

On Magar Identity and Autonomy

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Once I met M. S. Thapa by chance and I remember that he asked me what was my *jati*. Not satisfied by my answer that we have none in France, he then inquired about the *jati* of my ancestors. I had no prepared response to this unusual question¹ but finally, I said: "Gaul". I then explained that we unfortunately know very little about the Gaulish culture and language, because they did not use writing, and that they were defeated by the Romans who acculturated them. From our prime youth, however, we are taught at school that our ancestors were fond of boar meat and used to go to the battlefield running and laughing. I am still not sure if he told me that "we" were like the Magars then or if it came up to my mind by itself, but I had clearly the feeling that this short conversation was something as a psycho-analysis. This deeply buried identity, despite its antiquity, could in effect well explain why I have been interested in studying a group of people searching their identity through the meagre elements still in their possession, after centuries of acculturation and domination. My purpose is not to pursue this psycho-analysis, but to position in broad terms the "western" scholar that I am, a category which is too often undifferentiated, especially when collectively designated by their skin colour (*Kuire*). Despite all the fundamental problems raised by the subjectivist approach², the subject sometimes takes over the scholar, as in the present case. Indeed, it is the first time that I am asked to write something on the Magars, by a Magar(ni), and for a Magar journal. Though I have been working with Magars for almost twenty years, I must say that I consider it a more difficult exercise than usual. Indeed, my previous publications were focused on a specific question, not on a group as itself, and were meant to a less directly concerned readership. On the other hand, I am here directly addressing those who normally are kind enough to share some of their time to quench my curiosity and to enable me to justify my salary as a full time researcher. To those too, that I freely use as an object of study and on whom I probably impose views that they often dislike or reject. Therefore, I feel uneasy at offering such a type of exercise to the Magar readership of this journal, inasmuch as I do not feel like acting as a mere mouth-piece of people who do not have access to writing or to advanced scholarly education by presenting some raw material. In fact, I consider that self-determination shall not take the form of an engaged anthropology in which the specialist represents the group s/he works with. On the other hand, he or she may participate in a collective reflection and bring a specific type of analysis or perspective through his or her position of exteriority.

I (as well as my institution) have never considered myself as useful but for this contribution, although the people with whom I have been working asserted me a great variety of roles and never had access to my publications³. As a free electron in the village of Gulmi where I conducted my PhD research in the 1980's, I was often used to keep company. I was thus daily invited to go and cut grass with women, to sit and have a beer with men, or to play to a multitude of games with children. Being unmarried when I settled first there, I was also assimilated to a *kanya keti* (virgin girl), and invited to all the rituals where I was fed and given one or two rupees, in exchange of my auspicious presence. I was also an object of prestige, a position from which I benefited greatly, and though I never distributed other things than cheap cigarettes around, I was often told that I was like Lakshmi, bringing luck and prosperity to the place. To this was added a whole network of more personal relations in which I was not necessarily the centre. This is how, for instance, I was placed in the middle of a strange triangular situation, by being invited daily at a Magar house by a lady who was in love with my Magar assistant. He was refusing her advances but was nevertheless willing to go to her place because he was dreaming to marry her daughter. She, in return, had no desire to marry an uneducated peasant and was often exasperated by his attitude. These three people were equally close to me and it resulted in an impossible combination, since I was sure that at least one member of this trio will react

negatively when put in presence, or by not being in presence. Their ceaseless strategies were thus prevailing over mine. I remember that once, I asked my assistant to bring me back some maps from Tamghas. It took him three days to go and come back and this absence caused by me made my « mother-friend » very upset. Though she knew that I was alone in the evening, she did not invite me as usual, as a form of punishment. Reacting in her turn, her daughter clashed with her and left her home with food and alcohol for my place. She also found in the situation an opportunity to spend the night at my place without danger and to have a dinner in *tête-à-tête*, which allowed her to speak freely for once. I do not think that this type of relations could have developed with the local groups of high caste, since their stricter social rules wouldn't allow the development of such a sentimental imbroglio. Each individual's life is more ascribed, especially regarding family ties.

With regard to the relations with a foreigner, a similar contrast between these two communities prevailed. Thus, I had to maintain close relations with the three major clans of Magar in the village, none of which adopted me in an exclusive way. I was the *didi* of all the younger persons and the *bahini* of all the persons older than me, in an undifferentiated way. And the villagers often showed their disapproval of the stronger ties that I could maintain with some families, telling them: « don't lock her up in your house ». It is only very recently, in 2005, when I went back to the village after several years of absence, that I realised that an appropriation of myself had finally taken place without my participation, since one family-head in particular addressed me then as daughter, *chori*, while all the others were using for the first time my proper name (this last change may be related to the fact that they are now under a Maoist local government). The Magar imperative to share, not only food or wealth, but also human relations, was clearly opposed to the local Bahun-Chetris' attitude. Even during short visits, they often proposed me to tie a ritual friendship, *saino*, with one member of their family and sometimes with their married daughter in visit to the village from a distant place, that I had never seen before. Their will to establish an exclusive link was thus obvious, and interestingly, it also formed a kind of prelude for further relations, whereas it acted as a result of twenty years of mutual frequentation in the Magar community of the same locality.

It is perhaps possible to make a parallel between these two attitudes with the foreigner and the contrasted forms of wedding in these two communities. Whereas ideally the Magars end up marrying their cross-cousin with whom they have been playing all their youth, the high castes marry someone that they have never met before ⁴. A ritual contract thus marks the beginning of an interpersonal relation in one case or just reinforces it in the other. In addition to what was thoroughly observable, another sphere of relations was kept hidden from me, although I sometimes got very fugitive glimpses of it. I remember for instance, that the Magar headman of the village once noted something that I was asking him in his note-book, and wrote a name which was not mine in front of my request, that he quickly hid from my curious glance. I then realised that, as most of the villagers, I was attributed a nickname, but that I was not aware of. In another occasion, Magar girls came to sing and drink at my place, laughing a lot because they had composed a new song about one of their friends who had just eloped with a quite ugly man who was in charge of the mapping of the village. I knew the girl, and I had seen the man in question, and was thus laughing too, when one of my friends told me: « you know, we also composed one about you ». Though eager to know its contents, as I was sure that they were making fun of me in it, I could never hear this song for they were laughing too much when requested.

Through these details, I could experience the phenomenon which was presented by Lacan as a model for inter subjective relations. In his model, the personality is constructed in a mirror game with the Other. Sometimes, however, the person realises, through a lie for instance, that the Other does not correspond exactly to the image he projects of himself by his language. On these

occasions, one perceives that there is another reality behind his perception, but it remains hidden from him or her. When I studied the relations that the Magars maintain with their high caste neighbours in this village of Northern Gulmi, I had the feeling that the same phenomenon was operating at the level of the collective identity between these two communities. Let us take an example. In this region, the Magars employ either a Brahman or a *bhanja* (uterine nephew) as their domestic priest and several Magars explained me that in employing their *bhanja* for this role, they were acting as the Brahmans, saying: « the *bahun* of the Bahuns is their *bhanja* » (or "the priest of the Brahmans is their uterine nephew"). At the same time, they used to say that there was a difference between the Magar and the Brahman attitude towards their *bhanja*: the latter would salute their *bhanja*, while among themselves, it is the contrary. They were thus raising their global similarities while noticing a kind of anomaly, about which no one ever made any further development. Through this tiny detail however, they were pinpointing a fundamental difference between the two groups. Among the Brahmans in effect, the wife-receivers are seen as superior and hence the *bhanja* is saluted first by his maternal uncle. Even if the *bhanja* never becomes a son-in-law among the Brahmans, he is a member of the lineage of the wife-receivers, being the sister's son. Among the Magars, the wife-receivers are inferiors. They say, « as we have taken a spouse from them, we have to make ourselves small ». Besides, the *bhanja* is a double wife-receiver since he is ideally the son-in-law in his turn. For this reason, he is usually expected to render a lot of services to his in-laws in return for his wife.

The Magar inversion of the Hindu hierarchy and the fact that depending on the situation and the lineages, either the Brahman or the *bhanja* may be used by them for the same function, show that priesthood is not correlated with a superior status for the Magar, but rather with the notion of service, *seva*. Despite their cultural domination and their apparent adoption of Hindu principles, the Magars of Gulmi thus introduced an important shift regarding the Hindu notion of priesthood (and the position of the Brahman). But this was not openly claimed as a sign of their autonomy, for the simple reason that it was not clearly formulated as a diversion. In the mirror game of collective identity building, such an opposite principle hidden behind apparently similar practices, played a role similar to that of the lie in Lacan's model. It showed that the Magars had kept, through their kinship rules, an autonomous identity, of which they had a very punctual or fragmented conscience. In fact, when I carried on my PhD study in the 1980s, this very notion of autonomy had not really emerged, despite the fact that differences were an important aspect of inter-communities' relations and identity. There was thus a kind of unconscious form of autonomy, if we consider that the fact of being Magar was usually defined by a specific form of comparison with the practices or the cultural attitudes attached to the neighbours of high or low castes. As in the case of priesthood, identity was not described as a global opposition, but as an ensemble of small differences within a global similarity, which were nevertheless seen as crucial distinctions. I frequently had the feeling that my Magar friends were questioning me about my own culture to assign me a place in this universe, by trying to determine if I was more a Magar or a Bahun-Chetris. A typical example of these meaningful differences assigned to group identity was formulated by a Magar lady when discussing about wedding rituals. She told me that there was one thing she did not like about the Bahun-Chetri's practices. I was thus expecting her to mention the fact that their marriage is arranged and characterized by tears (of the bride and her mother at least), whereas the most common form of marriage among the Magar was to elope with a boy. But no, she simply declared: « the wrong thing is that the bride and groom are tight together like bulls when they turn around the fire ». In this case, I could not know if it was the "bestiality" of the practice or the fact of being obliged to show publicly the specific link between a man and a woman that she reproved, as the lady just kept repeating that it was *naramro*, not good. At any rate, within a global Hindu universe, the Magars had managed to preserve enough specificity to anchor their feeling of difference. Somehow, they were also using their similarities in a strategic way by often manipulating the high castes neighbours with their own weapons. Such

was the case of the local goddess's priest office, which was held by a Magar *bhanja* of the Magar headman. The latter, who had lost his position of Mukhiya years before, was still acting as such despite the law and was always consulted for the village affairs. He was regularly approached by a delegation of Brahmans from the panchayat who were willing to play a role of priest at the temple for the Dasain rituals, together with the Magar officiant. The Magar headman never said no openly, but always told them with regret that the goddess instructed him in dream that such was not her wish. The Brahmans could hardly oppose anything to this.

In several places, the Magar more concretely fought in a direct or indirect way against the high castes who were trying to make their cattle graze in high forests or pasture lands. In the north of Gulmi where mines were exploited, the Magars used their exclusive occupation of miners in a strategic way. There, the local Magars confess that they maintained for a long period to the authorities that there was a copper-mine on a slope where the Brahmans had received a pasture right. The Brahmans were then forbidden to take their cattle to this place and the Magars simply bought each year some copper from a neighbouring village to deliver it to the authorities as a proof of the existence of the mine.

The Magars' adoption of Hinduism was thus not just a passive process. Within a framework which was promoted or even imposed on them by the successive Hindu rulers, they kept various forms of distance through three major operations: a sociological distance through the diversion of Hindu notions, a conceptual distance through their mocking of some of its contents, and finally a political distance through its manipulation in a strategic way. All these operations formed the basic principles of a kind of permanent game in daily village life, through which both interaction and distance were maintained despite the apparent Hinduization and domination.

However, a feeling of dispossession, or the expression of a « loss », was also manifested by the Magars. Though the elders had an extraordinary oral memory, they used to say: « the Magars have no history ». They had a very fragmented knowledge of what was their culture before the arrival of Hindu rulers, at the time of the Magarant, the Magar kingdoms⁶. These fragments had usually the shape of short anecdotes, and the listener was often warned that such or such story was just a *dantye katha*, that is a story to which they do not attach full credit. In addition, their narratives were very often self-deprecatory. Such was the story of the Magar king of Juniyakot who married a girl from the plains. It is said that she brought with her shoes and a dog as presents for her husband. The king, when receiving the shoes, placed them on his head, not knowing what they were for, and soon after realized that his wife's dog was not accepting the millet pudding he had to eat daily. He thus fled away from his savage kingdom, retell the Magars of Gulmi.

A similar self-deprecatory attitude was prevailing in the local Magars' account of their rule in Musikot (Gulmi). They claimed that the Magar king had no *buddhi* (intelligence, wisdom) and was thus replaced on the Magars' initiative by a Thakuri ruler.

The self-presentation of the group as unadapted for political power is in fact still quite widespread. When visiting a village of Tanahun district, for instance, a Magar man explained me: "there is only one house of Brahman in the village, but he represents us". Though the local Magar population freely elected this person, there was a clear feeling that there was something abnormal in the situation, which was expressed by the most frequent Magar form of conceptual "autonomy", i.e. humour or self-derision.

This attitude, which can be documented in various places, is undoubtedly revealing of a deeply rooted symbolic domination, which gave birth to the Magar belief that the Brahmans are more skilled with their brain than the others. As recently as September 2005, when discussing with an

educated Magar friend of Syangja, we started to speak about the Mission hospital of Palpa where his brother recently found a position. The question of conversion to Christianity came about and he explained me: "The Magars become converted for that (hand gesture signifying money), but the Brahmans understand through that (another hand gesture showing the head)". To be sure, I asked: "what do you mean?" - "*dhimagle bhujchan*" (they understand with their intellect), was his answer.

Absence or fragments of history, self deprecation and valorisation of the dominant group form however only one aspect of the Magar identity. Indeed, the Magars' stereotypes related to the high castes in fact often link their superior abilities to negative forms of social relations, such as exploitation, slavery, trick and unfairness. Through this negative evaluation of an asserted superiority, autonomy was already found within a dominated relational mode. It was expressed in one of the most widespread story used by the Magars to illustrate their relationship with the high castes: the cat who pretends to have become an ascetic in order to obtain the confidence of mice (the Magars). Once convinced about his non-violence, they approached the cat without fear, who ended up eating them all. As the story teaches, a form of caution towards the high caste individuals was thus always maintained, or rather said to should have been maintained. This symbolic distance and the feeling that the group was misled probably contributed to the rapid formation of the Janajati movement, or at least allowed the spread of its ideology in the group. It resulted in a new conception of the Nepalese society as composed of two distinct populations: the Mongols and the Aryas, as well as in the construction of their global opposition. The Janajati movement contributed to operate a kind of social revolution in Nepal. Indeed, whereas the Janajati groups have long been considered as a rather low *jat* in the Nepalese social hierarchy and several of their practices were reproved by the dominant ideology (such as alcohol or pork consumption, marriage with the uterine cross-cousin), they now form the most highly praised form of social grouping. Lack of male dominance, freedom of the individuals and communitarian forms of organization are lauded. On the other hand, no aspect of the caste organisation is now openly glorified. Thus ethnic groupings are presently conceived as fully legitimate, whereas caste is becoming a matter of shame. At the same time, since its beginning before the 1990 People's movement, the Janajati ideology includes a project of "reform" of the various Nepalese ethnic groups, and the Magar do not form an exception with this regard. Parallel to the globally positive evaluation of their culture, a condemnation of some of the Magar (and Janajati) cultural features may be found in several Magar journals, for instance. These usually include alcohol consumption, "unnecessary expenditures" for festive occasions such as wedding, "lazy practices" like songs and dances, as well as sexual freedom. In this matter, the proposed reform strangely recalls a new form of sankritization.

To my eyes, the theoretically promoted reform of the Janajati, of which several points are applied in the villages by the Maobadis, may in fact well turn into a destruction of their distinct identity as a whole. Indeed, gender equality and female independence, for instance, are not linked to anything else than to women's economic autonomy. Indeed, Magar women are stuck to their marital house like the others, but contrary to the others, they have an easy means to earn money, by making beer and alcohol, which they sell to a very accessible market: their neighbours. If this custom is suppressed, as it happened in many "Maoist controlled areas", Magar women will become as dependent and dominated as the others. The same is true of sexual freedom: deprived of their right to go and sing with boys (or girls) before marriage, how can the individual freely choose his or her life partner? And finally, isn't it through festive occasions that a communitarian spirit is cultivated ?

End-Notes

1. French is usually enough as an identity when abroad and within the country it is expressed through a region of origin.

2. To my eyes, more than often, subjectivist studies are finally merely ethnocentric or even narcissist. In addition, the position, role, and image which an anthropologist may think to have in a group is eminently complex, and what he can perceive and say about it, even with all his or her honesty, is necessarily biased and narrow.
3. Some of them are in possession of my publications, but as they are all in French or in English, they just look at the pictures as they often told me.
4. Both this extreme proximity and this complete strangeness leading to wedding are surprising for someone who grew up in present-day France, for instance.
5. This long exercise found a new turn in 2005. When I went back to Gulmi, the local Maoist government had imposed the consumption of cow meat and of food prepared by the impure castes to all the population. It was then no longer question of determining my identity within their familiar universe, but rather the contrary: people kept repeating me that they were becoming like me (hoping that an economic development will follow this cultural revolution).
6. In fact the high castes knowledge of the Caubisi period was not more developed, except the events during the unification and somehow, their own sense of history is mainly based on the history of Gorkha.

About the author

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 -"Ethnic Demands within Maoism. Questions of Magar Territorial Autonomy, Nationality and Class", *Himalayan 'people's war*, M. Hutt ed. Londres, Hurst & Co, 2004, pp.112-135.
 Recently, she coordinated a program of research on the Khas people, to appear as a collective book and a DVD Rom entitled: *Bards and Mediums in the Himalayas*. Her fields of interest also include the People's War ideology and its consequences on village life. On this subject, and in English, see:
 "The modern incarnations of a warrior kingdom: regicide and revolutionary warfare in Nepal" (translation by David. N. Gellner), *Anthropology today*, February 2004, vol. 20 (1), pp. 13-19. and
 "Kill one, he becomes one hundred. Martyrdom as generative sacrifice in Nepal's People's War", to appear in *Social Analysis*, 2006.