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women and politics: case of the Kham Magar of western Nepal

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While there are numerous women's organizations in urbanized/westernized areas of South Asia, as well as examples of Indian women's active participation in nationalist struggles (Omvedt 1979), there are few documented cases of village women forming a group and employing political power locally to achieve a common goal.[1] During the period of my research among the Kham Magar, a Tibeto-Burman-speaking group settled in the hills of western Nepal, I witnessed an interesting series of events in the village of "Chilbatti," in which women banded together and entered the public domain to effect a village decision in their favor. For Magar society, the incident is quite unusual. Traditionally, Kham Magar women exercise political power through the use of nonstructured local channels rather than through central political institutions. They do not hold positions of authority in the village, that is, the extrahousehold domain. While their ability to exert influence on political decisions that concern the whole village is extensive, it is limited to familial-based channels of power.

Politically, their power derives from their position in the household, accorded to them vis-à-vis their husbands, if married, or their male kin, if not. There was, as far as I could ascertain, no history of women banding together for solely female interests and exerting their influence formally.

How and why female solidarity groups form or function in a society is of interest theoretically and of relevance to theories of women's political participation. As Sanday (1974) suggests in her pioneering article on the determinants of women's status, the formation of such groups is a central criterion for the high status of women in the public domain.[2] The questions I examine in this paper are (1) What strategies were employed by these Kham Magar women and how do they compare with the strategies used by Kham Magar women traditionally to effect village decisions? (2) What caused women to enter the public domain

Current anthropological studies of women in South Asia recognize that women play a more significant role in community decisions and local politics than was previously believed. Such participation in rural areas tends to be informal, that is, outside the formal political institutions. This paper investigates the entrance of women in a Kham Magar community in Nepal into the public arena to protest a ban on the sale of local liquor. The case sheds light on the dynamics of these women's political roles and on future trends in their involvement in politics. [women and politics, formal/informal participation, political anthropology, women's roles, Nepal, Kham Magar]

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as a group? (3) What was the result of their action and how did men perceive it? (4) What does this case reveal about women and the political process? Is this incident merely an extension of traditional roles and identities or is it an example of a change in women's roles toward status in the public domain?

ethnographic background

The Kham Magar are traditionally ranked by caste below the Brahmans and Chhetris, the two higher-caste groups in Nepali society, as *matwali* (liquor-drinking castes), along with other Tibeto–Burman-speaking groups.[3] They are settled in a remote and marginal area and have, as a result, maintained a distinct cultural identity. While many areas in the Nepalese hills are multicaste in character, the area settled by the Kham Magar is inhabited solely by Kham Magar and two artisan caste groups, the Kami, or blacksmiths, and the Damai, or tailors. These two groups have traditional *jajmani*[4] ties to the Kham Magar and own some land, although not very much. While Kham Magar do not maintain very strict caste rules, they will not allow a Kami or Damai to enter their house and will not accept food or water from these groups.

The Kham Magar are agro-pastoralists. They grow nonirrigated crops of maize, barley, wheat, and potatoes and raise cattle, sheep, and goats. They live in large village settlements of 200 to 500 households, with farmland scattered along the valley to either side of the village. Most villagers are poor in comparison to average villagers elsewhere in Nepal.[5] The majority are at a level of minimum subsistence and a bad year can force them into a spiral of debt from which they may not recover. A few villagers are able to grow sufficient surplus grain to easily weather crises and therefore are considered extremely wealthy in the village. This viewpoint of wealth contrasts with that of wealthy villagers elsewhere in Nepal who produce much more. Families may supplement their income by sending a male from the household to India to seek employment in the army or to work as a seasonal laborer for extended periods of time.

The division of labor is mainly along sexual lines. Men do most of the herding and move with their animals in a transhumant pattern. Sheep and goats are taken to the mountain ranges of the Mahabharat to the south of the Kham Magar area in the winter; in the summer they are taken to high pasture areas north of the villages. Cattle are grazed on a more modified transhumant pattern within the boundaries of Kham Magar habitation. Women remain in the village during agricultural seasons and take responsibility for the bulk of agricultural tasks. Poorer men without herds or animals share the responsibility for agricultural tasks with other members of the household.

Each sex makes decisions appropriate to his or her sphere of responsibility. Women make most of the daily decisions with regard to the agricultural allocation. Decisions that are considered within their domain include allocation of grain for consumption, liquor making, sale or payment of laborers, decisions to weed a particular field and whether to hire laborers to help, and decisions as to how many days per season leaves must be carried to make fertilizer. Women have a high economic status as a result of the complementary division of labor. Although men have responsibility for major purchases, such as cattle or land, or major decisions—for example, sending a son to India to work—their wives are usually consulted in such major decisions. If the husband is absent from the village, the wife makes such decisions as they arise.

The kinship system of the society divides all people into patrilineal, exogamous, localized lineage groups with prescribed matrilateral cross-cousin marriage.[6] Most marriages take place within the village, so women do not move to a strange village at marriage; they

retain their affiliation to their natal lineage, while becoming incorporated into their husband's lineage.

Marriage is processual; the couple does not reside completely with the husband's family until the birth of the first child. The bride initially spends much of her time in her natal home and her husband may stay with her, as well, performing a kind of groom service for his new in-laws. Residence is patrilocal and neolocal. The elder sons split off from their parents, taking equal portions of the father's estate, while the youngest son remains in his parent's house and assumes the position of household head at his parents' death. Divorce and remarriage are socially acceptable and are practiced. Most divorces take place in the early stages of a marriage before the couple has any children.

When widowed, women with children usually live in their neolocal household, separated from their husband's kin. Sons (if there are any) inherit the estate when they become adults and/or marry, but until then a widow acts as regent to the estate. Even when sons marry, the widow retains a position of authority in the household and must be consulted on all major decisions made in the household. Younger widows without children, or without male children, may return to live with their parents or they may remarry.

Polygyny is practiced in Magar society. A man may so marry for a number of reasons, one common one being the failure of his first wife to bear a son. While initially co-wives live together, they seldom get along, and the unfavored wife in a polygynous marriage may set up a separate residence from her husband and co-wife. Her husband provides her some support in the form of land or income, and she supplements this with her own earnings or with money or goods given to her by her natal household.

Widowed, divorced, separated, and unmarried women support themselves to varying degrees by a variety of entrepreneurial activities. They weave blankets of wool or cloth from two local fibers, hemp and thistle, and they make some cloth from purchased cotton thread. Women also brew beer and distill liquor from home-grown or purchased grain, and some raise pigs for sale. Since the Kham Magar recognize female rights to personal property in the form of personal earnings, women who engage in entrepreneurship have complete rights over their earnings. Unmarried girls usually engage in one or more income-generating activities with some help from their families, and the cash they earn is spent on jewelry or clothing or is saved to take with them at marriage. Some married women, usually those with a surplus of grain in the household, distill liquor for sale and use this added income to bolster household production or to buy goods for themselves or their children. The women with the most capital-intensive entrepreneurship, however, are widows, divorced or separated women, polygynously married women separated from their husbands, or unmarried girls. When these women live in their natal home, entrepreneurship provides them with some economic independence and prevents them from becoming a burden on their families. If these women have separate residences, their earnings constitute a major portion of their economic support.

political participation

For political and administrative purposes, the local unit of representative government in Nepal is the village *panchayat*, the lowest tier in a three-tier system: village or town, district, and national. The incorporation of the village panchayat into higher levels of administration is recent; and in areas such as those settled by the Kham Magar, the village panchayat still has only vague ties to higher levels of government. Village panchayats vary in size and population but all consist of a group of hamlets or villages divided into nine wards, or subunits. Each ward elects a member to the village council and these members in turn elect

a council chairman (*pradhan panch*) and a deputy chairman (*upa-pradhan*). The *pradhan panch* presides over regularly held village meetings and is the arbitrator of local disputes that cannot be settled on the individual or ward level.

The panchayat system is relatively recent in Nepal. It was instituted in 1961 after the fall of the Rana regime (1846–1951). Before this time, the western villages in Nepal were administered locally by a council of elders and by a local representative of the central government, a *mukhiya* (headman), who was appointed by the district governor. His official duties were to collect taxes from the local peasants and to settle minor disputes. "Once approved by the tax office, a headman . . . was secure in his post during a lifetime provided he fulfilled his obligations to both his taxpayers and administration" (Caplan 1975:152). The *mukhiya* had considerable prestige and power in Kham Magar villages as the arbitrator of disputes. His office was usually hereditary and he belonged to one of the wealthiest families in the community.

When the panchayat system was instituted, the panchayat council in theory replaced the council of elders and the position of *pradhan panch* replaced the role of *mukhiya* as arbitrator, although the *mukhiya* retained his duties as tax collector. The pattern of political decision making that emerged under the new system did not coincide solely with the functioning of the panchayat council, however. Not all influential villagers sought to become, or became, elected members of the council. Caplan (1975:182) describes the actual situation in western village panchayats quite well:

> There are three principal but not mutually exclusive ways in which prominent men attempt to exercise their influence on the village council. One is by seeking election to it, generally to office of chairman, and thereby to dominate council business. The second strategy is to become indirectly involved by being present at council meetings and participation in its discussions without actually seeking election to it. [In a village panchayat] most decisions are in fact taken by an informal body which includes not only council representatives, but a number of influential notables who attend meetings regularly and tend to dominate the proceedings. [Third, notables] seek to exert their influence in *panchayat* matters either by sponsoring candidates for council who in the context of daily life are largely dependent on their support and goodwill or by establishing such links with existing councillors.

This decision-making pattern is important for understanding the public political arena. While power does not rest exclusively with the elected council members and the *pradhan panch,* it does depend upon the ability to influence this elected body in the public arena of village meetings either directly or indirectly.

At the district level, the district governor, who was the main official before 1961, was replaced by a central district officer (CDO). The CDO is the district representative of the Ministry of Home and Panchayat, the coordinator of all activities of the technical branches of government operating in the district,[7] and chief administrator in the district. There is a district-level panchayat council that mirrors the village-level panchayat system.

The general attitude of Kham Magar villagers toward the government, whether central or at the district level, has been one of avoidance bordering on distrust. As most villagers have been, and still generally are, unfamiliar with national laws, they have been easily exploited by any outsiders with authority. But more often, they have simply been ignored. Now, with the advent of modernization and political integration in these more remote areas, the villagers are beginning to have a greater orientation to the broader Nepali society. The village leaders view the government as a potential source of goods and services, such as schools, clinics, or technical assistance. They also have become more attuned to district and zonal politics and have a grasp of the personalities and issues in extravillage politics. The majority of villagers are still, for the most part, unaware of and unconcerned with the world outside, but this is beginning to change.

Public political meetings on the village or panchayat level are exclusively the forum for

males. Women seldom attend these meetings; when they do, they listen quietly on the outskirts. Women may represent their households when their husbands are absent, if a meeting is called that requires a member of each household to attend, but they seldom speak out at these meetings.

Women's traditional power to influence village decisions is exercised through their control of information channels (used for economic and social, as well as political, purposes), their use of ritual settings to express opinions, and their manipulation of their ties to their husband's and their natal lineages. Women have more access to and control of these information channels than do men. Because their central role in household decision making requires them to visit other households in the village, women tend to maintain more extensive daily ties to other households than do men. Women are constantly going to another house to make work plans, to seek extra laborers, or to borrow liquor for a guest or coal to start a fire. During these visits, a bit of gossip is passed on or a discussion of some village event takes place. In work groups, women exchange information, and during trips to the river to wash clothes or trips to distant fields or the forest, women talk to other women on the trail. If they go to a distant field on a path that passes by outlying hamlets, they may stop in the courtyard of a relative to visit and exchange news. This is not to say that men do not also visit informally, but their visits are more sporadic; men do not employ a pattern of constant visiting of many households.

Ritual is another important setting for information exchange and is useful to both men and women for this purpose. However, women participate in more rituals than do men, and they are mostly responsible for the preparations. Thus, the ritual setting is used more frequently by women for information exchange, and it serves to maintain more distant kin networks. Because rituals, excluding those of birth, are joint events in which both women and men participate, this setting also provides a forum for women and men to discuss village affairs. Women have a chance to pass on to the men information they have exchanged among themselves; they can also present their arguments to influence decisions regarding local disputes or village fund raising, for example.

Rituals are a more multifaceted setting for women than for men. Men are often away from the village herding or engaged in outside employment or trading. When they are home, they attend rituals held by close relatives, but they generally let their wives go to events of more distant kin. Except for the funeral of a very important person, more female relatives go to a burial or cremation than do male relatives. By custom, only women attend the rituals held in the village after the birth of a child. Since women are also responsible for bringing the *sho* (household contribution each family makes to a life ritual), women make several trips to participating households before the ritual event itself to decide when and how much to bring.

Male collective activities, such as housebuilding or roofing, provide a forum for male informal discussions. Men talk together at fairs or over a glass of beer or wine about many village issues. When home from the pastures, they gather in front of the post office or in one courtyard to catch up on news. Daily agricultural activities, however, and household tasks are more exclusively used by women as a forum for discussion.

To a certain extent, women's lack of participation in formal, political meetings stems from a lack of interest in male affairs. This disinterest is one dynamic of women's political participation cross-culturally noted by Rogers (1975:743). Just as women are more concerned with agricultural decisions than with herding and housebuilding, so too are they more concerned with domestic affairs than with pan-village affairs that do not directly touch them and their families. The women who showed the most interest in the inter-panchayat dispute described above were those who lived in the hamlet whose affiliation was in question.

Another factor contributing to their lack of public political involvement is the nature of information exchanged among women. They do not have a clear idea of the outside government structure or personalities at the district level or above and are therefore at a loss in weighing issues that concern the outside; they leave such discussions to the men. This point is addressed later in the paper.

There are advantages to a woman's informal role in the power structure. A man has certain obligations that he must juggle informally as a lineage member or as a public authority figure. Often he must assume a mediatory role in a difficult situation and remain as diplomatic as possible. A woman lacks a formal position of authority and thus has more freedom to take sides and to express strong opinions in a discussion. She can also serve as a counterpart to her husband or brother, saying what he really feels while he maintains an attitude of diplomacy and conciliation. This often is the case in a lineage dispute over land or debts in which several households are involved. A woman can present arguments to sway members of her own or her husband's kin group because she has access to important information from both her own and her husband's households. I found this to be a tactic of poorer, or lower-caste, women in confronting members of higher castes. While their husbands could not easily confront a situation without inviting censure, women can start a bitter argument and say very pointed things that are more easily forgotten.

In informal mixed-sex conversations, although women defer to men as authority figures, they can also be outspoken and are willing to present and defend arguments. The real differences in their participation is in structured political settings. Yet, while only men attend and participate in these public meetings, many of the opinions expressed there are influenced by women's ideas.

the case

The incident to be presented deals with a dispute that had been evolving over a long period of time. It originally centered on a power conflict between two men and the political following that each formed as a result of this conflict. Here I can but extract aspects of the long-standing conflict relevant to the discussion of women and political participation.

A traditional leader of Chilbatti village panchayat was challenged politically by a man I shall call Ganesh. Ganesh had become successful as a trader and started a small store in the village, moving over time from a low to a fairly high economic stratum, one comparable to that of the traditional village leaders (both council members and others). Ganesh tried to create a political following for himself and challenge the power of the traditional village leaders.

Ganesh played upon his poor background to create a following among poorer villagers, and he used his new economic status to draw to his side those better-off villagers opposed to the existing leaders. One of Ganesh's claims was that the traditional leaders were misappropriating village funds. Another was that attempts made by the leaders to raise money to build a school were in their own self-interest. The leaders wanted to allocate a tract of cultivable land to the school, to be rented on an *adiya* system. The poorer villagers would work the land and collect next year's seeds and half of the crop, and the rest of the crop would become school property to be sold to raise money to finance a school building. Ganesh argued that it was a better idea to simply divide up these lands among poor villagers and give them the whole crop. This won him support from a number of villagers who could not see that a school would benefit them, since they could not afford to send their children to it and thereby lose their labor in the household. The traditional leaders

succeeded in passing the original plan, but the dispute left a fairly strong factional division between Ganesh's followers and the supporters of the traditional leaders.

At first this power conflict centered on the men of the village, but Ganesh's mother employed an informal means to undermine his opponents that soon led to the active involvement of women in the conflict. About the time of Ganesh's economic rise, his mother became a *deotini,* a woman possessed at full moon by Bhagwan, the Hindu name used for the main Magar deity. While she was possessed, Bhagwan spoke through her and answered questions directed to him by the villagers. She became known in the village as a respected spokeswoman for the god. She claimed that Bhagwan told her to abstain from polluting substances, especially pork and liquor, and she encouraged Ganesh and his family to abstain as well. Sometime after the school dispute began, she, as Bhagwan's spokesperson, said that several wives of the traditional leaders were witches and gave "evidence" of their evil activities.[8] These women were incensed and sought to discredit her through gossip. When some of the god's predictions about future events proved false, other villagers lost faith in her powers and sided with the leaders' wives. During this period, women who agreed with the wives became vocal in the conflict and work groups often discussed factional issues.

Ganesh tried to use contacts with district officials he met during trading ventures to increase his status in the village. He often curried favor with these officials, who were impressed by his apparent knowledge and his ability to express himself in Nepali, the national language, as well as with his adoption of strictures of purity associated in Nepal with higher castes. Several years later, he and a friend obtained a license from the district officers to sell government-distilled liquor *(mowa)*[9] in Chilbatti. Ganesh tried to convince the villagers to ban the sale of home-brewed and distilled liquor and replace its sale entirely with the sale of *mowa.* He argued that the ban would cut down on the use of grain for liquor making locally and channel more grain into use for general consumption. He cited conversations with district officials who were concerned with the food deficiency of the Kham Magar area and who believed that liquor making aggravated the situation.

The village men were initially agreeable to the idea of a ban, because they felt the district government would view it as an attempt by the panchayat to deal with its own subsistence problems and thus a sign of progressiveness. The women who earned money largely by entrepreneurial activities, particularly the sale of liquor, were outraged. Ganesh would grow wealthier as a licensed *mowa* dealer and they would lose their main source of income, without provision for any alternative source of employment. The women argued informally about the ban, and a few got into fights with some of Ganesh's followers. The panchayat council, including traditional leaders, decided to institute the ban. The village women were furious and in informal conversations argued that the matter should wait for the next open village meeting (*gaun subba*) and that they would ignore the ban if it were adopted.

A meeting was called for final discussion of the issue. A number of women, mostly liquor sellers, met informally beforehand to discuss the issues; the event was also the main interest of women's work groups for several days before the meeting. At the meeting, attended by some 70 women, the men spoke in Nepali rather than in the local language as a way of excluding the women, whose command of Nepali was relatively poor. The women were reduced to jeering and disrupting the men. Neither were they adept at the protocol used in public meetings, so they often interrupted a speaker, angering the men. Early in the afternoon it began to rain, and the men tried to make a quick decision so everyone could go home. The women refused to allow this and demanded that the meeting be reconvened the following morning. The leaders agreed and the meeting ended for the day.

A group of about 20 women—liquor sellers and their friends and relatives—went to the nearby house of one widowed liquor seller and debated how best to present their case the following day. They decided to follow protocol as much as possible, neither interrupting nor jeering, but presenting clear arguments in Kham, the local language, and refusing to give ground on the issue. The next day, a sizable crowd of women of various groups appeared at the meeting place. Some of the older women who sold liquor made with surplus grain from their household were asked by the younger liquor sellers to come to the meeting; but they refused. They said that a respectable matron of their status—here implying a mother-in-law or mother of grown sons—should not attend such a gathering. Their respectability was at stake and they did not want to endanger their position of influence in their husband's lineage. They supported the attending women but felt their own position would be jeopardized by actively entering the discussion.

Initially, the women present sat outside the compound where the meeting was held, but several outspoken ones encouraged everyone to move into the circle across from the men when it became apparent that they would again be ignored by men in the discussion. Most women moved closer, although a few remained on the periphery to simply listen. At first the men talked among themselves, but the women soon demanded recognition. They also demanded that Kham, not Nepali, be the medium for discussion and they began to present their arguments. They were very clear in arguing their case this time and were careful not to interrupt one another. They focused on the economic issues involved and showed a clear grasp of their categorical economic position, as women. Their points were:

1. Women have no traditional rights (*huk*) in property and can therefore not gain income by inheriting land, as do men.

2. Liquor sales were the major means of support for widows with children and polygynously married wives who live apart from their husband with their children. These women receive no support from their husband's patriline for purchasing clothing or other necessities that require cash, and so they must sell liquor to obtain these.

3. Ganesh had no right to monopolize the liquor market. Unless they also had rights to sell *mowa* (impossible to obtain[10]) the sale of liquor should not be banned.

4. Liquor making did not divert grain needed for consumption; instead, it provided a profitable use of surplus grain. Women who sold liquor regularly in households without a surplus purchased grain and thus did not use grain needed by their household for consumption.

5. Liquor was the main item for hospitality, ritual, festivals, and gift exchange, and its ban was ridiculous. One woman asked if they were supposed to bring *mowa* in place of local liquor to Genesh's funeral and thus anger his ancestral spirits.

6. Those who were household heads (either young widows with children or polygynously married widows living separately) could not pay the newly instituted school tax for their household unless they were permitted to earn the cash needed to pay the tax.

The men began to argue against the women's position and several teased them. The lower-caste Kami (blacksmith) men present said that the women were not well versed in the important issues involved. Several women, who regularly hired these men as laborers and smiths in their households, turned angrily and asked how they, the Kami, expected to receive their annual *jajmani* payment at harvest time if their patrons were denied the means to provide their own subsistence needs. The Kami men quickly fell silent, to the amusement of the rest of the male audience. A pensioned soldier who had served in the Indian army started to argue for the ban, but a women denounced him: "He is the one to talk; he can go to India and earn a fortune, but we, as women, have no such opportunity. Look at his wife's jewelry; I would wear such jewelry too if I had a rich soldier husband to support me. Give us your uniform and we will fight in India."

At this point, the panchayat secretary (*sajib*) began to defend the women's position. He argued that the ban was a foolish one and would lead to "village suicide" economically if women could not sell liquor. Other men began to agree. When the women realized that their cause was being supported, they enjoined one another to remain silent and not anger the men by talking out of turn. The village council members put the ban to a vote and it was not passed. Everyone present, both men and women, were asked to thumbprint the resolution to permit the sale of local liquor. Ganesh's right to sell liquor was suspended.

The women allowed the men to make the actual decision and were quiet while the men debated their cause, for fear of losing male support. After the resolution was signed, some women unfamiliar with meeting protocol asked timidly if in fact they had won. Reassured, all women left and went to various houses to gloat over their success. "And they [the men] say women have no *huk* [rights in the patrilineal line to land and a say in lineage affairs]! We showed them we have some authority," one woman commented to the enjoyment of her audience. In general, women were amazed that they had been able to enter the public arena so effectively and use unfamiliar protocol so successfully.

Later in the year, the power conflict between Ganesh and the traditional leaders again intensified over other issues, and there were several skirmishes in the village and at nearby fairs between men of the two factions. One fight was precipitated when, during an argument, followers of Ganesh hit a woman of the opposing faction who had spoken out in the meeting against the ban. As the result of another skirmish, Ganesh filed suit in the district court against about 30 members of the opposing side, claiming that they had caused damage to his property. When this case continued to drag on because there was no real evidence on either side, a few overardent members of Ganesh's faction stole a radio belonging to a panchayat member's son and said they would only return it if they won the case and if the traditional faction paid the damages to Ganesh. This caused more skirmishes, the end result being that the radio was put in police custody and Ganesh and the main supporters of his faction slipped out of the village at night.

Before he left, Ganesh was able to convince a village woman who had a government cloth loom to file suit declaring her loom had been damaged by the traditional faction during a fight. She went to the district center and named 15 of the original defendants of the old case in this case. These 15 were put in jail and a large amount of money was demanded as bail.[11] This caused considerable consternation in the village. The woman was weaving regularly on her loom the whole time these men were in jail, much to the anger of their relatives. Two of the defendants were students, four held salaried government jobs in the village, and the rest were adults of the traditional faction. The women in these men's families were distraught, as they had no money for bail. Those whose male relatives had salaried jobs were economically hurt by the fact that these men could not earn money or collect a salary while in jail.

During this period, a male entrepreneur from a nearby village set up a small store to sell *mowa* in Chilbatti, with the implicit support of district officials. Some women wished to again band together to oppose the sale of *mowa*, but female relatives of the men in jail feared a public display would hurt their relatives' cause. They and some male villagers tried to convince the women to stay home from the next fair and not sell liquor there. They argued that liquor could become a negative issue, since the argument presented by district officials was that the drunkenness at fairs precipitated the skirmishes. Local liquor sellers and the *mowa* seller attended the next fair, but the women were careful not to make an issue of *mowa*.

Meanwhile, the female relatives of the men in jail decided that some additional persuasion was needed to settle the case in their relatives' favor. They held a feast for some prom-

inent, respected village men and asked them to go to the district center to defend their relatives. The women promised to provide money and food to cover expenses on the trip. The women themselves could not go to argue the case, because in dominant Nepali culture, women without education or official standing would have no influence to sway district officials. Their comprehension of Nepali was limited and they had no knowledge of the behavior appropriate for women of non-Kham Magar groups.

When I departed the village, the dispute had not been settled and the men were still in jail. Some women met informally to discuss the liquor issue but were afraid to take action given the complexity of the general village dispute and their lack of outside information about district policies regarding liquor. A traditional leader suggested that the women who had spoken out at the meeting should go to the district center en masse and create a stir with the district officials.[12] The women were horrified by the idea, however, and made no attempt to do so.

theoretical framework for discussion

Before analyzing this case, it is necessary to state some definitions and provide a theoretical framework for discussion. *Political power* is defined here as the ability to exert control over others within a community, that is, the extrafamilial sphere. There is a wealth of theoretical concepts in the area of women and politics that has appeared during the last 25 years. Many of these concepts were developed in response to the theories of politics as process (see Bailey 1963; Cohen 1974; Turner 1957; Swartz 1968).[13]

The emphasis on process as opposed to jural rules led to the study of political processes that were not a part of formal institutions. Initially, the concepts of *formal* and *informal* channels of power were devised to enable theorists concerned with women to describe influence exerted by women outside of political institutions. Formal power is that exercised through structured or public political channels or by persons with socially recognized authority, while informal power is that exercised outside of publicly recognized channels.[14] An example of formal power would be decisions made in the village council meetings in Chilbatti. In the Magar example, informal power radiated through female networks, bringing social pressure to bear on an individual through gossip, manipulating ties to male kin of both the husband's and the wife's natal lineage, or exercising control through possession or the supernatural.

Political theorists such as C. Nelson (1974) and Rogers (1975)[15] have argued that this distinction obscures the fact that both men and women use informal channels for political purposes and that one form of power is not necessarily more effective than the other. They have tried to replace a false duality by a more general concept of "reciprocity of influence," in which all social actors wield influence of varying degrees in any political or social system. While this enables the researcher to see a society as a more complete whole and avoids value judgments of the effectiveness of different types of power, it is not useful here. By the criteria presented by Nelson and Rogers, women in Kham Magar society traditionally have a great deal of influence in political decisions. This does not address the question, however, of why these women found their traditional strategies inadequate to effect a political decision. My concern in this paper is the extent of women's access to power in the *public, formal* domain and the discovery of what causes women to enter formal channels.[16] With this framework in mind, it is now possible to examine the four questions raised at the beginning of the paper.

what strategies were used and how do they compare with traditional strategies used by women?

Kham Magar women are accustomed to participating in village decisions through informal channels. They have access to important information and are able to influence decisions by disseminating information to men in informal settings. The decision to enter the public sphere required them to use a new set of strategies to effect a decision in their favor. When they initially attended the meeting, they were unprepared for the protocol by which such meetings are conducted and were quickly rendered powerless by the men. The use of Nepali put them at a disadvantage and their jeering and interruptions hindered rather than helped their cause. It only showed their ignorance of male channels and gave the men an advantage.

The change in their strategy by the second day was quite marked. The women realized they should overcome their shyness and enter the circle of male participants where they could not be ignored. They stopped jeering, a strategy effective in gossip channels but not in a public meeting. When some men, such as the Kami and the soldier, began to tease them, they countered with arguments that put the men in a foolish position. Their use of economic arguments hit upon fundamental societal norms. I had never heard women express these as directly in an abstract analysis of their own position in a patrilineal society. Nor had I heard them express their authority as female household heads over men in a public meeting. The men were taken aback by the explicitness of this approach and were forced to rethink their arguments.

That women still felt they played an informal role in decision making was shown when they did not pressure the men once the discussion turned in their favor. They were unsure of how far they could go before the men would challenge them. That some women could not believe they had won after the vote shows a lack of confidence with respect to their power in a public forum.

The strategy to enter the public forum was effective, so much so that one traditional leader later considered sending them to the district center to argue with the district officials. Their success in the village meeting depended in large part, however, upon a prior, established status in Kham Magar society. While as a *group* they had not previously entered a public arena, they were already important, informal, categorical political actors and their views were respected by the men of the village.[17]

what caused women to enter the public domain as a group?

The women's decision to band together over a common issue of mainly female interest was an unusual phenomenon. Women traditionally are tied to a particular household, a particular circle of family, related kin, and female work-group members. Their identity is in relation to this circle, not to village women in general. They do not think in terms of women as a common group; they deal with one another as individuals. The women they are concerned with and the women they trust are close relatives and fellow workers.

This point became very clear in a set of surveys I conducted in Chilbatti.[18] On a political awareness questionnaire, one of the questions was, "What three women do you respect most in the village and why?" Some women were confused by the structure of the questionnaire, but most who answered named close relatives or a member of their work group. When asked what they as women needed to improve their lot, they cited specific problems related to themselves or to their household, never common, general issues of concern to

women as a group or as a category. Married women discussed family subsistence problems, divorced women discussed the need for employment to add cash to their household income, younger women cited the need for education, and older women discussed the strain of work and family relations.

The reason women formed a group in this particular instance is that the proposed ban on local liquor sales raised a common subsistence problem that directly concerned the women involved. The decision to enter the public domain as a group required an issue that was not only important to women in general, but one that directly threatened their subsistence base. Unmarried, divorced, widowed, or separated women, all of them liquor sellers, entered the sphere of formal male public political debate. The securely married middle-aged or older women who sold liquor from surplus household grain remained outside and did not attend the meeting for fear they would lose the respect and influence they held in their kin group and community.

Nonliquor sellers also attended the meetings and a few married women who only made liquor for home consumption expressed their distaste for the ban as well. The outspoken women and those who entered the circle of men initially were the ones who had everything to lose if the ban were enforced. Once it became clear that the female spokeswomen were accepted into the public arena, other women who had remained on the periphery were willing to join them.

Later in the dispute, this solidarity was mitigated by other factors. After the 15 men were put in jail, their female relatives put concern with family and household first. They convinced the liquor sellers they had previously supported to remain silent about the issue of *mowa* for fear there would be more trouble and less chance of freeing their male relatives. Women who depended upon the salaries brought in by those men in jail who had jobs were especially concerned that they be freed at all costs. These relatives were confronted by a conflicting loyalty that mitigated their stand on the liquor issue. Without the support of other village women, the liquor sellers were afraid to make a public issue as they had before; up until my departure, they still had not formally reopened the issue.

how did men perceive the women's action?

The reaction to women's participation in the public political channels was mixed. Initially, men tried to ignore the women and render them ineffective. At the second meeting, their first reaction was to tease the women and refuse to take their arguments seriously. When the arguments proved convincing, a number of men entertained the ideas seriously and convinced those in favor of a ban to reverse the decision. By the end of the meeting, the male attitude was one of agreement and/or respect.

It can be argued that some of the men were reacting as much to Ganesh as to the women's cause, but this does not provide an adequate explanation. Many men believed the ban to be a sign of progressiveness and were concerned with the issue itself. At the time the meeting was held, the village dispute over liquor had not become intertwined with other factional issues, as it did later in the year.

In the aftermath of the meeting, there were repercussions despite the men's agreement not to pass the ban. The hitting of the spokeswoman during another argument at a local fair was an unusual occurrence and caused considerable ill-feeling in the traditional leaders' faction. Ganesh's followers played upon a cultural ideal that women should not enter public politics as a chance or pretense to attack the other faction and to express their own frustration that this woman had been able to sway opinions against Ganesh by speaking publicly. Some of Ganesh's followers, in fact, tried to justify the incident to other villagers by saying

that this woman had overstepped the bounds of propriety in some of her statements at the meeting.

In general, men were surprised by the women's entrance into a traditionally male forum, but they respected their arguments. Men were accustomed to discussing affairs informally with women, and since the decision was one that directly affected these women, their active participation was acceptable, though unexpected. The women did not attack traditional power structures during the meeting, but only entered a forum of discussion from which they were traditionally excluded to argue for one of their traditional rights. The women allowed the men to make the final decision, a reinforcement of the traditional lines of authority in public meetings.

what does this case reveal about women and the political process?

To effectively determine whether this case presages a change in women's traditional roles and attitudes or is an extension of women's traditional political roles, it is useful to discuss some comparative material on women and power, and political action in general. A theory of political action is developed by Scott (1976) to explain peasant revolt in his analysis of Southeast Asia. He uses the concept of *subsistence ethic:* that an individual or community has a right to subsistence; that the ability to survive crises and maintain minimum subsistence should not be jeopardized by laws or economic relations imposed on an individual or community. Scott argues that the peasant revolts in Southeast Asia were a response to the violation of this ethic by colonial rulers. He contends that their revolt was not to stop exploitation or to achieve equality but to protect their right to minimum subsistence, which they felt was jeopardized by colonially imposed laws. Examples of women's protests in Africa in response to colonial intervention can also be seen in this light. Ardener (1973) describes the use of a traditional form of female militance, *anlu,* in Cameroon to protest agricultural policies. Another example is the women's uprising among the Igbo of Nigeria, discussed by Sacks (1979:83).

Scott's "subsistence ethic" is applicable to the Magar case. Kham Magar women, in this instance, were not "rebelling" against their position as women in the society, but merely defending their right to a subsistence, one they felt depended upon their ability to sell liquor. During the second meeting, while women clearly stated their position and the differential rights accorded to them in a patrilineal society, they did not use these statements to argue the fairness or rightfulness of this position but to describe the place of liquor selling in the overall economic scheme of the village. They did not want a different position or different rights, merely the right to continue to support themselves in a traditional fashion, through the sale of liquor. Their statements about this right did not lead to an argument with the men about their rights as women in the society but only the implication of banning this central economic activity.

The material available on the dynamics of women's movements in India is comparable to the dynamics of the Kham Magar case. Omvedt's (1975, 1979) work shows that the Indian movements for women's emancipation are directly tied to the national movements and to later caste and cultural movements. Inequalities regarding women became issues central to these movements because they were directly linked to caste and class inequalities (Omvedt 1975). Despite active participation of large numbers of women of varied backgrounds, the movements in India have not reached the villages or rural areas except in exceptional cases and, in such instances, only as a result of a strong union or party organization active in general economic issues (Omvedt 1979).

Activism in these movements to achieve reforms or improvements in women's status vis-à-vis men entailed a growing consciousness of categorical female identity and oppression. This consciousness was created by a top-to-bottom movement, not vice versa, and solidarity has been through women's identification with a movement, not with one another on a village or local scale. Like the Magar case, many of the issues that are most important to peasant women in India are mainly economic—wage levels, job security, child care for working women—but the peasant women's active involvement is part of an external organization.

By contrast, the Kham Magar women's decision to enter the public arena and exert their influence through a formal, political channel has internal sources and is not the result of a growing feeling of subordination or inequality; nor is it instigated by influence from leaders from above. The women's decision to band together and enter the public arena must be explained by a different set of dynamics.

That there is an inherent difference in political activism by women on a local level and as part of a regional or national movement seeking to increase female consciousness of female subordination seems to be borne out by other examples. The Chinese women's emancipation (Croll 1979), for instance, has roots in traditional Chinese society but is a response to the revolution in China in general. In a collection on women's solidarity groups, N. Nelson (1979) argues that petty commodity production can be a precondition for female solidarity. She describes the networks developed by Kenyan women in Nairobi who brew beer for sale. These women are separated from their husbands and male kin and rely upon networks with other beer brewers; they share domestic tasks, ensure the success of their business, and enlist mutual support. The solidarity these women have for business purposes extends into group action to prevent police from closing their shops. It has also extended to a limited degree into political activism regarding a number of issues, including housing, schooling, and piped water availability.

Kham Magar women who are liquor brewers, like the Kenyan beer brewers, have developed linkages based upon their entrepreneurial activities. Women may pool capital to make and sell liquor. Those women who depend upon the sale of liquor and other entrepreneurial activities to maintain their household are, like the Kenyan women, separated from their husbands or male kin. There are major differences, however. These women are not separated from their village networks as are the Kenyan women in the market town. Nor are all the liquor sellers who attended the meeting divorced, separated, or living alone; some are unmarried, some live in their natal homes, and some produce liquor for sale from a household surplus. Yet their common entrepreneurial activity provides them with a common identity for the purposes of political action to preserve entrepreneurial rights.

Although planned from above and part of a larger network that facilitates women's involvement in decision making despite family or social discouragement, some of the employment-generating, cottage-industry schemes in rural India are relevant to our discussion. Two of these are the Amul dairy cooperative, whereby women bring milk to a common collection center for processing, and the Lijjat Papad Industry in which women make tortillalike cakes for marketing in a dispersed factory system (Dixon 1978:50–74; Sundar 1978:11–20; Jain 1980:77–162). These programs have not changed women's formal participation in overall village political meetings; but women influenced by them are pressing actively for rights with regard to the cooperative and to the use of their earnings.

In the women's reaction to Ganesh in the meeting, they argue that Ganesh has no right to impose a monopoly on liquor sales, and they stress the cultural importance of liquor and ask if they are to bring *mowa* to Ganesh's funeral instead of the traditional contribution of home-brewed liquor. This is reminiscent of a point made by Migdal (1974) in his discussion of the changing relations in a peasant community created by increasing imposition from

the outside. He argues that initially, the villagers try to isolate themselves from the outside, but a few entrepreneurs begin to use the outside system to their benefit. The effect locally is that more traditional peasants resent and fear this intrusion of the outside system and wish to protect social relations that are part of their isolation.[19]

Part of what the women resent about Ganesh is his attempt to capitalize on an outside opportunity—*mowa*—to their disadvantage. They are aware that they themselves cannot obtain a license to sell *mowa;* their statement that they also should have licenses is rhetorical because they know they are unable to capitalize on this opportunity—district officials would never give a permit to a woman. Their statement about Ganesh's funeral is a statement about traditional village obligations. Their sale of liquor is part of a traditional system that protects them economically and socially, and Ganesh is a threat to this system.

While I have no hard data to validate such a statement, it also seems likely that part of the reason that men were willing to support the women in the meeting is that they had the same negative feeling toward Ganesh. While there are other villagers who are able to deal effectively with district-level people, they and Ganesh are in the minority. Although this is not the only reason for opposing the ban, it could be one reason.

The women's use of formal political channels does not imply or create any consciousness of women as a group per se; their common identity revolves around a common economic activity, but this can be diffused by conflicting loyalties and the stronger ties of family and kin. The traditional divisiveness of South Asian women has been noted by a number of scholars (U. Sharma 1979; Dasgupta 1976; Arens and Van Beurdon 1977). Nor is the women's action an expression of a desire for change. They clearly stated the limitations imposed upon them by the system without having a consciousness of any exploitation as a result. The seeds of consciousness are present in their statements both during and after the meeting, but as yet they have not led (and may never lead) to a consciousness that their position vis-à-vis men should change. They are testing the limits of their traditional power, not striving for a new kind of power. This is what the woman is expressing after the meeting when she says, "And they say women have no *huk* [traditional rights], we showed them we have authority."

notes

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[1] One recent incident in North India in 1978 caused a great deal of consternation. The incident occurred in Uttar Pradesh and was part of the Chipco movement started by the Himalaya Sewa Singh to educate and to organize the women of hill regions of Uttar Pradesh for action against forest degradation and destruction. "Women's interests in this region were vitally bound up with the supply of wood and fodder from the forests and indiscriminate felling of trees impinges on their living. Hence, women have clung or tied themselves to trees, as a protest, whenever the area was threatened" (Sundar 1978).

[2] Sanday (1974) gives four determinants of women's status in the public domain: the formation of women's solidarity groups; their control of and access to knowledge; the relations of productions; and their control over surplus.

[3] The caste system in Nepal, while based upon the Indian caste system, differs in some important respects. A number of previously non-Hindu groups settled in Nepal were assimilated into the system as a middle category, called *matwali.* These groups are considered to be lower in rank than the two upper castes, the Brahman and Chhetri. The artisan castes are at the bottom of the hierarchy and are traditionally considered untouchable. See P. R. Sharma (1975) for a description of traditional caste rules in Nepal.

[4] *Jajmani* is a traditional relationship between the artisan castes and landed families in a community whereby services are repaid by a customary amount of grain, given annually (see Molnar 1980).

[5] In an economic survey conducted among the Kham Magar, 20 of 35 households were in the bottom economic strata (Molnar in press).

[6] By prescribed cross-cousin marriage, I refer to a system in which a man marries his maternal uncle's daughter or a woman in the same kin category from a lineage from which his family has taken a bride (see Maybury-Lewis 1965 for a description of this system).

[7] Since this case (in 1980), the CDO's duty as coordinator has been taken over by a representative of the newly created Ministry of Local Development.

[8] This is the only instance I know of among the Kham Magar of the use of possession as a female political action.

[9] *Mowa (mahawa* in Nepali) is the fruit of a tree which is processed to make a non-grain-based liquor.

[10] Rights to sell *mowa* or other government-distilled liquor are auctioned off and the government also receives revenue from the sale of this liquor. Women do not have access to such rights both because of the capital required and, more importantly, because they do not have the necessary influence with district personnel. In addition, seeking a liquor license for this purpose would be considered socially unacceptable for a woman.

[11] Bail was set at 725 rupees (approximately US$60) per person. As these villagers have an income below the national average of US$110 per capita, this sum was quite large.

[12] This suggestion was made partly in jest and partly in earnest. The statement was undoubtedly made against Ganesh's political stance, as well as in defense of the women's liquor rights.

[13] The concept of politics as process was primarily developed in a collection by Swartz (1968); see also Bailey (1963), Cohen (1974), and Turner (1957).

[14] These concepts were first used in Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974). While the position of these two authors regarding the formal/informal controversy has changed, I am using the concepts in the sense in which they were developed/employed in that volume.

[15] C. Nelson (1974) argues that women in the Middle East have considerable influence in the society although they are excluded from the public sphere. Rogers (1975) discusses European peasant societies using the "myth of male dominance." Her argument is that men are actually often powerless in their political dealings with the government; and while women help maintain a myth that males are dominant authority figures, women often have as much control over politics as do men.

[16] One area in which women's formal power becomes important is considerations of women and change. While traditional channels may be effective when traditional disputes arise, and formal/informal distinctions may be misleading and arbitrary within the community, such distinctions are more relevant as the community becomes increasingly linked to the larger society. Boserup (1970) has noted women's loss of power with economic development. In a society such as Nepal, community decisions about economic or social issues become more affected by factors from outside the community. The formal political arena becomes a more central institution for decision making and information exchange. Although women's informal channels of power could influence decisions made in the political arena, increasingly women lack access to the information needed to influence such decisions.

[17] A similar point about women's entrance into public political channels is made by Wolf (1972, 1974) and Croll (1979) with regard to women's changing roles in Chinese society in Taiwan and on the mainland. Both argue that women's involvement in public activity—in the case of China, during the revolution—was a departure from their traditional household-based activity but that their new participation was based upon strategies used traditionally in effecting decisions in the family.

[18] The research project was a two-year study funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and conducted by the Centre for Economic Development Administration at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, on the "Status of Women in Nepal." The Kham Magar were one of eight groups in Nepal for which information on women's roles and activities was collected. The results of this study are being published in two volumes (see Status of Women Project Team in press).

[19] Migdal (1974:133–189) develops this argument.

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