Part 3   Armed Movements and State Formation in Nepal, Nicaragua and Mozambique

Chapter 6

Identity Politics and the Maoist People's War in Nepal

Anne de Sales

Abstract

This chapter explores the tensions between ethnic and class-based emancipation through an in-depth analysis of the Nepali case. The first section shows that cultural diversity was at first legally recognised but organised according to caste hierarchy. This was, in the course of the 20th century, contradicted by the individual equality of all citizens before the law. However, in both cases, cultural subordination was also economic and political. The second section shows, through observations made of one indigenous community, the Kham-Magars, how the Maoist movement acted in violation of their class analysis: both intentionally (through its tactic of alliance with ethnic fronts) and incidentally (following the failure of its cultural revolution) it politicised Kham-Magar ethnic identity. The chapter concludes that it is necessary to distinguish between the 'capacity for culture', involving healthy debates within a community, and conservative identity politics.

Nepal's recent history has been marked by a movement for political emancipation, which took two intertwined, but often conflicting directions. There was first a Maoist struggle, based on a class analysis that succeeded in overthrowing an autocratic Hindu monarchy after 10 years of armed insurgency (1996-2006) and established a democratic republic. Second, there were claims for political and cultural recognition from a large component of the population[1] in quest of a federal constitution based on ethnic distinctions.

These conflicting tendencies in Nepal's recent emancipatory struggle have to be set in the historical context from which they developed. The ideal of modernity that came to dominate the world in the post-colonial 20th century was conceived, *mutatis mutandis,* as emancipation from local affiliations and particularisms inherited from an irrelevant past. The future was imagined as 'breaking the chains' of the past and local attachments (kin, regional) were

synonymous with alienation. Autocrats and liberals alike shared a conviction that the modern nation state had to be centralised and unified under one dominant cultural model in order to promote economic and social progress. However, from the 1990s on this national policy, vigorously implemented in Nepal in the second half of the 20th century, was increasingly criticised by indigenous peoples as 'internal colonisation' by upper Hindu castes.

In contrast, the communist revolutionaries had the explicit aim of mobilising 'oppressed people,' including ethnic and Hindu groups of low status such as the Dalits, on the basis of their membership of an (international) socio-economic class. The communist revolutionaries saw membership of this international oppressed class as something to be nurtured among Dalits and indigenous groups above any other sort of local and ethnic sense of belonging. However, ethnic sentiment proved to be stronger than class solidarity as a basis for mobilisation during the insurgency. In this context, the revolutionary leaders had to resort to ethnic mobilisation tactics that potentially contradicted their ultimate and ideal goal of a communist society. Their vision of emancipation, based on a class perspective aimed at equal distribution of wealth, was not always compatible with one which valorised cultural or ethnic identity.[2]

This chapter explores the tensions between ethnic and class-based emancipation through an in-depth analysis of the Nepali case. It begins with a historical sketch of the legal and political treatment of ethnic and cultural diversity in Nepal from the founding of the kingdom, in the second half of the 18th century, to the Panchayat regime implemented in the early 1960s and ended by a popular uprising in 1990. The kingdom was initially designated as 'all countries ruled by the dynasty of Gorkha' (*gorkhā rāj bhar-muluk*), an expression that encapsulated the process of its own formation and recalls the structure of an empire: several 'countries' or principalities were conquered by one of them, the principality of Gorkha, while remaining differentiated from their conqueror who was more concerned with their submission to his authority than with their cultural assimilation. It was only in the middle of the 20th century that the kingdom was proclaimed a 'monarchical Hindu state' (*rājtantrātmak hindu rājya*) and defined as a 'nation' (*rāstra*) (Gaborieau 1982: 277). This chapter shows how the cultural diversity that was legally recognised but organised by caste hierarchy was then contradicted by the principle of individual equality of all citizens before the law.

The second part will try to clarify the position of the Communists towards ethnic groups through observations made of one community, the Kham-Magars, whose territory the Maoist leaders made the stronghold for their military insurrection. Were the villagers 'heroes or instruments' in the People's War, to quote the French historian Lucien Bianco on the role of the peasants in the Chinese Revolution (Bianco 2005)? Indeed, the Constituent Assembly's (formed after the Maoist People's War)[3] failure to come to terms with federalism in contemporary Nepal leads us to ask whether there was an overlap of interests between the minorities and the Maoists during the military insurrection, or was the minorities' need for recognition exploited (Lawoti 2003). Also did increasing ethnic and cultural hybridity resulting from economic emigration, changing life-styles, urbanisation and political disruption affect the supposed 'purity' of local cultures? Most important, how do the villagers envisage their own emancipation? I suggest that listening to the villagers may be the best way to prevent radical demands for recognition escalating into violent confrontation, and may help us to imagine other possible futures.

Nepali Ethnic and Cultural Politics: a History of Domination[4]

Nepal's formation: hierarchical cultural differences
Current claims of ethnic comunities for political and cultural recognition are based on the historical experience that they have of the various ways they have been integrated into the nation at different times. The distant past of ethnic groups in Nepal is poorly documented, and largely absent from school textbooks that are exclusively focused on the history of the Shah dynasty that ruled the country until 2008. However, local cultures convey certain conceptions of the relations that ethnic groups have had with the dominant groups. While not mistaking popular imagination for historical reality, rites and legends are part of this historical experience and should not be overlooked. We know that Hindu princes fleeing from Mughal India took refuge in Nepal and took over local chiefdoms that they incorporated into their new principalities. If the warrior princes fought the natives who resisted them violently, they also gave those who cooperated with them some ritual precedence, especially with regard to worship of local deities that they were anxious to appropriate. Moreover, these groups claimed to be riven by internal wars and in need of an outside leader of royal rank

who might unite their clans and establish peace. This ancient immigration from India is popularly represented as colonisation, but a form of colonisation that remained quite distant and relatively respectful of or indifferent to local practices – and which may have been well received in places.

This historical experience varies by region, but it also reveals common features beginning with the military conquest of the indigenous groups that lasted for half a century (1744-1790). Prithvi Narayan Shah, the ruler of a Hindu principality in the middle hills to the west of the country, embarked on unifying about eighty independent principalities. He and his successors allied themselves with a number of local communities that they enlisted in their army,and rewarded with land or exemption from slavery (Stiller 1973). This is how groups of Magars and Gurungs from western Nepal came to have a privileged relationship with the rulers. By contrast, indigenous groups in eastern Nepal, grouped under the ethnonym Kirat, developed highly conflictual relationships with the Shah dynasty, despite obtaining certain privileges, such as keeping their clan land. At the other extreme were communities, such as those who would come to be grouped under the ethnonym 'Tamang' in the early 20th century, who were dispossessed of their land in central Nepal. This is probably the ethnic group that presents the clearest case of a subaltern history of internal colonisation (Tamang 2009).

The Shahs' military conquest was accompanied by an effort to classify social and cultural diversity along the lines of the caste society of their homeland in central Nepal. Indigenous groups were included in the caste hierarchy and subjected to blanket laws such as the ban on killing cows, or marrying a woman of lower status, or for a man to marry the wife of his older brother should the latter die. If breaking rules was fined, certain customs rejected by the Hindus of central Nepal, such as matrilateral cross-cousin marriage could nonetheless be performed for a fee. Fines and taxes gradually instilled a new model of society while filling the coffers of the state (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 295-300).

This effort of classification was further systematised under the government of Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana (1847-1877), whose lawmakers drafted a civil code, the Muluki Ain, in order to fix and unify the country's laws. The idea of a civil code was innovative at that time in South Asia. The influence of the Napoleonic code may be detected, especially since the

Muluki Ain followed a couple of years after Jang's journey to Paris and London. The content of the Nepalese code is, however, very different from its French counterpart: the caste hierarchy is re-affirmed, as is the primacy accorded to Hindus from the hills. Ethnic groups are given an intermediate position between the castes of the Twice-born[5] and the Untouchables, Dalits. Most of them belong to the Shudras, the lowest of the four pure varna, and therefore have no access to Vedic knowledge – a restriction that, at the time, meant no access to any form of literacy. Within this broad category of Shudras, each group was recognised as constituting a different caste (*jāt*), free to speak its language and follow its customs within certain limits. The code reveals a society based on legal recognition of cultural differences but also on their statutory ranking within a single model organised by the principles of Hinduism. This system initiated two opposite and complementary social dynamics: cultural hegemony on the one hand and the emergence of new ethnic groups (ethnogenesis) on the other.

Indeed, social prestige was clearly associated with the upper castes of the hills, and other ethnic groups felt encouraged to emulate their practices and embrace their values in the hope of enhancing their social status. This process of 'Sanskritisation' (Srinivas 1952) contributed to a certain social homogeneity. Brahmins and wandering yogis helped to spread the Hindu religion around the country while legitimating the social order and the political power of the upper castes. This system of social classification involved a simplification of the vast cultural complexity of a mountainous country where every valley boasts its own language, customs and ritual calendar – a complexity that the new rulers might have considered difficult to monitor. However, the allocation of rights and duties to *groups* rather than individuals made various identity strategies also possible. While some of these groups were tempted to move up the caste hierarchy by showing their strict adherence to Hindu rules of commensality and marriage and by inventing a past of being degraded Twice-born, others forged an altogether new identity in order to enjoy some privileges (Höfer 1979; Levine 1987).

A good example of this use of the Nepalese code is the emergence of a new group, the Chantyal, a community of former miners of diverse and dubious origins – the product of prohibited inter-caste marriages, former runaway slaves or landless peasants, among other categories – to whom the government gave land after closing the mines in the early 20th

century. The former miners forged for themselves a past as Chetri, a Twice-born caste who, during a forced migration that pushed them to cold and inhospitable territories, were doomed to drinking alcohol and eating meat and subsequently lost their status. It seems that they first gave their daughters to landless in-laws from different origins, and then reversed their marriage strategy to one of strict group endogamy in search of a higher status under the assumed name of a Chetri clan, the Chantyal. However, this strategy of upward mobility in the Hindu hierarchy was challenged in the late 1980s by a new strategy that involved playing another card, that of ethnic identity. It was then that the Chantyal claimed to have a language and culture of their own in order to justify this new allegation (de Sales 1993). This process of ethnogenesis was carried through successfully and the Chantyal were duly registered in the 2001 census and recognised in this way as a collective entity.

In other words, the primary intention of the founder of the kingdom and his descendants to reduce culturally different groups to a manageable political entity, through formalisation of these differences in the Civil Code, led a version of identity politics that prefigures the current situation in some ways: the emergence of a multitude of new groups trying to use the new rules and opportunities to their advantage. However, reducing identity politics today to a straightforwardly pragmatic or instrumental dimension may be going a little too fast. The second part of this historical sketch will suggest that the Panchayat era transformed identity politics through the principle of equality of all citizens before the law.

The Panchayat era: equal and undifferentiated citizens

With the emergence of the Liberal Congress Party that was secretly born in India in 1947, Nepal entered a new period of its history and the first universal suffrage elections were held in 1959. Even if, under the pretext of restoring peace after the outbreaks of violence that followed this attempt at democracy, King Mahendra managed to quickly resume the reins of power and restore his autocratic rule, skillfully using new ideas. The modern views expressed in the new constitution of 1963 are striking for their radicalism. Gaborieau remarks that, while we might have expected a modernised but moderate interpretation of the caste system along Gandhi's line,[6] all reference to such a system was eradicated in the new text. Similarly, when we might have expected the denial of social classes, the unequal positions of the different segments of society were instead described in terms of the divergent and even

contradictory class interests, as for instance between the peasants and the major landowners. However these concessions to Marxism were only on paper and the key concept of class *struggle* was categorically rejected. Classes had to be persuaded to abandon their interests in favour of the national interest. They were expected to stay in their place and live in harmony, like castes in the old system (Gaborieau 1982: 263-270).

This feature of the so-called 'guided democracy' of the Panchayat system eventually led the people to rise against the regime in 1990. The modernising attempt to mask social cleavages systematically by imposing a 'counterfeit reality' (Burghart 1993: 11), through brutal repression if necessary, led to unsustainable contradictions: on the one hand, a system of democratic representation (mostly indirect) was supposed to meet a growing popuar desire for emancipation and political participation, while the king practiced autocratic rule backed up by a repressive system.

There was also a contradiction between claiming that Nepal was the last Hindu kingdom and a conception of society that was almost entirely secular: Nepal was a nation and its inhabitants were citizens, equal before the law regardless of caste or ethnicity. With the new constitution, rights and duties were no longer allocated to groups as in the old Nepali code but to *individuals*. At the same time, the ethnic and cultural diversity legally recognised and ritually organised in the old system was now officially denied in the name of national unity and equality. The unifying model, however, remained that of the dominant ethnic group, the Indo-Nepalese from the hills (Parbatya). The Panchayat regime deployed all possible means of communication in support of this model, starting with the school apparatus extended throughout the country, and systematic learning of Nepali as the vernacular language. This effort of cultural homogenisation benefited from international development aid that in turn contributed to greater centralisation. Any ethnic claim was repressed as political subversion and an attempt to destabilise the state.

Ethnic associations were careful not to show any aspirations other than strictly cultural ones. At the same time they aimed to reform local traditions, criticising the 'bad habits' of indigenous groups: these included alcohol consumption that allegedly reduced the quantity of grain available for food; overspending on communal ceremonies, prestigious events in the

life cycles of individuals and shamanistic rituals. The activists faced a paradox when seeking to eradicate practices at the heart of the collective life of the communities they claimed to defend (Pettigrew and Shah 2009). Similarly there was a huge gap between educated people living in the city and the majority of ordinary villagers. The former's concern for reform was intended to redress the stereotype of ethnic groups as being careless (because of their lack of education) and extravagant spenders – a stereotype that stood as the symmetrical opposite of the austere and parsimonious (literate) Brahmin. This was a recipe for alienation whereby the oppressed or colonised groups are doomed to adopt the values of those from whom they want distinguish themselves. Two ideologies -- Hinduism and development – combined to stigmatise peripheral populations and ethnic groups.

Ethnic groups had a position in the caste hierarchy even if at the lowest rank. They were now considered not only to be backward but also responsible for the country's lack of economic development because of their supposed blind attachment to ancestral practices. The only choice open to individuals wishing to improve their living conditions through social mobility was to accept assimilation into the dominant society, that is, to follow Hindu rules and join one of the patronage networks that linked local communities with the political centre. At the apex of these networks were 'big men' who all belonged to upper castes. Furthermore, as Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka has pointed out, this process of assimilation was only open to individual members of ethnic groups who had the means of engaging with this process. The formation of local privileged elites made the integrity of these groups even more vulnerable (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1999: 58) and further embittered those who felt left out.

I have suggested that the pre-national identity dynamic might have been more pragmatic than essentialist. Indeed, under the old law when the relevant social unit was collective entities like ethnic communities and castes, a group's identity rested on its *collective* distinctiveness. Presumably changes in group identity did not provoke existential angst in individual members of the group, membership was not threatened. By shifting the basic unit of society from the group to the individual, the constitution of 1963 established a fundamental break from the old system and iwe must try to understand current ethnic claims in this context.

Ethnic demands made in Nepal today come after half a century when individuals, all equal before the law and undifferentiated, were encouraged to embrace their national identity. In a sense Panchayat propaganda was pushed to the limit by the revolutionary communists, who asked citizens to die for their nation against the imperialist enemy. The only intermediate groupings between individuals and the nation recognized by the new ideologies are classes: pseudo-classes introduced by the Panchayat were not intended to be effective[7] and the Maoists tried to mobilise classes in the Marxist sense for a revolutionary uprising. However, despite the official speeches made by revolutionary leaders in which class rhetoric was omnipresent, their propaganda was slow to convince the villagers. The 'class struggle' was translated into a simple and radical opposition between oppressors and oppressed, a formulation that was more effective for mobilising people.

Nepal's modern history was marked by two processes that neatly illustrate the general problem: how to reconcile recognition of cultural differences and the principle of legal equality for all. Legal recognition of cultural differences between social groups was a feature of the Hindu caste system, but it put ethnic groups at the bottom of the hierarchy. However, legal equality for all citizens led the groups in question to identify with other oppressed categories under the cultural hegemony of the high castes. One way or the other, this subordination was accompanied by economic and political subordination. The two different, and in many respects opposite, processes had a similar result, suggesting that the problem may not be the philosophical one of irreconcilable approaches focused on difference or equality, but a problem of governance.

Moreover, the dichotomy between oppressors and oppressed does not coincide with the opposition between castes and ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are not all oppressed to the same degree, for both historical and cultural reasons, as we have seen. Groups with a trading tradition, for instance, can adapt to the modern economy etter than groups which live from farming alone. Similarly, caste members are far from all being privileged and the service castes are still heavily stigmatised by both higher castes and ethnic groups, who enjoy higher status than the Dalits. Finally, 'modern' Panchayat ideology, which shifting the legal social unit from groups to individuals, introduced a new sense of identity involving a *personal* or existential anxiety that found an expression in identity politics. A look at the Kham-Magar

community below may help us to dissipate confusion concerning their involvement in the Maoist movement and to clarify their aspirations as an ethnic group.

The Maoists and the Need for Recognition of Ethnic Groups: a Case Study

According to the revolutionary epic, Prachanda, the leader of the Maoist movement, chose Kham-Magar country as where he would start 'his long march.' The role of being the 'crucible of the revolution' that this community played has given rise to the mistaken belief that the insurgency responded somehow to identity frustration. Yet closer examination reveals that mobilising the local population has gone through several stages; the Kham-Magars' ethnic claims grew out of the insurgency and the international context in which it took place rather than being its source. The particular history of this hill community reveals how the revolutionary movement went back and forth between theory and practice in dealing with the ethnic groups and the Kham-Magars in turn responded pragmatically to the insurgents'strategy and tactics.

An Underground and Local Communist presence: 1950-1990

The Kham-Magars are 40,000 to 50,000 people whose Tibeto-Burman language (*kham*) distinguishes them from the largest minority in Nepal, the Magars, who helped to conquer the country under the banner of the Shah Dynasty. The Kham-Magars are grouped together in the high valleys of two districts, Rolpa and Rukum, to the north and west of what was Magarant. Distinct from the Magars by their language, clan names, customs and a part of their history, at the time of the insurrection they formed a little-known minority within the Magar minority. Tucked away on their hilltop the Kham-Magars were what James Scott would call a 'non-state' people (Scott 2009): they are highland maize eaters not lowland rice-eaters; an important part of their diet and income consists of forest products as; they were slash-and-burn cultivators in the past and are highly mobile today; their social organisation is egalitarian, in contrast with caste society, notably the relations between men and women; their exclusively oral tradition centred on shamanic practices and they generally mistrust outsiders. Until 20 years ago, their subsistence economy was based on high altitude agriculture and transhumant sheep herding. The shepherds go up to the Himalayan foothills with their flocks in summer and descend to the southern plains in winter. The local economy

is no longer sufficient to support the population and emigration abroad provides vital additional resources. With no road until recently this region, like most of western Nepal, has been isolated and neglected by economic development. Individuals do however travel, and since the 1950s ideas have circulated from south to north through transhumance.

Unlike the Chantyal mentioned above, the Kham-Magars never sought recognition within the census and registered under the Magar ethnonym.[8] There were several reasons for this. Away from urban and political centers, the Kham-Magars have long been more interested in commenting on the differences between the customs and dialects of their respective valleys and villages than in any national ethnic policy. Ethnic activists, meanwhile, have shown little interest in this population: Gore Bahadur Khapangi, who founded the Nepal Magar Association in 1990, considered them to be insufficiently educated then and too backward to be mobilised for a national cause. Despite this initial lack of political awareness, their official membership of the Magar minority was an advantage for anyone who wanted to be recruited into the Gurkha regiments of the British army. For young men of certain ethnic minorities, soldiering had long been the only hope of escaping their condition as shepherds or farmers on poor mountainland while also offering the promise of a pension, if not a glorious future.

In the 1950s, the Congress Party led the opposition to the autocratic Rana regime. The Communists were present only in central Nepal and brought together a small minority of opponents who made up just 7% of the votes in the first parliamentary elections in 1959.[9] However, they were very active among the 'classes' of farmers and students, unlike the liberals who had neglected them. These social classes served as a cover for their political activity when, between 1952 and 1956, their party was banned.[10] At this time Barman Budha,[11] a young shepherd from the Kham-Magar village of Thabang (Rolpa District), was introduced to communism by Mohan Bikram Singh, the founding father of Nepali Maoism and a native of the neighboring district of Pyuthan.[12] The Communist cell of Thabang remained the only underground bridgehead in Rolpa of the Pyuthan group's activities for nearly thirty years, from 1956 to 1985.

In 1984, Mohan Bikram Singh and his party were signatories to the first convention of the Revolutionary International Movement (RIM), a (now defunct) international Communist

organisation which upheld a version of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. But he soon withdrew from the committee because he disagreed with the founder of the RIM, the American Bob Avakian: while in theory he presented himself as a defender of armed insurrection and against the parliamentary vote, he felt that 'the objective and subjective conditions' were not met to ensure the success of an armed struggle.[13] This break, like many other ruptures on points of doctrine, masked a personality clash between leaders which resulted in the village of Thabang following a new faction. In 1985, Mohan Baidya, a Brahman teacher from Rolpa, founded a new party that was later to become the CPN(Maoist). He was followed by Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the future Prachanda, and both were eager to start the armed struggle. They were encouraged by their affiliation to the RIM which offered Nepalese Maoists an international forum and boosted their confidence in starting the armed struggle. The role of epicentre of the insurgency that promoted the village of Thabang and the Kham-Magar community had contrasting effects for the lives of the villagers and their perceptions of themselves.

The Kham-Magars, Heroes or Victims of the People's War?[14]
The Maoists started to prepare for the insurgency several years before the 1990 popular uprising, and were anxious to secure a base area for organising their guerrilla operations and to which they could retreat safely. They were fully aware of how jealous the Kham-Magar villages were of their autonomy and of the difficulty of bringing them together under one banner. In 1995, on the eve of launching the People's War, they organised the Sija campaign, named after the two mountains that dominate the Kham-Magar country, Sisne to the north and Jaljala to the south. The campaign was aimed at strengthening the solidarity of the cadres from different villages. Apart from doing some communal work (building latrines and helping to repair roads), the activists also collected homemade hunting weapons in preparation for the insurgency. In this way, they would also control their use by the villagers and discourage all resistance. There was no question of an ethnic claim in this first phase, but rather of class struggle in order to overturn the oppressors and establish a communist society. The way the 'Initiation day' of the People's War (February 25, 1996) was organised throughout the country illustrates this point.

Seven actions took place on that day at different locations in the country. They all aimed at symbolic rather than material gain. The policy of not killing anyone was respected and the

militants made long speeches explaining their revolutionary political motives. In Gorkha, for instance, a large group of men and women stormed an office of the state-owned Agricultural Development Bank, and made a bonfire with all the loan documents. However the land registration certificates were kept safe and later returned to their respective owners. The 'initiation day' was therefore a carefully staged peasant rebellion aimed at convincing the local population of both the Party's good moral character but also of its potential power to act. It focused on the immediate problem that the majority of farmers had to face: the need for cash and their oppression by moneylenders. This focus on loans is a pragmatic way of expressing the abstract notion of class struggle; it is the great tradition of communism translated into the idiom of the little tradition of village communism – ideology in action (Scott 1979).

The first five years of the People's War were characterised by rigorous development of the Maoist forces that gradually transformed these initial demonstrations into a national insurrection. In this process the Kham-Magar country was one cog in an implacable machine focused on systematic mobilisation of the villagers. The Magars paid a particularly heavy toll in these early years: according to the Informal Sector Service Centre in Kathmandu, Magars accounted for nearly 20% of those killed by security forces between 1996 and 2001. The proportion of Magars killed by the Maoists (12, 5%) is also sizeable but less significant. Some ethnic activists, like Gore Bahadur Khapangi, did not miss the opportunity to point out that the Maoist leadership, who belonged mostly to the upper castes, were using the Magars as cannon fodder in the same way that Prithvi Narayan Shah had used them in his conquest of the country some 250 years earlier. To this accusation, however, Barman Budha would reply that 'only iron could cut iron.' The old Thabangi leader felt that high-caste people were indeed in the best position to abolish caste privileges and prejudices precisely because they were so dominant. He turned the argument of Magar exploitation on its head and restored to his fellow Kham-Magars the agency that had been denied to them by ethnic activists, while embracing the communist ideal of a classless and casteless society.

In 2001, the People's War entered a second phase: the king declared a state of emergency and sent the army against the rebels. The insurgency was growing into a civil war and the success (or failure) of guerrilla operations increasingly depended on the support of local populations,

who were put to the test. It was therefore crucial to keep villagers on the rebels' side. As in the case of their Naxalite counterparts, it was only in this second phase of the insurgency that the Maoists confronted the ethnic issue and initiated a policy of alliance with the regional ethnic liberation fronts (Pahari 2010). In April 2002 the Party singled out a Kham-Magar territory for the honour of the title 'special district.' This new administrative unit was understood as a transitional formation pending the declaration of the Magarant Autonomous Region. This took place less than a year later, on 9 January 2004, in Thabang. The special district was then dissolved and Santos Budha, a native of the village, was elected president of Magarant.

It is ironic that the backward and marginal Kham-Magars were brought to front-line ethnic politics, even at the very heart of the historical Magarant, through the Maoists' success. Following the Marxist-Leninist approach to nationalities,[15] Santos Budha himself was clear about the transitional character not only of the special district but also of the autonomous region. The politics of autonomy were aimed at mobilising the minorities towards a goal known to satisfy their need for recognition and thereby to secure faithful supporters in the base areas for the protracted war. Ethnic interests were subordinated to the political and military conquests of the central power, and autonomous Magarant was dissolved in 2006 when the Maoists joined the government. This clearly instrumental use of ethnicity by the Party could not but increase the frustration that the Kham-Magars had begun to feel, notably in the cultural domain.

Indeed, the revolutionary ambitions of the Maoists aimed at a radical transformation of the self in accordance with universal principles borrowed from the European Enlightenment. Scientific arguments were evoked to distinguish between proven and indisputable truths on the one hand and, on the other, superstitions that should be eradicated to build a better world. Maoist cadres were taught that religion was in the hands of merchants of illusion in search of profit; they strove to impose new rules, banning the villagers from performing blood sacrifices. The brutality with which they imposed these rules might have reflected their own lack of familiarity with this new 'scientific' vision of the world. Local people were deeply offended by all this and were reluctant to change their habits, which in their view had little to do with the fight against oppressors or the justice to which they aspired. In the same way as

the Kham-Magars would not hesitate sometimes to drive out of the village a Brahman priest, a representative of the the dominant Hindu religion, they resisted this Maoist acculturation by secretly continuing to practice their rituals, or collectively expressing their dissatisfaction in the course of village festivals.[16] The Maoist so-called 'cultural revolution' was a failure in this area, and reinforced Kham-Magar perceptions of their 'traditional cultural identity' as something to be defended, even at the risk of reifying a culture that hitherto was anything but monolithic.

We have seen that Kham-Magar identity was not much politicised before the 1990s, but ethnic feeling gradually crystallised around the notion of territory through the experience of the insurgency. The Maoist base area, with its symbolic occupation of the Kham-Magar country throughout the Sija campaign, the creation of the 'special district' and finally the proclamation of Magarant could not but reinforce a general trend. Indeed the notion of territory became more and more essential to the definition of ethnic groups in general: initially designated as *jāti,* a term that distinguished them from Hindu *jāt,* ethnic groups became *janajāti* ('people's castes') after the 1990 popular uprising; *janajāti* was then translated into English by 'nationality,' an expression that was in turn translated into Nepali as *rāstra,* designating precisely a 'political territory' (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009). The territorial dimension of this conceptual evolution was attuned to the declaration of the decade of Indigenous Rights by the United Nations in 1993 and to the accompanying notion of autochthony. This historical process supported a multi-national and ethnic concept of nation, and raised the question of federalism as one of the main bones of contention in writing the constitution of the new Republic.

Following the great tradition of socialist propaganda, the Nepali Maoists made extensive use of the 'model' tactic. The village of Thabang was raised to this status, and the Kham-Magar community was given the privilege of representing the whole nation in the march towards a bright future. I would suggest that by virtue of being a 'model' for the nation, those chosen are given an opportunity to become national actors *through their very specificity*: the tactic includes its own potential subversion.

Observation of the annual village festival in honor of the local god offers a useful entry point, because the festival's stated aim is precisely to represent the community to its own members and to the outside world. In June 2010, in Thabang, the festival revealed how the revolutionary communist party then in power sought to control the authority that is the deity (and the underlying clan organisation) by reforming certain ritual procedures; these attempts resulted in heated debates between the different components of the population (older women, activists of the first hour, informed young villagers) whose metaphysical recognition by the local god was just as important as their political recognition within the Nepali nation. The fervour of these debates evoked the emotional charge involved in any attempt to redefine 'we.' Contrary to expectations, these debates about ancestral rites were less oriented towards the past than to the future. At stake was the image of their collective self that the villagers were trying to present to others and to themselves: a progressive community that aspires to be part of the outside world – thanks in part to tourism but also to its increasingly numerous links with foreign countries through emigration – without losing its specificity; that is to say, what makes the Kham-Magars feel unique and therefore irreplaceable. We can now answer the question concerning the role of this community in the insurrection: although they have been an instruments of Maoist strategy, they have also been and still are – at times heroic – actors in history.

Conclusion

I chose to address the issue of political emancipation through the case study of the Kham-Magar minority because it was the geographical, political and symbolic center of the Maoist armed struggle, and because my familiarity with this community long predates the insurrection. However, it should be clear that all the Nepalese minorities, whether ethnic groups from the hills or castes from the plains, participated in the liberation of the country from the yoke of monarchy and the dominant culture of the Hindu hills. The underlying motivations of these minorities vary according to their own historical experience, but it was under the leadership of the Maoist movement that, for the first time in Nepal's history, they challenged the dominance of the upper-caste elite. The violent uprising of the people in the Tarai plains in 2007 imposed the multi-national model on the political field (ICG 2012).

The exemplary case of a small hill community, the 'crucible of the revolution,' has shown that ethnic frustration was not the reason why the Kham-Magars became involved in the Maoist movement. Their frustration was above all political and economic. Instead, the movement contributed both intentionally (through its tactic of allying itself with Nepal's ethnic fronts in the second phase of the war) and incidentally (following the failure of its cultural revolution) to forging Kham-Magar ethnicity; that is, politicising a cultural identity that used to be limited more or less to the confines of the village. Now, the villagers no longer follow their ancestral strategy of avoiding the outside world, which they used to perceive as a potential threat. They are instead engaged with the world in the hope of being a part of it on an equal footing, as long as they can imagine the future offering them new opportunities (schooling, urbanisation, migration, development). In this new positioning, their growing need to know about their culture and to debate its content in a world that they see as growing larger and providing more elements of comparison, needs to be taken seriously.

It is important, however, to follow Terence Turner in clearly distinguishing two very different conceptions of culture separated by only a fine line in political contexts where local communities come under stress. The village festival in which cultural issues were debated within the community showed that the 'capacity for culture is a collective power emergent in human social interaction' (Turner 1993: 426). This capacity needs to be nurtured and protected. In contrast, when culture is merged with ethnic identity, it is doomed to be haunted by 'repressive demands for communal conformity' and exclusion. Indeed, any claim for identity is, ultimately, a way of claiming power and status, without saying so explicitly.

The village of Thabang was the only one in the country that boycotted the elections for the new Constituent Assembly in November 2013 – an indication that villagers had withdrawn their trust from the Maoists in power. As in 1985, they followed Mohan Baidya's faction, which claimed to remain faithful to the revolution. For this small community of farmers, economic redistribution and cultural identity are two faces of the same coin, and therefore of the same fight for emancipation.

References

Bulag, U. E. 2000. From Inequality to Difference: Colonial Contradictions of Class and Ethnicity in 'Socialist' China. *Cultural Studies* 14: **3/4**, 531-561.

Bianco, L. 2005. *Jaqueries et Revolution dans la Chine du XXème siècle.* Paris: Editions de la Martinière.

Burghart, R. 1993. The Political Culture of the Panchayat Democracy. In *Nepal in the Nineties* (ed.) M. Hutt, 1-13. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cailmail, B. 2008-9. A History of Maoism since its Foundation by Mohan Bikram Singh. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* **33:4**, 11-38.

de Sales, A. 1993. When the miners came to light: the ethnogenesis of the Chantyal. In *Nepal Past and Present* (ed.) G. Toffin, 91-97. Delhi, Sterling.

_____ 2009. From Ancestral Conflicts to Local Empowerment: Two Narratives from a Nepalese Community. *Dialectical Anthropology* **33**, 365-381.

_____ 2010. Pride and Prejudice: an Encounter between Shamans and Maoists. In *In Hope and in Fear* (eds) P. Manandhar & D. Seddon, 123-133. New Delhi: Adroit Publishers.

_____ 2013. Thabang: The Crucible of Revolution. In *Revolution in Nepal. History and anthropology of the Nepal People's War* (ed.) M. Lecomte-Tilouine, 164-210. New Delhi: SAGE.

Gaborieau, M. 1982. Les rapports de classe dans l'idéologie officielle du Népal. *Purushartha* 6, 251-290.

Gellner, D. 2001. From Group Rights to Individual Rights and Back: Nepalese Struggles with Culture and Equality. In *Culture and the Anthropology of Rights* (eds) J.

Cowan, N. Dembour & R. Wilson, 177-200. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ 2007. Caste, Ethnicity and Inequality in Nepal. *Economic and Political Weekly* **42: 20**, 1823-1828.

Haupt, G. & M. Lowy 1974. *Les marxistes et la question nationale, 1848-1914.* Paris: Maspero.

International Crisis Group. 2011. *Nepal: Identity Politics and Federalism* (available on-line at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/nepal/199%20Nepal%20-%20Identity%20Politics%20and%20Federalism.pdf, accessed 24 July 2015).

Höfer, A. 1979. *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal. A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854*. Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagners.

Lawoti, M. 2003. Maoists and Minorities: Overlap of Interests or the case of exploitation? *Studies in Nepali History and Society* **8: 1**, 67-97.

Lecomte-Tilouine, M. 2009. Ruling Social Groups—From Species to Nations: Reflections on Changing Conceptualizations of Caste and Ethnicity in Nepal. In *Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia* (ed.) D. Gellner, 291-336.Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Levine, N. 1987. Caste, State and Ethnic Boundaries in Nepal. *Journal of Asian Studies* **46**, 71-88.

Middleton, T. &Schneiderman, S 2008. Reservations, Federalism and the Politics of Recognition in Nepal. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 39-45.

Ogura, K. 2008. *Seeking State Power: The Communist Party of Nepal (maoist).* Berlin: Berghof series. Resistance/Liberation Movements and Transition to Politics (available on-line at: http://www.berghof-center.org/, accessed on 4 December 2012).

Pettigrew, J. & A. Shah 2009. Windows into a Revolution: Ethnographies of Maoisim in South Asia. *Dialectical Anthropology* **33: 3/4**, 225-221.

Pfaff-Czarnecka, J. 1997. Vestiges and Visions: Cultural Change in the Process of Nation Building in Nepal. In *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom* (eds) D. Gellner, J. Pfaff-Czarnecka & J. Welpton, 419-470. Amsterdam: Hardwood Academic Publishers.

_____ 1999. Debating the State of the Nation: Ethnicization of Politics in Nepal —A Position Paper. In *Ethnic Futures. The State and Identity Politics in Asia* (eds) J. Pfaff-Czarnecka et al., 41-98. Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE.

Pahari, A. K. 2010. Unequal Rebellions: the continuum of 'People's War' in Nepal and India. In *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal* (eds) M. Lawoti and A. K. Pahari, 195-215. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Srinivas, M. N. 1952. *Religion and Society Amongst the Coorgs of South Asia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Scott, James. 1979. Revolution in the Revolution: Peasants and Commissars. *Theory and Society* 7: **1/2**, 97-134.

_____ 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed. An Anarachist History of Upland SouthEast Asia.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Stiller, L. F. 1973. *The Rise of the House of Gurkha*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

Tamang, M. 2009. Tamang Activism, History, and Territorial Consciousness. In *Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia* (ed.) D. Gellner, 269-290.Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Turber, T. 1993. Anthropology and Multiculturalism. *Cultural Anthropology* 8: **4**, 411-429.

Whelpton, J. 2005. *A History of Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

About the author

Anne de Sales is an anthropologist who holds the position of Senior Researcher in the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). Her publications on Nepal include a monograph on an ethnic minority, the Kham-Magar, and numerous articles on shamanic practices and oral literature. Since 1999 her publications have addressed a range of anthropological issues concerning the impact of the Maoist insurrection on rural Nepal. Her e-mail address is anne.desales@gmail.com.

Notes

1 Over 37% of the population and 59 ethnic groups were registered in 1990.

2 It must be stressed, following Uradyn Bulag, that both class and ethnicity (and the accompanying notions of nation and nationality) are Western ideas that have been introduced into specific historical and cultural situations. These 'irreconcilable concepts' are ways of 'thinking the political' (Valentin-Yves Mudimbe quoted in Bulag 2000: 534) that came to dominate the contemporary debate. This reminder does not necessarily imply that these concepts are irrelevant to an understanding of the Nepali situation, but aims rather to draw attention to the *historical experience* of the concerned social actors.

3 A couple of years after the end of the People's War, a Constituent Assembly was elected in 2008. The Maoist Party was the largest, with 220 seats out of 575, and its leader Prachanda was Prime Minister. Due to its failure to draft a new constitution, the Constituent Assembly was dissolved on 12 May 2012 after a tenure of 4 years.

4 A number of recent studies have traced the history of Nepal from the perspective of its ethnic diversity such as Pfaff-Czarnecka (1997, 1999); Gellner (2001, 2007); Lecomte-Tilouine (2009).

5 Traditional Hindu society is divided into four ranks or *varna* (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras). The male members of the three higher varna undergo an initiation or spiritual rebirth, hence the expression 'Twice-born.'

6 After Indian independence, the law punished caste discrimination, but the caste system, seen as integral to Hinduism, was not abolished. In Nepal, by contrast, the caste system was officially abolished in 1963.

7 Eight 'classes' accounted for different age groups (children and youth), joint trainees (retired soldiers), gender (female) and socio-economic classes (peasants, workers, graduate students).

8 This is why their number can only be estimated.

9 Several publications retrace the political history of the communist movement since the 1950s. For a general overview see Welpton (2005). For a more specific study, see Ogura (2008).

10 The Communist Party of Nepal was founded in Calcutta April 29, 1949. It participated in the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1951 and was banned between 1952 and 1956, then again during the Panchayat years (1962-1990).

11 For Barman's biography, see de Sales (2011).

12 For Mohan Bikram Singh's biography, see Cailmail (2008).

13 According to communist dogma, the given conditions of a society ('objective conditions') must be matched by the level of consciousness ('subjective conditions') that the oppressed classes have of their oppression.

14 This question is developed in de Sales (2013).

Notes

15 For Lenin, the democratic revolution includes national aspirations as one of its elements, but they are supported only insofar as they might contribute to the class struggle (Haupt and Lowy 1974).

16 I have given examples of such conflicts in two earlier articles. See de Sales (2009, 2010).