

TOPICAL REPORTS

The Study of Oral Traditions in Nepal

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On the occasion of the CNRS-DFG conference on the History and Anthropology of Nepal, held at Arc-et-Senans in June 1990, a number of research themes were brought up and among them the collection and analysis of oral traditions received special attention. The rapid development of communication media and social changes in both rural and urban areas have contributed to a radical transformation in the transmission of unwritten lore and the call for an urgent recording of oral traditions in their widest expression. This urgency is justified by the fact that many forms of expression which have remained unrecorded for posterity are now disappearing.

Our present research effort should not be narrowly concerned within the purely academic fields of folklore, ethnology, linguistics and the like but should also serve as a tool to better understand the functioning of oral tradition in contemporary society. The collection of data should be systematic without neglecting evidence from non-traditional media such as news articles, comics and posters. To date, most of the research done on oral tradition seems to have concentrated on well-structured, easy to define, understandable stories (e.g. myths, legends, tales and proverbs). However upon reflexion, it seems to me that forms of human expression are far more diverse than those which have been classically recorded within an established academic typology.

My travels in different ethnic territories in the Himalayan region and my

interest in the study of technical and economic activities have called my attention to a form of expression seldom observed, or rather little described, by researchers in oral tradition and particularly those linked to festivities, to merry-making and all actions which accompany work. It is during the festive moments, and often upon the euphoric effect of food and drink when the tongue is loosened, that stories are told or that simple incidents become tales which afterwards will be carried far and wide.

Within each community there are individuals who have the gift of story telling. Are they still numerous? In fact, most of those whom we met are old enough to remember a period during which the movement of people was quite limited and when means of communication were still unavailable (daily press started in 1960, radio transmission in 1954 and television in 1988/ dates approximative). In the case of a story-teller his information originates from a member of the family or from other story-tellers of the community and sometimes from an itinerant traveller. Certain opportunities favoured the transmission and the creation of tales, such as rest periods during common agricultural activities or the occasion of travel linked to commerce or as porters. As an example of the above, the father of one of the story-tellers I met, well known for his "merry spirit", was called to tell stories during the husking of corn in order to liven the spirit and keep awake the womenfolk who reached the end of a day in a state of great fatigue. For his services he was

compensated with a good meal and drinks.

Specific celebrations linked to rituals, such as death ceremonies, represent another important occasion involving a great number of participants. Stories spontaneously emerge, which serve to demystify the occasion and put the principal actors at a more human scale.

By way of example I recall an occasion in which the story turned around a shaman who, in 1987, had failed to produce the result of his intervention in a Tamang village. The story is as follows: "Maili was sick in the stomach, the shaman Birbal was called in to perform a healing ritual. The shaman and his son went to look for crabs in a rice field, put a crab in a small container and the son kept it under his shirt. His father told him: "I will heal Maili, who is sick in the stomach. The moment I beat the drum I will pronounce the words 'rau-rau ru-ru'. At that moment you will discreetly release the crab".

Both father and son went to Maili's house; the shaman diagnosed the sickness as being caused by a crab, eating into the entrails and said that he would extract it.

He beat the drum in a trance, pronounced words without meaning, adding occasionally 'rau-rau ru-ru'; after a while his son recalled his father's instructions and asked him: "Is this the moment of letting loose the crab we caught this morning?" The shaman was furious and cried out: "May a tiger devour you and may the devil carry you away...".

Numerous myths, legends, tales, fables and proverbs, which form part of orally transmitted folklore, are increasingly written in special publications or school books and are thereby adapted to

a major national language. Thus these stories have been tailored and structured by the compiler and do not lend themselves to many variations. To such stories one must add an ensemble of tales of variable length which I would call 'short stories', the themes of which originate from events of daily life and in which a simple, unimportant event in the beginning, becomes, through the imagination of a facetious story-teller a humorous story which will be perpetuated through repetition and enrichment.

Among the diverse story lines the following categories could be cited. First, there are stories which deal with the marvellous, local history and geography linking with the domains of the gods and demons. Second there are stories dealing with life itself, as for example, the need to remain young among both women and men (there is a belief that when a man marries a very young woman he preserves his youth. If he marries a woman older than himself, he loses the freshness of his face and ages rapidly). Third, there are stories which concern the family and the structure of caste society: e.g. the relationship between different social strata and forbidden relation between a man and woman, such as incest and adultery. For example, there are tales about the marriage between a very old man and a pre-adolescent woman (the obvious difference between the parties appearing as an unbalanced element of society as well as an object of ridicule), the privileged role of the maternal uncle responsible for the education of his nephews and nieces, the often ambiguous relationship between the son-in-law and his mother-in-law (particularly when there is a notorious difference of age between the married partners), the

relationship between in-laws of the same generation, the hierarchy established between elder and younger siblings, the institutionalized links of friendship (*mit*) and stories which reflect the rivalry between ethnic groups or castes in which the story-teller tells the tale to his advantage.

This latter category seems to be particularly abundant. It should be recalled that rather recently lower castes and ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burman language became dominated by the Bahun Chetri castes. The latter have exploited the former, less educated groups who became dispossessed of their property. Thus, a satirical short story told by a member of an inferior caste becomes a sort of revenge. As the saying indicates: "The Bahun does harm but the story-teller delivers it back with interest".

Along the same lines the following true story recorded in the Terai tells of a Bahun who enjoyed suing Pahari migrants from the hills. Approaching death, he asked them to come to his side whereupon he told them that he was aware he had caused them wrong and suggested that they plunge a dagger in his heart after his death which would give them the feeling of having taken their revenge.

They did so, but the descendants of the Bahun initiated a new case for having defiled the dead, a posthumous deed of the Bahun from which originated the expression that "even a dead Bahun could bother a simple man from the hills".

Social stratification can also be manifested by the fear provoked by certain ethnic groups, for example the Danuwar caste living in the Terai and Mahabharat range are said to have the power of turning into leopards and

attacking women, killing them and stealing their golden jewels. To recover human form, their partners must throw three grains of rice in their direction pronouncing an appropriate spell.

The language utilized by the story-teller is always an everyday language with often trivial expressions, sometimes derived from well-known religious texts in which certain words are changed and new ones added. The linguist should thus find here a rich material for research.

Once the story-teller is identified it is convenient to obtain from him his life history which will help to better understand his environment and life style as well as his sources of inspiration.

The attention of his listeners is important as every detail is worth noting; his vocabulary may be adapted to his audience according to the circumstances. Systematic recording is evidently the best means of preserving this information (let us recall here that certain languages lack a written expression).

An aspect which remains unexplored is that of oral tradition among women particularly on occasions when women gather together, such as at marriages where through laughter and jokes women see through the claims and pretensions of men in a male-dominated society. Here is a line of research which would perhaps only be suitable for female ethnologists and linguists.

The suggestions made here might appear as "platitudes"; however, it seems to me that they are important enough when wishing to understand the psychological framework of specific populations and their interdependence and interactions. It is also important, before it is too late, to collect in as much detail as possible the different dimen-

sions of the tales including situation, expressional language nuances, changes in wording and the portions which provide either humour, mockery or social

comment. They are of great value in portraying personal identity in multi-ethnic Nepalese society.

Wild Animals and Poor people: Conflicts between Conservation and Human Needs in Citawan (Nepal)

Ulrike Muller-Böker

From the "Fever Hell" to the "Melting pot" of Nepal

Citawan, the largest of the broad valleys within the Śiwālik Range was only sparsely populated until the middle of this century. Difficult of access, the region was infested with malaria (Haffner, 1979:51ff.). During the period of Nepal's political isolation (1816-1950) the interests of the government were consciously geared to preserving this protective zone of forests, grasslands and swamps, all the more so for constituting one of the best territories for hunting big game. It seems that the autochthonous inhabitants of Citawan, the majority of whom are Tharus, lived relatively undisturbed, in this peripheral region despite the presence of the state and disposed of sufficient arable land and forest.

With the eradication of malaria - Citawan having been largely free of malaria since 1964 - and the turnabout in Nepal's political orientation to the outside world, the situation changed drastically. A large and still continuing flow of immigrants from the mountains (Pahāriyas) entered Citawan, promoted by planned resettlement programmes (Kansakar, 1979; Conway & Shrestha, 1985), causing the population to increase thirteenfold since 1920. Where in 1953 only 19 people shared one sq.km, there are today about 120. Since the late 1970s the main thoroughfare

from Kathmandu to India goes through the Nārāyaṇi and Rāpti valleys. This in turn brought many bazar-settlements into being, the most important of which is Nārāyaṅhāt.

In sum, Citawan has developed in less than a half century from a sparsely populated periphery to an attractive multi-ethnic center.

Citawan as Wildlife Heritage

During the Rāṇā period (1846 - 1950) Citawan was declared a "private hunting reserve" of the Maharajas due to its richness in big game, being the arena of elaborate hunts, to which the royalties of the world were invited (Kinloch, 1885; Oldfield, 1880/1974: 210ff.).

For example - for the visit of King George V of Great Britain in 1911 600 elephants were employed, and 39 tigers, 18 rhinos, four bears and several leopards were shot within eleven days. All records were broken by a hunt in 1938/39, in which the Viceroy of India took part. The bag included 120 tigers, 38 rhinos, 27 leopards and 15 bears (K.K. Gurung, 1983:2f.).

After the downfall of the Rāṇā regime hunting and poaching increased dramatically. Dealing in particular in rhino horn became a lucrative business (Stracey, 1957: 766). Poachers came from India and from the hills, but also new settlers were responsible for the decimation of the *Rhinozeros unicornis*