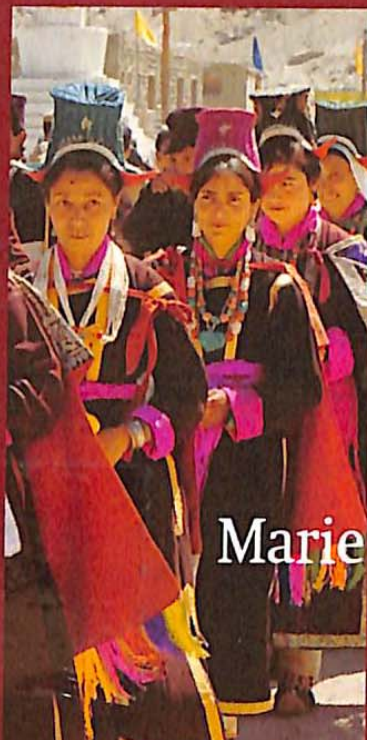


OXFORD



Ethnic Revival and Religious Turmoil

*Identities and Representations
in the Himalayas*



edited by
Marie Lecomte-Tilouine
Pascale Dollfus

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Introduction

MARIE LECOMTE-TILOUINE, PASCALE DOLLFUS

The multi-ethnic and multi-caste communities of the Himalayan countries constitute the theatre of a deep revival of ethnic and religious identity. Although group taxonomy is an old exercise in this area, it has found new modes of expression, particularly among the so-called 'tribal groups'. The theme is extremely broad and is of primordial importance because of its potential and indeed actual political ramifications.

This volume gathers the communications and discussions of a workshop held in Meudon, France in 1998 and entitled: *Representation of the Self, Representation of the Other in the Himalayas: Space, History, Culture*. All the participants chose to treat this question from the inside, that is the relations between different Himalayan groups. As a prelude to this corpus, we would like to bring a complement dealing with the external aspect of this relation where the scholar is the *Self* and his object of study, the *Other*. This apparently decentred complement lies in fact at the very heart of this volume. It is made of contributions of western scholars, most of them anthropologists, presenting the way a specific group, articulates, constructs and instrumentalizes its relation with its Others. The legitimacy of this approach has been extensively discussed since the last few decades.

One of the major criticisms addressed at social anthropology concerns the nature of the analytical procedure that a foreigner, a

westerner to be more precise, applies to social facts which are by nature foreign to him and which would thus be translated into categories that are specific to his culture. Thus the notion of ethnic group is a western construction which has no exact equivalent in the Himalayan region, where people refer to their groupings as castes, tribes, and so on. This criticism goes against the Kantian theory of the universality of understanding categories and the universality of man developed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment—a theory which was specifically applied to social anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss as a condition rendering its existence possible. Lévi-Strauss' response to his critics admits that a residual meaning is certainly left aside as a result of the anthropological analysis. For him however, '... those who pretend that the experience of the Other—individual or collective—is by essence incommunicable' take shelter behind 'a new obscurantism' (1977, p. 10). He shows that this argument, taken to its logical conclusion, implies the impossibility of understanding the Other, and even of dialogue, since any dialogue implies a minimum of identity (1977, p. 330)¹.

More recently, another criticism directed at anthropology, and especially at its western tenants, has been formulated by Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*². The argument, in brief, is that any discourse on the Other is a form of domination/subjection and is made possible by this domination. If the author's book itself is an obvious counter-example to the second part of the argumentation, even the first part is open to objection although it certainly contains an important truth. If considered true, this assertion should be generally applicable to all discourses on the Other, be they internal or external to a named/given group, especially in the case of such a vague regrouping as 'Oriental'. One arrives at the famous paradox of the Cretan liar who says he is a Cretan (the Oriental *scholar* who says he is Oriental). In no way could the discourse of an Oriental about his group be an exception to this general rule. And it may well even be that it implies and leads to a much more pregnant relationship of domination, because internal alienation is more difficult to escape, almost always being more legitimate and closer to the subjects. As the first criticism examined, this would lead to the end of any production which is not introspection. Even this egoistic form of knowledge could be considered as a domination of a

particular kind of thought on others (the non-published thoughts) or could be viewed ultimately as constructed on a relation of domination, that characterizes the building of the Ego.

If these criticisms constitute important warnings about the possible drifts which may occur in the social sciences in general and in social anthropology in particular, their argumentation leads rapidly to a contradiction; they may be viewed as an ideological expression of the Other's illegitimacy of studying and speaking for the Self. They thus constitute signs of 'the end of Man', as announced by Michel Foucault in his book *Les mots et les choses*, 'Man is an invention which the archaeology of our thought easily shows to be of recent date. And may be near the end'³. Commenting on this assertion, Edmund Leach seems to misunderstand its meaning when he tries to develop it from a biological and sociological point of view. He reaches the conclusion that biologically, humans constitute one unique species but that social institutions distinguish the similar and dissimilar within humanity. He curiously proposes to accept diversity without aiming at social equality as a conclusion⁴. On the other hand, Foucault's theory is that social sciences could emerge only at the point when Man became an end in itself for men, having declared with Nietzsche that God is dead. For the author, this first murder can only be followed by the killing of the murderer.

Although Foucault's statement might seem intuitive, recent developments in the social sciences seem somehow to turn him into a prophet. Invariably the aim and legitimacy of social sciences, social anthropology in particular, is questioned. Ethnicity is by nature a process which emphasizes particularisms. It anchors identity in a self-constructed and overall particular model in which universality has no place: it is thus that one human group is ascribed one distinctive language, territory, or general style of life and any cultural trait shared with another group is seen as emerging from a common origin. Of course the relationships which are thus established between communities are selected and invented—notably by the dominant members of the group—on the basis of choices which can easily be read as political. To take a Himalayan example, the Tharus who speak an Indian language are thus assimilated into the 'Mongol tribes' on the basis of their physical type, despite their language. They represent more than one million individuals and

obviously bring a greater weight to the Mongol organization. But their assimilation follows equally the logic of the Mongol ideology which views the Hindus and the Indians (that they call the Aryas) as dominating groups which cannot therefore encompass dominated groups like the Tharus or the Dalits, lest it complicates the scheme.

Nor has social anthropology been left aside from this general phenomenon as the development of communalism within it shows. In the United States, black studies or women's studies are mostly done by blacks or women, and in France, regional studies appear to follow the same rule. Parallel to the increasing epistemological difficulty of accepting identity, which alone allows the study of Others, the interest in the Others is now waning.

Our discipline developed out of the encounter with foreign cultures, a phenomenon accelerated by the European discovery of the New World, but with almost certainly known antecedents, such as the travelogues of the Chinese pilgrims in India and the Himalayas, Alberuni's description of India or Julius Caesar's invaluable observations on Gaul, to cite a few examples.

Distantiation is peculiar to anthropology. As Lévi-Strauss clearly states in *Structural Anthropology* (1967: 360)⁵, 'While sociology seeks to advance the social science of the observer, anthropology seeks to advance that of what is observed—either by endeavouring to reproduce, in its description of strange and remote societies, the standpoint of the native themselves, or by broadening its subject so as to cover the observer's society but at the same time to evolve a frame of reference based on ethnographical experience, and independent both of the observer and of what he is observing.' Indeed if distantiation does not erase a stereotyped vision of one specific culture, resulting from the culture of origin of the observer, it surely aims at a greater degree of objectivity in its approach. Freud even recommended that analysts should not treat a patient whose personal interests were close to their own, for fear of being caught inside their discourse and losing their analytical faculties.

However, distance is not necessarily geographical (or historical). While anthropology is no longer limited to the analysis of 'strange and remote societies', but tends to take an ever greater interest in the interpretation of the observer's own society, distantiation re-

mains a guiding principle. The scholar, whatever his origin, should, according to Emile Durkheim's famous recommendation, 'treat social facts like things' ('traiter les faits sociaux comme des choses'), he should '(. . .) embark upon the study of them by adopting the principle that one is entirely ignorant of what they are, that their characteristic properties, like the unknown causes upon which they depend, cannot be discovered by even the most careful form of introspection'. Durkheim further specifies that, '(. . .) the representation that we have been able to make of them in the course of our lives, since they have been made without method and uncritically, lack any scientific value and must be discarded'⁶.

Indeed, objectivation of one own's group and values seems to be a difficult exercise as impassioned reactions are quite impossible to prevent, '(. . .) the transition is difficult to operate between the objectivity for which we strive when we look at communities from outside, and the situation in which we are placed, willingly or not, inside our own community'⁷. Beyond the difficulty conferred by the internal position of the scholar to the objectivation during the observation part, the necessary involvement of the subject in his object of study adds another obstacle to the difficult imperative of dissociation between the scholar and the politician advocated by Max Weber in the presentation of results and teaching⁸. Without distanciation, the master may well become a chief rather than a professor. Ultimately, it seems that it is adhesion which leads from science to politics. In our post-modern period, one would certainly have to modify the definition of the object of social anthropology given by Lévi-Strauss, in his introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss (p. XXIX)—'Any society different from our own is an object, any group of our own society other than our group is an object, any use of this group to which we do not adhere, is an object'⁹. Any adhesion to a group or to a use prevent the possibility of its objectivation by any subject. Engagement can be reified and raised as an object of study but as a personal disposition, it is certainly an obstacle to the analytical faculties of the observer.

As for the aim of our discipline, the new focus on the Self seems to advocate two paths, which are indeed fashionable but of little help to build new understandings of the functioning of social facts: deconstructivism and fiction¹⁰.

Besides these trends which are noticeable in theoretical and general approaches, regional anthropology is still constructivist and less affected by the crisis. The Himalayan region studied in this volume embraces two distinct sets: the kingdom of Nepal and the Indian Himalayas (to which northern areas of Paksitan are added). Nepalese society, which is the focus of this book, seems recently to have witnessed a counter process to that which was imposed on local communities. From a period of integration, which was certainly also a subordination, it seems that the country has entered into a process of disintegration. This morphological dislocation is undoubtedly due to political factors—the loss of a legitimate central, unique and ultimate power with the 1990 revolution—and more generally, the result of the crisis of caste ideology. The process of Hinduization under which political power had placed the country since the Middle Ages is now perceived as alienation among the tribal groups. At the same time the high castes themselves are tending to break their traditional links with their artisanal low castes, contributing to the global imbalance. Politically inexpressible because the Nepalese law forbids parties based on ethnic or religious basis¹¹, ethnic feelings find a means of expression in different political parties, hence masking the real problems. Simultaneously, caste groups tend to organize themselves on the same model, developing a kind of ethnic consciousness.

The concept of ethnic group and its derived forms has been greatly discussed. Here we shall use it to designate a group of people who recognize and share the same ethnonym (generally in the case of Himalayas, an endogamous group which has the idea of a common origin). The Nepalese territory was closed to foreigners until 1951. It has never been colonized by westerners, but, according to most ethnic thinkers, the colonization has come from Indian caste groups. Since the revolution of 1990, ethnic minorities mobilized themselves to fight what they call *bahunvad*, or brahmanocracy. Their aim is to form scholars issued from their ranks to fight the Brahmins on their own ground: history, speculation, politics.

Hazardous as it may be, the ethnic revival movement can also be viewed as a kind of Renaissance. Books, leaflets and journals have flourished. Debates are organized daily. Dance and song performances form part of the meetings. Young intellectuals wander

through villages in search of their traditions. If these symptoms are often judged critically by westerners as 'the beginning of the end', that is folklorization, we are forced to admit that this is also a fascinating post-colonialist period, where people are starting to consider themselves as active, thinking agents. The danger, of course, is also great, because the group's thinkers have a double legitimacy, being both scholars and members of the group they study. Their discourse is endowed with a truth that cannot or should not be discussed. As part of the group, they know better than any foreigner and as scholars, the other members of the group lack the conceptual tools to engage in a real debate with them. Furthermore, their discourse responds to a certain demand. If we could generalize this last assertion to all writings, it is clear in this case that the enterprise is praised by the group, that it responds to a crucial need, as can be understood, for instance, by the letters of thanks to the Magar historians published in ethnic journals of this group. The enthusiasm generated by their works among their 'group' raises several questions: will these works be less partial than what was produced by the Brahmanocracy? What will the relations between this new type of scholar and the western scholars be? People understand intuitively that the latter do not work for them, that their writings will be inaccessible to them—written in a foreign language and aiming to fuel a discipline in which the object of studies are depersonalized. Indeed, the depersonalization is clearly perceptible in the way that some western scholars tend to erase or falsify toponyms and even peoples' names, as something indecent¹², whereas local scholars mention them precisely, thereby attaching an importance to the subjects. In the same way, Himalayan scholars render a constant homage to village culture as expressed in songs and poems, a subjective material much neglected by westerners, in contrast to ritual recitations and myths for which the opposite is true. Through their focus, these indigenous works are extremely useful as they put in perspective an approach often thought of as universal and unquestionable, as well as our own taboos—such as the question of the origin of groups. But to give them a higher status¹³ denotes the same post-colonialist attitude as ignoring or despising them because of their perspective, of their evident instrumentalization or the way the argumentation is organized.

The ethnic movements thus question the role of western scholars and the utilization of their texts by ethnic thinkers, an appellation which includes also those westerners who speak *for* the group studied and not *about* them. A dual attitude emerges.

The western scholar is used as an expert, a counsellor, and rejected as someone whose work is not 'useful'—'what is the use of your writings for us?'. In contrast, in Nepal, the attitude towards the most ancient western writings is quite different, being often the only sources about local groups and history, or the only sources which have not been written by the dominant local groups. Thus in Nepal, the first scholars are quoted without any questioning on the conditions of their production and their ideological purposes. It is certainly so because their writings serve the cause of tribal groups and fit well in the present context. Indeed, an obvious anti-Brahmin stance is apparent in the major book of Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal*, as well as a suspicion about the Rajput origin of the Nepalese royal dynasties. The situation is more contrasted in Ladakh. In fact, the earliest accounts of the region offered by British administrators and scientists, which reflect 'Tibeto-centricity' describing Ladakh as a Buddhist Land ('a Little Tibet') and ignoring or dismissing the Muslims as foreigners, not to say impostors, have been the object of much debate.

For obvious reasons, this view largely shared by scholars until recently is appreciated by the Buddhist activists who rely on it, but is criticized by Muslim Ladakhis to whom Ladakhi identity is denied. Siddiq Wahid¹⁴ goes as far as to claim that these earliest western writings, reinforced by a concentration of academic studies on Buddhists and Buddhist religion in Ladakh, are responsible for the conflict which opposes Buddhists, Muslims and Christians in Ladakh and led to the recent anti-Muslim boycott in 1989. He asserts that the Ladakhis have been 'corrupted' by those westerners who have confused ethnicity with religion and accuses 'intellectual colonialism—and its tenants who victimised the Ladakhis, particularly the Muslims, for having succeeded in planting the idea into their heads that 'being Ladakhi is to be Buddhist' or in other words that 'the idea of a Ladakhi Muslim was inadmissible'.

Ultimately, previous writings may be fully corrected by ethnic scholars. The most striking example of such an exercise is the recent

English translation of Bernard Pignède's book about the Gurungs of Nepal¹⁵. In its new form, the text has been augmented with new comparative data resulting from an inquiry made some 25 years later, which is a good and valid initiative. It is puzzling to know that the principal informant of the late anthropologist has been asked by the editors to add his own comments to the text, in the form of notes. These are extremely controversial, both in form and in content, as their purpose is not to engage in a post modern discussion but obviously to re-establish the truth about the tribe. It goes still further with the surprising initiative taken by the editors to simply delete from the text passages displeasing for the Gurung's, for instance, people's names, passages which, to be honest, the Gurungs should evaluate themselves. This edition is a good example of what can happen to a text when written *for* a specific group and underlines the crucial role of (mental) distantiation in the free exercise of research. Ethnic 'dictatorship' gives rise to a new type of scholar, whose task is not to understand reality but to judge it, as part of ethnic tradition or not, as authentic or not, as good or not¹⁶. This kind of literature flourishes in the Himalayas. Western scholars may have some responsibility for it, as studying the most remote ('pure?') ethnic groups has certainly been initiated by them.

In such a context, can or should the anthropologist remain neutral? Should he/she remain an external observer, refuse to act as a consultant or as a policy-maker? Should he/she accept or not to attend ethnic or nationalist meetings, to speak there or to write in their publications? Should he/she engage him or herself in the cause of the group? If any clear-cut answer is problematic, it is obvious that burying one's head in sand cannot be preferred to an engaged attitude. Analysis requires and causes distance. Once the analytical tools have been built up, a reciprocal debate is not only mandatory because of the post-colonialist period, but necessary if there is to be progress in our field. All this is only possible within a democratic context. In a country like Bhutan, where the authorization to do research is given under royal approbation, the scholar's freedom of speech and objectivity are thus restricted to the politically correct. It is therefore difficult or impossible to criticize the policy adopted for the southern minorities or the governmental action to preserve Bhutanese 'culture', in the last Buddhist kingdom. . .

In the Indian Western Himalayas, group identity has followed a different history. There, the absence of ethnonyms and of the idea, prevailing among the Nepalese ethnic groups, of a common origin has given rise to communalism. In Ladakh for example, specific myths of origin or of village foundation are almost absent. The term Ladakhi or Ladakh-pa only means 'people of Ladakh'. To this vague definition corresponds a no less vague territory, whose borders are not even clear for the local activists. As M. van Beek¹⁷ (2000: 173) clearly shows 'the proclamation of tribes and other "racial", "ethnic" or "community" classifications failed to find a shared identity that could capture the identifications of people in Ladakh'. In such a context, religious identity has become prevalent, being widely used as the effective principle of classification, a heritage from British preoccupations and reflecting the British perception of the essence of Indian society: caste and religious community. In such a view, commonly shared by scholars until recently, 'real' Ladakhis are properly Buddhists, while Baltis, Purigpas or Bedas are treated as Muslims.

But Ladakh, being a part of India, has also known a phenomenon specific to this country which established a special status for the Scheduled Tribes and Castes and reservation policy. In 1989, eight Scheduled Tribes were thus officially recognized among the population: some of the names referred to regional identifications (e.g. Balti from Baltistan, Changpa from Changthang, or Purigpa from Purig), others to social or occupational criteria (Mon, Beda), or religious affiliation (Bot/Boto). To benefit from this ST Certificate was a temptation for it brought numerous advantages in terms of education, government employment, loans and economic assistance. All those who were excluded considered the measure to be discriminatory. It is thus that the Arghon Sunni Muslims of Ladakh, the offsprings of a Ladakhi mothers converted to Islam and a Muslim fathers from outside, felt very disappointed to be denied this status under the pretext that they had Kashmiri or Punjabi ancestors. Moreover, this status was given to Dogra Arghons (of mixed Ladakhi and Dogra parentage) and Nepali Arghons (of mixed Nepali and Ladakhi parentage).

This collective volume aims to present research in the making and the plurality of approaches to identity phenomena. Through the comments that follow each contribution, we have chosen to

preserve as much as possible, the interactive form and dynamics of the gathering which led to this book¹⁸. We tried to encourage contributions covering a wide geographical range, from eastern Nepal to Gilgit, in northern Pakistan, and treating the subject from different perspectives: anthropology, history, geography and literature.

A similar recent publication focussing on Nepal¹⁹ has been much criticized by a local scholar and ethnic activist²⁰. Besides the numerous aggressive remarks directed towards the high Hindu castes (embodied in the person of one Nepalese contributor), his arguments may well apply to this volume as well and may be summarized as thus: most of the authors are Europeans; the groups included in the study do not adequately represent the diverse features and aspirations of Nepalese society; the book should be made accessible to the indigenous people, by translating it into Nepali and even into the different mother tongues spoken in Nepal. This author offers in this review his personal idea of the anthropologist's task: '... all theory, fact should come from the participant and [the] observer should reflect them because they cannot represent them'.

Although we do not deny that a specific focus on a group may have important consequences because it will benefit from this publicity via tourism, foreign aid, and more generally via the interest it will raise, these are side-effects of the social sciences which are not directly under the control of individuals.

A collective book dealing with a specific geographical area does not aim to represent equally (according to their statistical importance, or to their ideological importance) all the groups inhabiting it. Such an ambition would be totally utopian—as would be the translation of the volume in all the languages spoken in Nepal²¹. As any science, anthropology can develop at one time a dynamic of questioning about one specific group or phenomena, which acts as a 'object à penser' (a thing to think of) susceptible to highlight other groups or phenomena which are not the immediate subject of enquiry. Furthermore, collective works are always dependent on circumstances and this volume does not contradict this general rule²². As for the task of the anthropologist, as defined by K.B. Bhattachan and taken here as a widely spread new conception of our discipline, it is obviously a utilitarian and subordinating point of view, turning the scholar into a spokesman, a mouthpiece. The main

difficulty for such an anthropologist would be to treat equally all theories and facts gathered about one specific group. This is quite an ambitious task; even if we imagine that this could be done on a small scale, the result would not help the reader much, since he would be left alone to analyze materials himself. Here again, reacting to this point of view does not mean that analysis should mask the data of facts and local theories, and that our task is to reduce cultural production and social facts to a disembodied result such as an equation or empty theory. The suggestion of Krishna B. Bhattachan reminds us that field data as well as interpretation and theoretical abstraction should be offered to the reader because they form material which others may interpret differently²³.

Identity and ethnicity being increasingly more being studied by social anthropologists in parallel to the increasing uses of ethnicity in the political debates in several countries. In a recent publication, Luc de Heusch analyses the modern critics of the concept of ethnic group. He shows how Frederik Barth²⁴, when rejecting the idea that ethnic groups are definable by some total inventory of cultural traits that their members share, neglected the heritage of a socio-cultural system, which, changing and fluctuating as it may be, should nevertheless be named. In contrast to those who think that ethnic groups were only produced by colonial administration, he argues that it is the result of a classificatory thought, which is much older than bureaucracy²⁵. In Nepal, ethnicity has been absorbed into a Hindu model of caste system, crystallized in the legal code of 1854 where each group was named and ranked in a linear order. But this ancient and constraining superstructure never erased the specificity of the ethnic groups incorporated in it as this volume will show.

The rejection of the Other's construction of the Self finds a striking example in the first contribution by Michael Hutt. In the novel *Sumnima*, written by B.P. Koirala, a famous Brahman political leader, the Brahman hero revalues the values of his own culture while staying in the wildness of a Kirant tribe. In this perception of the Other, the Kirant is a noble savage who incarnates opposite values. The most obvious example of this phenomenon lies in the fact that the Kirants are described in the novel as a matrilineal group, a purely imaginative feature. As noted by Martin Gaenzle in his discussion of the paper: 'the Other is not taken as different in its

own right, but rather it is seen as an inversion of the Self'. The Other's reaction to the novel was no less radical, since the book was publicly burnt by the Kirants who rejected the image imposed on them without commenting much on the reasons of their act. One of them may be that B.P. Koirala found his inspiration partly in the corpus of oral tradition of the Kirants. This corpus, called the Mundhun, has been recently written down and is held in great sanctity by the Kirants, who commonly claim that they follow 'the Mundhun religion'. B.P. Koirala's brahmanic Mundhun was probably seen as a sacrilege, as can be understood by the comparison made between his novel and the *Satanic verses*.

The relation with the Other was carried to the other extreme by the Khasa rulers of the Middle Ages. Indeed the repetitive worship of Matsyendranath, the protector of the Kathmandu Valley, by the sovereigns of western Nepal, suggests a strong identification with the Other, despite the geographical distance and the absence of known links between the two royalties. William Douglas attributes this identity to the fact that the Khasa rulers of western Nepal were Buddhists during the Middle Ages and used to identify themselves with Lokeshvara. Now the Kathmandu Matsyendranath is also known as Lokeshvara. Thus, we could argue that a process of identification and unification between distant societies could be realized through religious geography and identification between gods and kings, forming a network of identities overwhelming the realms. But Véronique Bouillier's comments show that if this relation existed, it was not the only motivation for the long journeys the kings of western Nepal undertook on several occasions upto the Kathmandu valley. Besides praying to Matsyendranath, they also paid homage to Hindu gods. This observation does not invalidate the general remark made by W. Douglas: '. . . it is clear that the Khasa observances were not a claim to sovereignty in the valley of Nepal, but part of their own dynastic ritual . . .'. It only complicates the model, which is attractive, but should be explored further as for its origins and implications. The Khasa empire collapsed at the end of the 14th century and is documented by few documents only, but similar instances taken from neighbouring and/ or more recent kingdoms could certainly bring a deeper understanding of what it meant to worship your neighbour's god.

After these interesting incursions into literature and history, the following contributions come from social anthropologists. This series begins with an important article by David N. Gellner who examines how global egalitarianism and the multiculturalism it implies faces specific difficulties when applied to the Newar group, which is quite multiform according to the points of view taken into consideration: at a national level, it is one of the 69 or 61 groups (castes and ethnic groups) which are said to form the Nepalese nation, at the local level, it is a community made up of several distinct castes and finally at the caste level, it is again subdivided. Gellner notes: '... the multiculturalist ideal is taken up as far as the largest cultural unit that can support it'. As a result of this complex structure, ethnic activists debate about what the Newars are: a nation, a group or ethnic group (*jāti*), a tribe, nationality or ethnic group (*janajāti*), or a community? They deplore the numerous caste organizations which have developed inside their group using the very same words as the nationalists when speaking about ethnic associations. In the former case, it is said to weaken ethnic solidarity, in the latter, the national unity. The double approach to the identity phenomena undertaken by Gellner, which allies field observation and an examination of the written production of the members of the group allows him to distinguish two levels: the views and choices of the activists and the lay majority. This leads him to an important criticism of Taylor's book and a general fundamental remark: 'By ignoring the distinction it allows the activists' definitions to be imposed on the others, denying the latter the choice the activists themselves had'. To this first level of objection, Gérard Toffin in his discussion remarks that gender should be added, since ethnic activism is male dominated.

Johanna Pfaff-Czarnecka focuses on the shift of meanings of established symbols and the construction of ethnic markers which is described as a reactive process based on power relationships between groups. The shifting of meaning would follow the shifting of power: 'The very fact that specific symbols have been associated with the former power arrangements can induce social actors to challenge them publicly, once the power shifts'. The shifts are often radical: previous symbols of unity turn rapidly into symbols of oppression. Such is the case of the Dasai, the national festival of

Nepal which is now read as celebrating the victory of the Aryas over the Mongols (i.e. the high caste Hindus over the tribes). The discussion shows that the shifting of meanings as part of political action (in the exemplary case of Dasai) is conditioned by the position of the different tribal groups to the central power—although all the tribal groups share the same discourse. The boycott of Dasai by the Tamang leaders is not really revolutionary since this group has never had in the past a central role in this huge state ritual. When the Magar leaders adopt the same attitude or discourse, this is a real shift of meaning, so radical indeed that it is not yet accepted by the great majority of the group. Here again, discourse of the leaders and exemplary practices should be distinguished from the praxis of the group.

This very use of 'group' to designate the Nepalese Hill Brahmins, is criticized by Gil Daryn who claims that Bahuns do not see themselves as a group but are seen as a group by outsiders on the basis of the common type of relation they have with them. His approach, deeply influenced by Barth and Eriksen, led him to define the Bahuns as a category with a dormant identity which may well evolve, under external pressure, into an ethnic group, transforming 'the category into a politically active group'. In his discussion, Phillippe Ramirez shows that the kinship structure of the Bahuns determines their identity, an identity which is dissociated from culture. These two views may be discussed. First, Daryn's Barthian conception of the Bahuns raises several problems, notably the assumption that they do not form a *group* but a *category*. Now a category is a class of elements sharing the same nature. In fact this last definition applies well to the Bahuns who would very commonly define themselves on the basis of their particular nature within humanity, describing themselves as 'human gods' or 'gods on earth'. On the other hand it does not fit with the Barthian definition of the Bahuns as unlinked elements defined by their relations to the Others. Indeed, if the Bahuns are conceived as linked between themselves, as we indeed think, they then form a group or a category depending on their link: a substantial one results into a category and an organizational one into a group. A set of relations may form a collectivating relation creating an *ensemble* but certainly not a category. Now it should be assumed that any Bahun would have the

same kind of relation with a given Other though we may notice in passing that relations too may be fluctuating. Even if we stick to this hypothesis, how will a Bahun behave as a superior creature, even in his urban, open and liberal form, towards the groups he considers at his service—the low castes—and as an equal with another Bahun (we should note here that equality is foreign to the Hindu society where many factors, and especially kinship, may induce differences of status even within the same caste)? On what basis will one element of the ensemble adapt his relation when encountering a foreign element? This cannot be answered through understanding relations only. These relations are indeed so old and organized in such a systematic way that they now form a classificatory thought which is shared by the Bahuns and by those with whom they are in relation.

Ben Campbell examines this notion of identity from a different point of view: he proposes to consider the relation with the environment as being a major element through which identity is constructed. Tamang representations of relationship to natural diversity is examined through narratives presenting matrimonial alliances as a negotiation with difference. For the Tamangs, alliance is the coming together of difference and is examined in extreme cases where the exchanging group consists of animals or vegetables. The narratives of nature would imply a direct continuous engagement of the Tamangs with their environment, which has been altered recently by the creation of a park. András Höfer's comments reinforce some of Campbell's statements, such as the non-existence of a separation between nature and culture, leading however to a less abrupt conclusion. If there is no clear separation between cultivated zones and non-cultivated zones, there are small spaces belonging to the gods which are strictly protected. Thus '... the demarcation between the realms of nature and Man is *focal*, rather than *zonal*'. The author shows the limitation of the attempt to understand structures of identity through direct relation with the environment and even the way the Tamangs exploit the natural resources. He underlines the autonomy of the 'cultural stuff'. One of the major issues in the debate about identity appears in this set of communication as well: a relation (here with environment) is set up as a starting point to understand a local identity, which is

defined as polymorphic at some point but generally treated as 'Tamang' whereas this refers only to a language in the studied context. If we do not deny that locality is a fundamental aspect of identity in the area and that identity can be studied through relation with the local environment, the question is whether this relation is globalizing or incorporated in and organized by other(s), more sociological dimensions: in the case presented here, by kinship.

Eberhard Berg argues that religion (Tibetan Buddhism) is the most important idiom through which the Sherpas define themselves in their dealings with Others. He examines how Sherpa identity is shaped through the performance of religious festivals and points out the key-role of ritual patronage in this process. But, according to Nicolas Silhé, in doing so Berg confuses two notions quite distinct, even though related. He mistakes the community membership with identity, which as a construction 'becomes apparent mainly through discourse'. It should be noted that social institutions are also constructions and are prone to modifications, especially the patronage of rituals. Several examples in the Himalayan region show that the financing of rituals forms a strong link between a group, a god—or ensemble of gods—and a territory—or a sacred place which appears as a power point within a territory. These components are central to the way in which identity is constructed. The financing of rituals appears as a fluctuating social institution which lies at the heart of the image the groups try to present of themselves or the position other groups try to confer on them.

To end with the Nepalese group of papers, Karl-Heinz Krämer presents the main ethnic arguments and claims while adopting their views. In her comments, Anne De Sales warns against an approach based on the militant discourse and suggests that 'alienation may be more a feature of the janajati leaders' discourse than of ordinary villager's representation of the situation'.

Discourse is also the base on which Joanne Moller, dealing with community and identity in Kumaon, builds her argumentation. Her paper, as the ones that follow deal with the Ladakh and Gilgit cases and how ethnicity has become particularly salient in social relations when the politics of everyday life accentuate the significance of certain cultural differences. She especially

analyses the impact of reservation policy on the construction of identity.

Referring to the anti-reservation protest and pro-autonomy campaign in the Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh, Joanne Moller suggests that these recent events must be understood both in terms of political economy and discourses of identity. She points out how Kumaoni high caste villagers organize their social world, on every level of identification, on a binary principle articulated by an opposition between the 'insiders' (i.e. themselves) and 'outsiders' (plains people and low castes), in which the latter are seen 'to eat' at the expense of the former. This 'rhetoric of hunger'—she argues—is rooted in the history of Kumaon, a region which has for centuries been characterized by geographical, political and cultural isolation, and then was given a lowly place in the new politico-economic order, leading to a deep resentment among the population against external powers. Additionally, this discourse of deprivation is also relevant in the relations between householders and affines, or even between humans and supernatural agents. In her comments, Antje Linkenbach refuses to explain the struggle for autonomy in the U.P. Hills through ethnicistic arguments and argues that construction of Self and Other cannot be reduced to a single pattern. Along with Martijn van Beek and Martin Sökefeld, she emphasizes the ambiguity, multiplicity and fluidity of identity/ties, showing how people identify with different social groups, which may be based on age, gender, language, habitat or even on 'degree of exposure to modern discourses', and shift identities frequently and repeatedly. On the other hand, Martijn van Beek follows the construction of Ladakhi identity in its fluidity, analysing thoroughly how in the contestation between scientists, bureaucrats and local activists over the 'true' characteristics of Ladakh 'identity' in the context of the granting of regional autonomy, representations appearing as 'identities' are produced. Yet these identities are necessary fictions. In her comments, Pascale Dollfus agrees with the statement according to which Ladakhi-ness is a fluid and unbounded entity varying according to a given context, but regrets that the data taken into consideration are only drawn from official reports, academic accounts and discourses or leaflets written by local activists. As a matter of fact, the 'non-published

thoughts' are left aside. And one would have welcomed some supportive ethnographic elaboration about the different sets of identities built upon the difference(s) one chooses to emphasize. The last contribution by Martin Sökefeld gives an in-depth understanding of the multiplicity of identities in Gilgit, in the northern areas of Pakistan, a region which accommodates at least five 'dimensions of difference': sectarian affiliation, *qôm* (i.e. roughly speaking ethnic groups), clan, locality and language. Keeping in mind the local complexities of his subject matter, Sökefeld suggests that one should analyse the intersectionality between multiple identities rather than work out a particular difference at the expense of others': an innovative methodology which proves very operative to account for the complexity of this area. Dealing with the claim for autonomy which, like the call for holy war in Islam supersedes all differences, Gaborieau in his comments remarks that 'nationalism in modern times is invested with the same conceptual and emotional content as religion was in mediaeval times'. To conclude Sökefeld proposes a new approach to the study of identities and ethnicity which requires the dissolution of the unequivocal and unequal dichotomy of the anthropologist as Self versus his/her objects of study as Other 'into a plurality of relations between the anthropologist (as a subject) and the *subjects* he or she studies that can signify both difference and identity'.

We cannot but agree with this proposal and would like to conclude this short presentation by a general remark which emerges from this volume as it does from social anthropology more generally: the tendency to build identity against others prevails strikingly in our domain and this creates an enduring difficulty in reconciling theories which were constructed in opposition to the previous ones but which are not in fact so exclusive.

Notes

1. '...ceux qui prétendent que l'expérience de l'autre- individuel ou collectif-est par essence incommunicable (. . .)' prennent refuge dans 'un nouvel obscurantisme'. (p. 10). *L'identité*, séminaire dirigé par Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paris: PUF, 1977.
2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, 1979.

3. 'L'Homme est une invention dont l'archéologie de notre pensée montre aisément la date récente. Et peut-être la fin prochaine'. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966. p. 398. Our translation (*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Pantheon, 1970).
4. 'The Unity of Man: The History of an Idea', unpublished communication given in Columbia University in 1976. Translated in French and published in Edmund Leach, *L'unité de l'homme et autres essais*, Paris: Gallimard, 1980, pp. 363–89.
5. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology (Anthropologie structurale)*, Paris: 1958) translated from the French by C. Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoeff, New York: Anchor Books, 1967.
6. '(. . .) en aborder l'étude en prenant pour principe qu'on ignore absolument ce qu'ils sont, et que leurs propriétés caractéristiques, comme les causes inconnues dont elles dépendent, ne peuvent être découvertes par l'introspection, même la plus attentive'. ' . . . les représentations qu'on a pu s'en faire au cours de la vie, ayant été faites sans méthode et sans critique, sont dénuées de valeur scientifique et doivent être tenues à l'écart'. Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris: PUF 1981, 1st ed. 1937. P. XIII. (Translated by W.D. Halls, edited by S. Lukes as *The Rules of Sociological Method*, London: Macmillan Press, 1982, p. 36).
7. ' . . . le passage est très difficile à faire, entre cette objectivité à quoi on s'efforce, quand on regarde les société' C. Lévi-Strauss in G. Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Claude Lévi-Strauss*, Paris, Plon Juillard, 1961, p. 16. Our translation. (Published in English as: *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, London: Cape, 1969).
8. *Two Conferences: Wissenschaft als Beruf, 1919 and Politik als Beruf, 1919* published together in French with an introduction by Raymond Aron as: *Le savant et le politique* Paris: Plon, 1959.
9. Claude Lévi-Strauss: 'Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss', pp. IX–LII in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris: PUF, 1950. p. XXIX: 'Toute société différente de la nôtre est objet, tout groupe de notre propre société, autre que celui dont nous relevons, est objet, tout usage de ce groupe même, auquel nous n'adhérons pas, est objet'. Our translation. (Published in English as: *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, London: Routledge, 1987).
10. To quote one example of a widespread position: 'Fiction. . . may offer accounts which are more authentic than our documentary studies, precisely because, to be convincing, it has to present the reader with the self conscious individual'. p. 192 in Anthony P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness, and Alternative Anthropology of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

11. Indeed, it is forbidden by the Nepalese law to create a political party on a communal basis, such as ethnic group, caste, religion. This point is rather paradoxical since the nation is Hindu as declared by the constitution—and thus perceived as communalistic. This has been noticed by K.H. Krämer in this volume.
12. The reasons for this attitude are usually to preserve the anonymity of the informants who generally have not asked for it, from their government, tourists or their neighbours. In fact, this procedure prevents comparison and the questioning of data, creating a very comfortable position for anthropologists, whose writings are thus unverifiable.
13. See for instance Mary Des Chene, 'Ethnography of the Janajati Yug' in *Studies in the Nepalese History and Society*, vol. 1, 1, 1996, p. 105–6, who writes: 'While I have read much more about Nepal in foreign languages than I have yet read in indigenous ones, the ratio of learning has been quite reverse and if I had to give up one or the other, the choice would be clear in favor of the languages of Nepal'.
14. Siddiq Wahid, 'Riots in Ladakh and the Genesis of a Tragedy', *Himal*, Sept-Oct. 1989, pp. 24–5.
15. Bernard Pignède, *The Gurungs*, English ed. by S. Harrison and A. Macfarlane, Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1993 (French edition 1966).
16. This exercise recalls the Greek etymology of the *Ethnos*, a concept associated with *Ethos*, custom, the ethnic group as 'a group of people who share the same customs', hence the importance of knowing the specific customs of the group.
17. M. van Beek, 'Dissimulations: Representating Ladakhi Identity', in H. Driessen and T. Otto (eds.), *Perplexities of Identification: Anthropological Studies in Cultural Differentiation and the Use of Resources*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press. 2000, pp. 164–88.
18. A workshop organized by us in 1998 at Meudon (France), and aiming to gather the subscribers of the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*. The workshop was financed by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. We deliberately asked the authors not to change their text with regards to the remarks of the discussants.
19. *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*, David N. Gellner, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and John Whelpton (eds.), Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.
20. Krishna B. Bhattachan: 'Making no Heads or Tails of the Ethnic "Conundrum" by Scholars with European Head and Nepalese Tail', *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, vol. 25, 1, 1998, p. 111–30.
21. Especially if we consider all the dialectal forms and the fact that many Himalayan languages are oral.

22. We regret, for instance, that we could not invite Himalayan scholars to open the discussion with them at this occasion.
23. For instance it is rather difficult to utilize many 19th century western books on India because the names of the gods are directly translated into their presumed Greek or Latin corresponding names without any mention of the local name.
24. Frederik Barth, Introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969, pp. 9–38.
25. Luc de Heusch: 'L'ethnie: Les vicissitudes d'un concept', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, Tome XLII, 2001, no. 1, pp. 79–100.