idea that their immersion in the wilderness has made them just as wild as the autochthons. Yet, on the other hand, *ajat* people, 'normally' ranked as impure, are not seen as such when wild. Indeed, wilderness forms a kind of parallel world, where people deprived of *jat* are seen as wild alter egos of their civilized counterparts, not as belonging to the bottom rung of the social hierarchy. This is expressed by the pure status in the Hindu hierarchy conferred on all local groups throughout the Himalayan range, despite their culinary or other social habits that are so 'disgusting' in the Hindus' eyes. It is also expressed, most remarkably, by the treatment of the most savage among the local groups, the Kusunda, Raute or Raji hunter-gatherers, who are regarded as Kshatriyas of a strange kind: the kings of the forest. In the case of animals, wilderness even confers an additional degree of purity: thus the boar is eaten by Kshatriyas, though the pig is not, and wild chickens are eaten by Brahmans whereas domestic ones are not, etc.

In Nepali, wilderness (*jangal*) is a relative notion designating a 'less domestic' space than the point of reference: for instance, the outside when speaking from the inside of a house or uncultivated places when speaking in a cultivated field, with the forest as its extreme manifestation. It also has an absolute

definition for the Hindus, as the space where rice cultivation is impossible. High-caste individuals explain that they cannot settle above the geographic rice cultivation limit or they would be 'wild'. This is significant because rice is an absolute necessity for their life-cycle rituals, or *samskar*, especially the ritual of the first solid food offered to a child, and the death rituals. They refer to the essence of what they call 'culture', *samskriti*, which is defined by *samskar*. Shantiraj Sharma, the Brahman author of a booklet on the culture of the Khas-Kirat people, highlights the relationship between *samskriti* and *samskar* and defines the relationship between nature and culture in the following passage:

The word *samskriti* [culture] was built around *samskar*. Now the word *samskar* has two meanings. The first one is the following: when man is born, he is similar to other animals. Animals, as men, search for food, sleep, are afraid, copulate, feel maternal love, the heat and the cold, protect themselves and their race. This is why Vedic texts called *shudra* [name of the lowest social class] the beings who possess only these low attitudes: these people deprived of *samskar* remain in their wild form. After birth, the different *samskar* rituals purify man of his animal aspect and raise him to a higher stage. Raising man from the wild or the animal stage, *samskar* offers him civilization (*sabhyata*).

There is another meaning of *samskar*: the form and design that the potter gives to raw clay, once cooked, cannot be erased, and it is the same with molten metal. Once cooked, the form no longer changes. In the same way, the memory of the *samskar* left by the beliefs and observances in our ancestors' spirit, remains indelible. These *samskar* of the spirit are called *samskriti*, (culture). The Hindu Aryas of the plains attach great importance to contacts, to purification rules, to purity. In hot areas where one perspires, washing oneself and one's clothes daily is unavoidable. If not, not only would one's body smell, but insects and vermin would also take residence and transmit diseases. Gradually, this usage became registered as a *samskar* consisting in washing and cleaning. Purity became associated with cleaning. Because of this, if they cannot wash, the Hindu Aryas of the plain develop allergies. They attach importance to washing, even

in the mountains, even when the weather is cold. This is their natural and mental *samskar*. However, the fresh air of the mountains has all the power to purify: there, water is not necessary but once a mental *samskar* is built, one cannot erase it by simple reasoning. Those who live on the mountain tops do not wash, do not clean their clothing or the pots in which they eat; they are not concerned with purity and impurity (*jutho-choko*), as they take pleasure in eating leftovers or dried meat. This is their geographical culture (*bhaugolik samskar*). In the *samskar* of the mountainous nature, there is no disgust relating to food, and people do not develop allergies. The mountains erase dirtiness, and this is why such peoples are not affected by vermin. Cold air, snow and frost ensure their natural destruction. Then why adopt the *samskar* of the Hindu Aryas of the plain [in the mountains]? (Sharma, 1995: 6–7).

For this author, culture therefore has a dual basis: it is both geographical (i.e., conditioned by environmental factors) and mental, or, as he explains, inherited. From a natural origin, culture, once registered in the mind, becomes disconnected from the environment. It is a progressive process similar to the cooking of clay or the melting of metal, which is perpetuated from generation to generation (until one Brahman realizes that it is meaningless in the new environment). Another distinct part of culture, called 'civilization' here, is opposed to wilderness, and acquired by the lifecycle rituals, which to varying degrees, refine the different categories of human beings, who are all born equally wild.

Santiraj Sharma's views are illustrated by actual education practices in rural Nepal: children (be they tribal Magars or upper-caste Hindus) are told by their parents to keep their distance vis-à-vis wild counter-models: not to behave like monkeys (by chewing on corn on the cob) or like wild beasts (by eating pieces of meat before they are cooked). Education is akin to domestication. Though the process of cultural refinement is presented as definitive in the image of cooking used by Shantiraj Sharma, Nepalese villagers often express the idea that, when in contact with wilderness, living beings return to this state. Among animals for

instance, domestic species are viewed as still akin to their wild counterparts. The dog does not bark at the jackal, its cousin, but lets it kill poultry. A chicken or a piglet released into the forest is said to become wild in this environment. Human beings also carry with them the dangers of the wilderness and hunters or those who venture into wild places for ritual purposes ritually get rid of them before returning to the village; babies are not to be handled by anyone coming from outside unless the person rids themselves of the dangers from the outside by placing their hands over a fire; and finally, Himalayan peasants who rarely wash their bodies, as Shantiraj Sharma recalls, carefully wash the earth off their feet so that it does not enter the house.

For Hindus, high places are wild for they do not offer full conditions for maintaining their cultural norms. The Nepalese Hindu government took into account this dimension and adopted less stringent rules in remote areas because it was considered impossible to behave in the same manner as in other parts of the Hindu kingdom. Interestingly enough, liberal rules for remote places did not only involve food, but also sexual practices. Perhaps it was on the basis of this principle that regulations for low-ranked groups were less strict than for upper-castes. They performed fewer *samskars* and were thus less refined; their wild behaviour was more acceptable, if not normal: they simply had to avoid polluting others.

In the hills of central Nepal, most people speak Nepali, a language in which the categories of nature and culture are often used in an oppositional way. For instance, it is used in the characterization of divine stones, to distinguish the worthiest ones, *prakritik* or natural, from those that were created by man. Various factors confer the status of a natural form of a god on a simple stone: physical factors (i.e., its appearance, its abnormal weight, its displacement), or external factors such as a revelatory dream. Unexpected encounters with divine *prakritik* icons, their selection, their valorisation and their worship form a major part of central Nepal's religious life. They are the only venerable icons, and if man-made representations of gods are added they have mostly, a decorative purpose. The idea that a ritual can confer permanent



divinity on a man-made representation is not common in this region; the process is used by Brahmins, but only temporarily, and at ephemeral shrines (*jagge*).

Gods generally manifest themselves through the natural world comprising some objects and phenomena that are considered divine, and qualified as natural, *prakritik*. Once acknowledged, they are set up in ultra-natural spaces, guarded by a wall where men are not allowed to intervene: no digging, ploughing, building or taking, not even dry wood or leaves. In these places set apart, wilderness forms the gods' temple, showing the sacred character conferred on unspoiled nature.

Puzzled by this conceptual field combining the divine and 'naturalness', as opposed to human and civilized, one day I quite simply asked a villager, a Chetri (or Kshatriya): 'what is cultural—*sanskritik*—and what is natural—*prakritik*?' He indicated at once his nearby field and answered: 'Here there is wheat. Man sows seed here: it is cultural. But afterwards, it grows: this is natural.'

This answer is interesting coming from a peasant because, as such, he knows that a seed borne away by the wind or a bird can germinate on its own, whereas man helps his wheat to grow by undertaking a series of operations: manuring, weeding, ploughing and other tasks. Thus sowing can be seen as natural and the growth of the plant as resulting from cultural operations. However, my interlocutor had radically separated these two processes from each other, according to the required degree of human intervention: without man, he added, a strong concentration of cereals cannot grow in a given place. On the other hand, germination and growth may prove excellent in a fertile place, without man having any part to play in it.

The example of the field shows that, for a peasant from central Nepal, the nature versus culture opposition does not translate the distinction between what occurs *de facto* with no human intervention and what does not, but between what *can* occur naturally and what *cannot*. The distinction relates to the possibility of a phenomenon occurring, not to the real conditions of its occurrence. In sowing seed, man's intervention is a determining factor, whereas in its germination and growth, this is secondary.

This conception is not idiosyncratic, since it is expressed in numerous myths about the foundation of villages in central Nepal, where hunters, seeing land ploughed by wild boars, sow seed and return a few months later to evaluate the yield. If there are large ears of grain, they know that the land is fertile and therefore settle on the spot. In this widespread account where even the preparation of the soil is not the product of human intervention, sowing indeed represents the founding cultural gesture, the result of which predicts future human settlement.

This scenario is literally opposed to another type of founding account narrating the transformation of 'wilderness' into 'auspiciousness' (*jāngal ko māngal*), and thus a real transformation of the nature of nature by man. This transformation is narrated by high-caste Hindu groups, when referring to the clearing of land to establish new settlements,<sup>19</sup> or metaphorically, when evoking the establishment of the Hindu order and laws.<sup>20</sup> Thus when King Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered Kirtipur, though a highly urbanized area, he is said to have rendered the wilderness of Kirtipur auspicious, by felling trees. Interestingly, the description of the conquering process is presented as a hunt with the enemy kings as deer. The Hindu royal conquest thus literally parallels the settlement of hunters on a wild space they clear, followed by the auspicious transformation of the territory into a cultivated and irrigated place.

It might be rapidly concluded from these few elements that we are faced with two groups: one (the Indigenous Peoples), closely related to nature, has a selective attitude toward its environment, both in the establishment of its gods, and in its settling process; the other (the Hindu upper castes living in a wild environment) accepts and recognizes this attitude, but encompasses it within their transformational capacity towards the natural realm and the supernatural one. This capacity is nonetheless limited in their

<sup>19</sup>See for instance the family history of Motilal Malla (2045 VS: 1–6), which relates the migration of 500 families from Baglung to Surkhet-Dailekh in 1831, and describes how they cleared land and made canals.

<sup>20</sup>See the chronicle edited by D. Vajracarya, (2019 VS: 117). For another mention of this process in Nuwakot, see p.196.

understanding: temporally limited in the case of the gods, who are invoked in some object or symbol for the time of the ritual only; spatially limited since the high caste's ability to transform the wilderness into auspiciousness is only made possible by cultivating rice. The absence of rice prevents them from following their culture, especially their crucial *samskar*, or lifecycle rituals. As a matter of fact, it is possible to correlate the settlements of high-caste Hindus with rice cultivation throughout the Himalayas.

However, the situation is even more complicated; since rice, being a cultivated plant, is considered something of a pollutant, it must not be offered to the purest deities who only accept wild food, just like ascetics. The wildest regions are thus considered the purest because they are less contaminated by human activity. Yet, they are not compatible with the life of a householder, whose duty is to perform *samskar*.

Here the valorization of untouched nature coexists with the need for transforming space into a properly cultural zone, i.e., a cultivated one. The paradox is formulated in the literally opposite meanings attributed to the expression, *jangal ko mangal*. This usually denotes the clearing of forest for settlement and can be translated as 'from wilderness: auspiciousness'; it is also sometimes used to laud the beauties of nature, in which case it has the opposite meaning of 'the auspiciousness of the wilderness'.<sup>21</sup> This inversion of the terms reveals a field of tension between ideas that co-exist among the Hindu population of the Himalayas, and within which the indigenous groups have managed in various ways to preserve a distinct identity.

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<sup>21</sup>See for instance the poem entitled 'jangalko mangal' by Dilliraman Dhakal (2040 VS: 12-13).

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PART I  
HINDUISM, BUDDHISM,  
ISLAM AND SHAMANISM

# At the Articulation of Nature and Artifice The Rite

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Osmosis with nature, western Nepal (Photo:  
Marie Lecomte-Tilouine)

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