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# SUB-TRIBES IN THE MAGAR COMMUNITY IN NEPAL

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My purpose in this paper is to examine in the light of recent field work some of the material on the Magar tribe of Nepal,<sup>1</sup> in particular on the problem of the sub-tribes within this community. In the literature the number of sub-tribes accorded Magar status is variable, and the authenticity of others is questioned. It is not possible to completely clarify the situation. But with data from West No. 4 and southern Baglung districts in central Nepal where there are concentrations of the tribe, it is possible to resolve some of the confusions and delineate more sharply the kind of problem which remains.

A major source of information about the Magars has been British army officers in Gurkha regiments of the British Indian Army. A difficulty they faced was lack of information derived from contact with the Magars in their home country, since their studies for the most part had to be conducted in regiments and recruiting depots. (One fairly large body of data was collected in Europe in a German prisoner of war camp during the First World War by a German official.<sup>2</sup>) Another problem was the levelling effect produced by the army itself. This arose in part because informants were living in a highly standardized environment, where differences which would be maintained in the hills were smoothed away. It also was a result of the seeping back into Nepal of knowledge (real or assumed) of British standards for recruitment and advancement.

In a manual published in 1944, Major H. R. K. Gibbs of the British Indian Army wrote:

The great Magar tribe is divided into seven clans viz:—Ale; Bura or Burathoki; Gharti; Pun; Rana; Roka and Thapa. . . . All are equal in social status and interclan marriages are usual and normal.<sup>3</sup>

In the regimental lines there undoubtedly were marriages between all Magar subdivisions. But it would be misleading to assume that it is possible to translate freely from this context back into the hills. Both geographical and cultural distribution make it necessary to qualify Gibbs's statement. To take the Gharti and Rana sub-tribes as an example, the former are for the most part concentrated in different areas than the latter. In the hills of

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<sup>1</sup> The research on which this paper is based was made possible by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> See Leonhard Adam, *Sitte und Recht in Nepal*, Volume 49 of the *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 1934), pp. 1–269.

<sup>3</sup> Major H. R. K. Gibbs, *The Gorkha Soldier* (Calcutta, 1944), p. 17.

Nepal, the majority of these two groups do not intermarry because they do not meet under conditions which favor it. Those most apt to meet are men who perhaps have travelled a number of days from their home villages to buy salt in a southern border market town, or have gone to an administrative center to register land or to collect a pension. Culturally the distance between the majority in these two groups also is great. I once travelled with a Rana from his home district, where there were no Gharti Magars, to an area of Gharti concentration, where there were no Ranas. The distance was about twelve days on foot. When the young man, who was an uneducated village boy, encountered the Ghartis he was shocked. His sense of cultural alienation arose from a number of factors. The Ghartis spoke a house language he did not understand and their economy was transhumant rather than sedentary. What struck him most forcibly was their carelessness about relations with untouchable castes and, above all, their dietary habits, which included beef-eating. It was not merely that he found it impossible to entertain the idea of marriage between a member of his family and this group but it was difficult for him to regard these people as Magars.

There are some regions, however, where Rana Magars and Gharti Magars occur in close proximity. In these areas there is intermarriage. But, as a rule, there has been a levelling of cultural disparity, meaning usually that the Ranas, who often are immigrants, have become less strict about inter-caste and dietary rules. Yet even if levelling has not occurred, marriages will take place, with the husband and wife perhaps cooking some foods separately. My point is not that intermarriages among these and other Magar sub-tribes never occur in the hills. It is rather that statements about sub-tribe status and intermarriage to be meaningful outside the British or Indian army context must specify the hill geographical and cultural context.

The difficulty which resulted from British standards filtering back into the hills arose because hillmen, in attempting to meet the known British preference for some tribes and sub-tribes, falsified their own tribal and sub-tribal affiliation. Evidence of this appears in the writings of Captain Vansittart, who realized how difficult it was to tell certainly whether the recruit was or was not a Magar, one of the preferred tribes. Some hillmen admitted their proper kin group affiliation but (Vansittart believed) falsely claimed that their kin group belonged to the Magar tribe. Others falsified their kin group and claimed affiliation in one of the Magar sub-tribes. "So many tribes now-a-days claim to be Magars," he wrote, "that to definitely settle which are, and which are not, entitled to the name, becomes a matter of great difficulty."<sup>4</sup>

Due to the confusion, Vansittart makes two statements which do not jibe with data from the hills. The first has to do with the number of sub-tribes. Vansittart gives a shorter list of Magar sub-tribes than Gibbs. He omits the Bura and the Roka, saying that "the real and only Magars" were the

<sup>4</sup> Captain Eden Vansittart, *Notes On Nepal* (Calcutta, 1894), p. 229.

“Allea, Burathoki, Gharti, Pun, Rana, and Thapa.”<sup>5</sup> As I will suggest later, the possibility that kin groups such as the Bura and Roka have been assimilated to Magar status cannot be eliminated, so that Vansittart’s exclusion of them 50 years ago may have been justified. But today the Roka on both sides of the Mayangdi Khola (Baglung), and Bura on the northernmost tributaries of the Bari Khola (Baglung) are regarded as Magar, and intermarry freely in such sub-tribes as the Gharti and Pun.

The second statement of Vansittart’s which is doubtful, at least in the light of data from the upper Bari Khola, is his placing of the Bura among the Matwala Khas, a group of Chetri (an order roughly corresponding to the Indian Kshatriya) who lost the right to wear the sacred thread because of failures to observe tabus on drinking liquor and eating chicken. Along the upper Bari in the Bhuji valley Matwala Khas (known locally as Nau-thar) and Buras live next to one another. It must have been true, as Vansittart said, that in the service Matwala Khas and Magar were indistinguishable,<sup>6</sup> with the former, as he says, eating and drinking and in every way assimilating themselves into the latter. Even now the Matwala Khas continues to enlist as a Magar of the Pun sub-tribe. But the assimilation does not persist when the Matwala Khas returns to his home valley. Here he assumes a somewhat higher caste status than the Magar and does not take boiled rice from him. Intermarriages occur but husband and wife as a rule cook their rice separately. And if the Bura in this region once were Matwala Khas, they have entirely lost the tradition. The Bura speak Kamkura, a Tibeto-Burman tongue, as their house language, while the Matwala Khas use Nepali, which is part of the Indo-European family. In an important ritual context, the Matwala Khas follow a rule of ultimo-geniture. The Bura have nothing similar. The Matwala Khas clans, such as the Kharaka are duplicated among the Chetri. Similar duplication is not found among the Bura.

The contact with the Bura also raises a question about Gibbs’s amalgamation of them into the Burathoki. There was one idea, along the Rithum Khola (Baglung), where I found it impossible to distinguish between the two. When informants described themselves, or were being described by their neighbors, the terms were used interchangeably. But in the Bhuji valley the term Bura was the only one in constant use. In the south around Phoksing in Gulmi, Burathoki rather than Bura was the prevalent term. More evidence is needed, I believe, before one can say with any certainty whether prevalent usage in the tribe as a whole amalgamates or separates the two. It is my impression that Buras of the north claim to be Burathoki when outside their home territory, or when speaking with strangers, because the name Burathoki connotes a somewhat higher status.

I will proceed now to examine a few other problems in the literature on the Magar sub-tribes, coming back again in conclusion to the question of

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

which sub-tribes are "the real and only Magars." Major Northey and Captain Morris raise a question about the Gharti sub-tribe. They say flatly, "There is no doubt . . . that every Gharti was originally a freed slave."<sup>7</sup> They base their statement on the fact that manumitted slaves were called Gharti and on the fact that in eastern Nepal the term implies a freed slave and nothing else. There is no clear and completely dependable evidence to contradict their statement but there is evidence which makes it problematic. In the hills one finds three groups who call themselves Gharti. One group are Chetri, and the term refers to one of their sub-tribes, among which one also finds Ranas, Thapas and Burathoki. A second group, found for example in Bhirkot district in West No. 4 and in the upper Bari Khola region in Baglung, are freed slaves, all of whom so far as I could determine were freed in 1927. In Bhirkot, where there are no Gharti Magars, the ex-slaves are referred to simply as Gharti, but in the Bari Khola region, where there are Magar Gharti, they are called Pāde Gharti whenever a distinction is necessary. The third group are the Magar Gharti, referred to in the upper Bari as Ware Gharti, to separate them from the ex-slaves. It was undoubtedly this distinction which Vansittart was referring to when he wrote the following:

Amongst the Gharti clans are two that should not be confounded, although from their similarity in pronunciation one is very apt to do so. The Pahare or Paharia is a good Magar. Pare or Paria (from *par*, outside) should never be enlisted. He is, as his name indicates, an out-caste, or a descendant of out-castes.<sup>8</sup>

Northey and Morris also were aware that Magar Ghartis claimed to be distinct from ex-slave Ghartis. "The Ghartis of to-day of western Nepal would not themselves admit that any such stigma still attaches to their name. . . ."<sup>9</sup> But they raise the issue of ultimate origin, which no present evidence can answer with any certitude. Hamilton (1819) and Hodgson (1833), however, attribute the existence of Magar sub-tribe names among the Chetri to a process which makes it seem at least possible that Magar Ghartis were not ex-slaves, or if they were, were freed in the very distant past. These authors believe that the duality of the sub-tribal names arose when some, though not all Magars from these sub-tribes, through contact with immigrant Brahmans and Chetris, were given the sacred thread and joined the Nepalese equivalent of the Indian military order. It is questionable whether groups with the stigma of slavery would have been granted this status.

Another confusion in the literature on Magar sub-tribes relates to the term "Bhujel." In a recent book, the Bhujels are mentioned without saying

<sup>7</sup> Major W. Brook Northey and Captain C. J. Morris, *The Gorkhas, Their Manners, Customs and Country* (London, 1928), p. 189.

<sup>8</sup> Vansittart, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>9</sup> Northey and Morris, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-90.

whether or not they are Magar. "From time to time other small peoples emerge as soldiers from the recruiting depots, such as Bhujel, who are slaves freed ages ago."<sup>10</sup> Gibbs mentions the Bhujels ("Bhujiyal") but has nothing to say about a possible slave background. He describes them as a "kindred" of the Gharti who "regard themselves as superior to other Ghartis."<sup>11</sup> The term has been known for over a century. It appears in Hamilton, when he writes of two kinds of Gharti: "Khas and Bhujal," apparently though not positively intending the distinction between Chetri and Magar Gharti.<sup>12</sup> Vansittart also mentions the Bhujels ("Bhujials"), calls them part of the Gharti sub-tribe, and locates them "along both sides of the Bhuj Khola . . . from which they probably derive their name."<sup>13</sup> None of these sources quite catches the significance of the term, at least as used at present and within living memory, though Vansittart was correct about its derivation. It is a generic term used to denote 15 clans of Magar, Bura, Gharti and Pun, all of them living in the Bhuj valley. It is not reserved exclusively for any one of them, does not imply superiority, and does not include ex-slaves (*Pāde* Gharti).

Vansittart questioned whether Bura, Roka and a number of other kin groups were actually Magar. Northey and Morris go further than this and suggest that the Ghartis, Burathokis, and Puns, and by implication all the kin groups which Vansittart excluded, belong to a different stock. Like Hodgson's, their list of true Magar sub-tribes includes only the Rana, Thapa and Ale.

It is probably no exaggeration to state that only the (Ale, Rana and Thapa) castes are pure Magars, for the (Burathoki, Gharti, and Pun) do not speak the Magar language and are somewhat different in appearance. The Puns and Burathokis, who live in the high isolated parts of the Magar country, have languages of their own, which differ slightly from valley to valley. These languages have no affinity with Magar-kura, and this fact alone is evidence to prove they originally came of different stock.<sup>14</sup>

The problem of whether those who claim Magar affiliation represent one original stock, or two and possibly more, is impossible to answer on the basis of present evidence. Some of the dimensions of it, however, can be further clarified. Observations in southern Baglung and West No. 4 support Northey and Morris regarding the slight physical differences between the Magars living in Bhirkot district in the south (Rana, Thapa, Ale) and those living either on the southern slopes of the Annapurna Himal east of the Kali Gandaki (Pun) or on the high ridges on each side of the Mayangdi

<sup>10</sup> Sir Francis Taker, *Gorkha, the Story of the Gurkhas of Nepal* (London, 1957), p. 272.

<sup>11</sup> Gibbs, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Hamilton, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal* (Edinburgh, 1819), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Vansittart, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>14</sup> Northey and Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

and Rithum Kholas (Gharti, Roka, Bura, Siris) or along the upper tributaries of the Bari Khola (Gharti, Bura, Pun). But they only partially support their statements about language differences, on which Northey and Morris place so much weight. The Puns east of the Kali speak Nepali, having lost all memory of any other language. This is true also of Puns in the Rakhughat Khola region, which lies to the west of the Kali Gandaki on the southern slopes of Dhaulagiri Himal, and of the Rokas, Buras, Ghartis, and Siris I contacted at the higher elevations along the Mayangdi and Rithum Kholas. Further west on the upper Bari, the Magars are bilingual and their house language is Kamkura. But it is incorrect to say that this tongue has no affinity with Magarkura, though the two are mutually unintelligible. Beyond doubt both are Tibeto-Burman. A Magarkura speaker finds pervasive similarities in lexicon and structure, and does not find Kamkura at all difficult to learn.

It seems to me that the most impressive difference between the Ranas, Thapas and Ales and all other groups claiming Magar status is in their geographical distribution. In West No. 4 and Baglung, there is a clear demarcation between northern Magars and southern Magars. The next river east of the Kali Gandaki south of the Annapurna Himal is the Naujangar Khola. Between this Khola and the Kali, especially at the higher altitudes there are many Pun villages. The Naujangar Khola marks the border between Magars and Gurungs, with Gurung villages on both flanking valley sides except to the extreme north, where there is a Pun village, Ulleri. The line of north-south Magar demarcation then runs roughly in a gentle arc from Beni, at the confluence of the Kali and the Mayangdi, to Bhurtibang at the confluence of the Taman, Bhuji and Nisi Kholas with the Bari. One almost never finds Ranas, Thapas or Ales north of this line. The few one does encounter are isolated families of recent immigrants from the south. It is significant that along this line one finds terms in current use which would be applied by more Hinduized to less Hinduized groups. Rokas in the mountains northwest of Baglung are referred to as "bhuiyr," meaning that they eat beef, buffalo and pork. Here and in other places along the line (e.g., the Rithum and Rakhughat Kholas) Puns, Ghartis, and Buras are referred to as "ruaini," meaning that they refrain from pork but will eat buffalo and beef. (Ranas, Thapas and Ales of the south do not eat buffalo and beef, although the Ranas and Thapas, but not the Ales, eat pork.) Such a distribution as this, with its separation of northern and southern groups, clearly suggests that the two represent different streams of immigration. Beyond this one enters the realm of supposition.

Possibly the Magars had a single point of origin. Some families may have moved into north central Nepal, others into south central. The differences one finds could be accounted for by the different physical and social environments. The separation between Magarkura and Kamkura could have occurred in a relatively short time. Grierson has noted that Tibeto-Burman

tongues, with no literature to act as a conservative influence, change rapidly.<sup>15</sup>

Since Vansittart accepts Burathokis, Ghartis and Puns as "real" Magars, he presumably would accept a theory of unity of origin. But some of the other groups claiming to be Magar, as we have seen, he regarded as Matwala Khas, and he explains their existence in the following statement:

In days of old a certain number of Magars were driven out of their own country, and settled in western Nepal among strangers. From the progeny of these sprang up many clans of mixed breeds, who now claim to be purebred Magars, but are not recognized as such.<sup>16</sup>

Presumably some of the "strangers" were Brahmans, who married Magars. Their progeny were Chetris who then fell to the status of Matwala Khas. And other kinds of crosses, of course, were possible, giving rise to a variety of "mixed breeds." Buras of south Baglung have a tradition that they came from the west to their present location. In contrast, the southern Magars in Bhirkot district have no tradition of place of origin. They have been where they are "forever."

In Vansittart's picture the "mixed breeds" claimed the status of "real" Magar mainly because of the levelling effect of British recruiting policies. It seems possible also that the process of claiming Magar status could have gone on for a long time before the British started recruiting. To state this hypothesis in its extreme form, one could suppose that only the Ales, Ranas, and Thapas were "real" Magars, and one might suggest as Northey and Morris and Hermanns do that the existence of long-established Magarkura-speaking colonies in eastern Nepal meant that the Magarkura-speaking groups entered from that direction.<sup>17</sup> To account for the existence of northern kin groups who claim Magar status one would posit a process of "Magarization." The major significance of such a process, though it is of interest as giving a very tentative idea of what may have occurred in the past, is that it seems to be occurring at present. At least there are enough hints in this direction to make it worth investigation. To take an example, there is a group of Chhantel<sup>18</sup> in the mountains south of the Mayangdi and northwest of Baglung. Normally they allow cross-cousin marriages within the FZD (Father's Sister's Daughter) category. In this area they live among Magars and frequently marry Magars, and now have become "Magarized" to the extent of forbidding FZD marriage. Since it is the rule permitting and favoring MBD (Mother's Brother's Daughter) marriages

<sup>15</sup> Sir George A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. I, Part I (Introductory), (Calcutta, 1927), p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> Vansittart, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>17</sup> Northey and Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 188; Father Matthias Hermanns, *The Indo-Tibetans* (Bombay, 1954), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> There is a tradition in parts of southern Baglung that the Chhantels are Magars who took to mining. This is denied by the Chhantels. I find support for their denial in their marriage rule.



and forbidding FZD marriages which sets the Magars apart from other Nepalese Mongoloid tribes and castes, such as Sherpas, Newars, Tamangs, Thakalis, Gurungs, and Chhantels, the acceptance of this rule is a large step toward becoming a Magar. The next step would be, I assume, movement from one region to another, so that a claim could be made to Magar status without likelihood of contradiction. In connection with the need for mobility, there is the case of a runaway slave who served a full hitch in the British Army as a Thapa Magar, but who reverted to the status of a slave when he returned to his home region as a pensioner. (In this case, it actually was ex-slave, since while he had been away the slaves had been freed.) There are also cases in which displaced Tibetans who were wandering south had begun to claim they were Pun Magars.

Vansittart suggests why non-Magar kin groups in the more northerly sections of central Nepal would wish to claim Magar status when joining the army. But why should such groups make similar claims when it is not just a question of temporary affiliation for army service? It seems probable that there were historical conditions which made Magar affiliation desirable; and there were also historical conditions—sometimes the same ones and sometimes different ones—which made it easier to win acceptance into the Magar community, since it encouraged an increase in mobility.

The little historical evidence there is shows that the southern Magars, or a section of them under Mukunda Sen (apparently not himself a Magar) were powerful enough by the end of the 10th century A.D. to sack Kathmandu valley, the seat of Nepalese civilization. At this time Magars must have had much military prestige. The more southerly and lower hills they occupied were warmer, better watered, and more productive than the more northerly and higher hills. The presumption is that in addition to military prestige they also had status deriving from greater wealth. In this connection it may have been significant that they could grow paddy rice, the most prestigious gain, while people living in the higher, more northerly sections do not. Finally, because of closeness to India they were subjected to Hindu influences at an early stage and had secured a rather ill-defined but respectable place in the caste system.<sup>19</sup> The hypothesis would suggest that as the influence of Hinduism spread north, the people of this region felt increasing pressure to find a place in the system of caste. Along with Hinduism they also learned that the Magars, who were Hindus, had a respectable position in the caste system, and were a group having both economic substance and military prestige. The assumption is that Magar status would appear desirable to Mongoloid non-Hindus, especially those that followed the Magar marriage rule.

The last step in the argument concerns the mobility of peoples inhabiting the higher, more northerly hills. Present evidence from the area sug-

<sup>19</sup> Magars are uncertain whether they are Sudra or Kshatriya. Those who think they are Kshatriya while recognizing that they don't wear the thread, think they probably should, since they are a military group.

gests that there has always been a considerable movement of peoples in this area. Mainly this would seem to have been because there were extensive forested tracts which could be exploited by a combination of transhumant herding and slash and burn agriculture and because there was only light pressure on these resources. The south Baglung Bura tradition of having come to their present location from elsewhere can be matched by similar traditions of movement among many other northern Magar groups.

The unification and expansion of Nepal under the House of Gorkha in the mid-eighteenth century led to conditions which may have further encouraged the process of Magarization, although by then it may have been more apt to create additional clans within existing sub-tribes than in establishing new Magar sub-tribes. As mainstays of the House of Gorkha's military power, Magars acquired additional military prestige. Since the House of Gorkha was Hindu and committed to the establishment of a Hindu polity, pressures during this period toward organization of the total society on a caste basis were strengthened. The conquest, finally, stimulated movement of peoples, for many soldiers in the Gorkha armies left their original homes and settled elsewhere, as evidenced by widespread Magar and Gurung colonies, some of them even beyond the borders of Nepal.

A third period when the process of Magarization may have been stimulated was during the First World War. This was a time when there was a strong demand for copper and it became economically feasible to exploit copper resources in the northern hills of central Nepal. Many peoples from different parts of the country were attracted to this area by the mining opportunities. Around these old mines one still finds many small kin groups who claim Magar status and belong to clans which are not well-known or widespread. The Chhantels, who were showing evidences of a Magarization process, also were living near a mine and had come there during the First World War. It seems possible that further investigation in such areas might reveal more evidence of recent assimilation or near assimilation to Magar status.

Finally, as already noted, there is some evidence that a few peoples who have been forced to move south due to the Chinese occupation of Tibet are claiming to be Magars. Admittedly slight, it nevertheless would seem suggestive.

In conclusion, I would stress that my purpose here has been to suggest problems posed by the present state of our knowledge of the Magar tribe in Nepal. The explanations for what now appears, particularly the Magarization hypothesis, are to be understood as very tentative. The next steps in elucidation of Magar history will depend upon a much closer and more systematic survey of the Magar groups, plus lexico-statistical comparison of Magarkura and Kamkura and investigation by techniques of the genetically-oriented physical anthropologist.