

Ethnic Revival and Religious Turmoil  
*Identities and Representations in the Himalayas*

*Edited by*  
MARIE LECOMTE-TILOUINE  
PASCALE DOLLFUS

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## Notes

1. I am especially interested in what is said about the Jyapus, the Newar peasant caste. I am still conducting research on this group and it is among them that the Newar caste organizations are presently the strongest.

## Differences and Distances

### *Contested Ethnic Markers in Local and National Communities*

JOHANNA PFAFF-CZARNECKA

Culture can establish bridges, or, on the contrary, it can erect forceful barriers between groups of people. The outcome depends largely upon the given context in which the social actors—more or less consciously—choose specific attitudes towards people they consider different, for instance towards people belonging to other caste or ethnic groups. In situations of conflict, the signs of avoidance, highlighting difference, or distance acquire an importance. Within relatively short spans of time, strategically important signs can be interpreted anew, or they may acquire additional conditions. Three issues are of significance in such circumstances. First, the very fact that with changed circumstances established meanings and signs can be re-interpreted makes thorough inquiries necessary: we have to ask when crucial shifts in meanings of established symbols take place, and what kind of meanings are especially prone to contestations. Secondly, when we examine the processes of production of new meanings and inquire into the processes of re-interpretation of signs in situations of ethnicity formation, it is interesting to see how local negotiations, say, within villages or among the members of particular groups are affected by discourses and actions beyond the 'local' context, coined for instance in the

national centres. The third set of questions pertains to the conditions and the actual processes underlying the coining and/or the re-interpretation of meanings, making for a particular use of symbols.

Ethnicity speaks a complex language. Social actors incorporate various cultural and religious elements when involved in identity politics, when, seeking to express their grievances or to formulate their projects. Prone to 'capture' are religious elements, rituals, specific habits and customs, historical notions, ritually important sites, cultural notions considered (by some people) as elements of the national culture, dress, and others. Usually such elements become ethnic markers when publicly contested by members of those groups feeling excluded from particular notions, especially when trying to define themselves in opposition to values and symbols embraced by those in power. Indeed, in Nepal specific cultural or religious notions were turned into ethnic markers only after the ethnic activists sought to define their identity *in reaction* to the prevailing public images of the national society and of the minorities in particular. Especially since the year 1990, various ethnic activists in Nepal have been publicly challenging the cultural and religious forms of the dominant Hindu groups. Such actions came as a surprise in view of the fact that until 1990, minority issues as well as the general theme of ethnic accommodation in Nepal have been perceived—by and large—as devoid of conflict.

Unfortunately, only few accounts of the forms of co-existence of people belonging to different caste and ethnic groups in Nepal exist, let alone regarding the signs used in everyday interactions as well as during special occasions. As is well known, until the year 1990, Nepal has generally been described—in official rhetoric, but also by scholars—in rather harmonious terms. Her multi-ethnic nation has been eagerly depicted as 'wild garden in which numerous wild flowers have been growing, since centuries' (see Sharma 1992). While until 1990 social anthropologists—mainly foreign—have been concentrating upon the ethnic populations<sup>1</sup> (see Dahal 1993)<sup>2</sup>—only seldom indicating the possible conflict potentials with the *tagadhari*-groups, the focus of inquiry has radically shifted in the aftermath of the so-called 'revolution' of 1990.<sup>3</sup> From this moment onwards, accounts of conflicts across the ethnic borders have rapidly proliferated due to at least two reasons. The

first lies in the changed climate within which scientific research occurs: until the end of the 1980s, any hints at potential social conflict by (foreign) scholars had been actively discouraged by the authorities.

The second reason is the actual increase of overt conflict situations in the aftermath of the 1990-'revolution'. While ethnic conflicts occurred long before the 1990-awakening its success has opened a Pandora's box of old grievances, leading to contestations of their public displays deploying pejorative symbols. The social movements depicted by the term 'ethnicity formation' are especially geared towards symbols expressing unity within groups, simultaneously stressing difference and distance towards the others. Notable are also negotiations within particular groups when the very bases of unity and/or self-definition come under a conflict-laden scrutiny (see Gellner 1997).

Why do such shifts come about? James Scott's concept of moral economy helps us to understand the current dynamics of ethnicity formation. Scott (1976) urges us not to be taken in by appearances, such as displays of ethnic harmony because within specific power arrangements the subjugated sections of a society have to display compliance to specific symbols displayed by the superordinate. Only when power configurations change does the real nature of these seemingly binding symbols come to light. The fact that specific symbols have been associated with former power arrangements can induce social actors challenge them publicly, once the power shifts. In the later sections of this chapter, I shall focus on such recent endeavours. Before doing that, it may be useful to assess the scope of symbolization in the inter-ethnic interactions in Nepal.

### Overt and Covert Signs in a Multi-ethnic local society in Central Nepal

Most symbols and other signs used in everyday encounters as well as on special situations, for instance during rituals, fall into the category of 'what goes without saying' (Bloch). Largely taken for granted, the signs organizing the local requirements of differentiation and of distantiation form a kind of a *hidden agenda* in inter-ethnic

and inter-caste encounters. Or, to be more precise, some of the signs have belonged to the *hidden agenda* until recently, but have been put into question in recent years—since the movement when the ethnic and low-caste activists have started to examine interactions and the silent signs, declaring some of them as symbols of oppression, and/or as devices misrepresenting their cultures.

Life in local settings characterized by a group of people belonging to various ethnic and/or caste groups is highly semiotized. It is hardly surprising that within microcosms so thoroughly dominated by Hindu norms and values, great efforts have been made—especially by those ranking high within the Hindu hierarchy—to express difference and distance in the idiom of superiority and inferiority.<sup>4</sup> But generally, people tend to read signs given through dress as well as through adornment in order to determine their relative standing (see also Srinivas 1972).

The use of symbols in the central-Nepalese village of Belkot where several caste and ethnic groups live in close proximity is one case in point (proxemic signs). Until a decade ago, the interactions highlighting difference and distance here seemed to be self-evident and binding. Some of the signs such as the attire, housing structures, or forms of behaviour were immediately visible. Other forms could only be deduced and could not be taken as signs in the precise moment of their enactment. In retrospect, when they became contested they eventually turned into symbols. One such example is the use of common wells.

Among the most visible signs is, of course, the *appearance* of persons. The Nepalis are very well trained in 'reading' each other's signs as expressed through dress, jewellery, and other accessories (for comparable inquiries in India, see e.g. Bétéille 1972). In quotidian village life such signs get ignored because personal intimacy makes such signs seem unnecessary and therefore invisible. But strangers encountered on village paths are closely scrutinized, and if their identity cannot be immediately determined by a mere glance the person is directly asked a question relating to his or her identity. Differences indicate caste and/or ethnic belonging. In central Nepal high-caste people do not wear black with the exception of vests—a new addition in the male attire—while this colour is common among the low-castes. The members of ethnic groups display

different attitudes in their dressing style. In Belkot, the Magars and Newars are dressed in the same way as the high-caste Parbatiyas (though the Newaris do not wear nose-ornaments), whereas many Tamang still wear hand-woven woollen fabrics which are cut differently from the Parbatiya clothes. During the 1980s, often when the villagers were heading to offices in the near-by district capital, they could witness state officials testing the Tamangs because of their distinct dressing-style. External signs do not pertain solely to the ethnic/caste belonging, but also to status, especially to the marital status of women. It is widely known that in central Nepal high-caste widows do not wear red and do not wear non-metallic jewellery while unmarried girls must not wear the *pote*.

Another set of signs is apparent in the *interactions* in private as well as public spaces (on this concept, see KcKim Marriott 1976; Dumont 1966). In private places, the treatment of guests is especially significant: guests visiting high-caste households are either admitted into the houses, or kept outside; outside, they are either admitted to the veranda or kept away from it. Those invited to eat in the kitchen are either asked to eat at the same level with the householder, allowed to the level where the children eat, or allowed to sit only in a corner—at a secure distance from the hearth where the rice is cooked. The look of the domestic compounds, the animals kept in the yard (usually, but not as a rule, only those animals that the household members are allowed to eat are kept), the allocation of the entrances as well as the small tectonic barriers between the compounds can be 'read' as signs—either symbolizing the particular status of the inhabitants, or the necessary distances to be kept from the neighbours belonging to lower ethnic groups or castes. For instance, the Brahmins guard the entrances into their kitchens from the view of passers-by more carefully than the members of other groups.

In public situations, the temples, offices, schools and tea shops make people adopt special forms of interactions. The tea shops are especially interesting because food is served—which makes temporarily for stronger rules of avoidance. As in the private house, the rules of distanciation pertain also to access into tea shops. For an outsider, the distances kept by people considered 'low-caste' may be scarcely visible, but they are in fact to be seen as forceful

barriers. Distances of just 20 centimetres can express deep social cleavages. Most striking is the behaviour towards the low-castes. They are not only made to remain outside the tea shops; the tea served to them is either poured into special vessels which are only used by the low-caste customers, or it is served in the ordinary glasses which have to be cleaned by the low-caste customers themselves. A clear-cut expression of Hindu hierarchy is the order in smoking cigarettes and water-pipes (*hukka*). Whenever several persons join in smoking one cigarette, it is always passed from a person of higher ranking towards the next ranking person. . . until it lands at the feet or in the palm of a low-caste person. The *hukka* is not only handed down from a 'higher' to the 'lower' person; depending upon the relative status of the smoker, the user may only be allowed to use parts of the *hukka*. (see also Höfer 1979)

Ritual occasions provide another arena for expressing differences and distances in interactions. Generally, rituals make for well-defined spatial arrangements of the involved persons, including the access to the ritually sensitive spots. Rituals make people express the relative standing through bowing and through the patterns of giving and receiving the tika (for instance, the Brahmin priests may not touch their Tamang *jajmans* when they are to give them a tika; on tika-exchanges on Dasain, see especially Bennett 1983). Rituals require special arrangements for the distribution and eating of the sacrificial food. Due regard is paid to the order in which the members of particular castes and ethnic groups are seated and served.

Particular ritual events make for special adaptations as shown in the case of the adjustments between the Magars and their Brahmin neighbours. The Magar hamlet of Belkot is situated near several Brahmin households. All the neighbours share the same well. In everyday situations this fact does not call for any particular adjustments. It is gender rather than caste and ethnic group membership that orders the interactions. This order changes when the Magars kill pigs and cook pork on ritual occasions: they are then not allowed by the Brahmins to use the common well. Drinking water is usually stored in advance; washing is done at a distant water-source. This arrangement indicates that particular practices of distancing may help to maintain friendly neighbourly links between people

belonging to different caste or ethnic groups. This arrangement as such is not a sign, but it has acquired the status of a signal in Belkot when recently, 'all of the sudden' the Magars decided to 'read' it as a demonstration of power differentials to their disadvantage.

The most impressive displays of hierarchies and distances occur during the Dasai celebrations, when members of various castes and ethnic groups are united through patterns of a ritual division of labour, on one hand, and when they are divided among themselves by rules of distancing on the other. The Dasai celebrations as they have been celebrated in Belkot until the second half of the twentieth century, consist of an elaborate ritual sequence, with ritual specialist acting as the protagonists throughout the first nine days of the festivities, and with local power holders playing the major role on the last day. By and large, Belkot's festivities conform to the broader pan-Indian tradition of Durga puja celebrations. They contain, however, some particular aspects along with specific 'local meanings'. Neither the ritual nor the local specificities can be described here (see Pfaff-Czarnecka 1993; 1998), but two instances are of special interest in relation to the symbolic practices: first, the co-operation of the ritual specialist, consisting of the Dasai priest (a Brahmin); a temple priest (a Brahmin); the village servant (*naiko*—a Newar); a man who fasts together with the Dasai priest, who lives together with the Dasai priest in the Dasai house, who performs the sacrifices and carries the sword (*upasye*—a Magar) as well as the leader of the orchestra (*kotwal*—a Damai). The joint activities can be (and have been over a long period) 'read' as forceful manifestations of local unity—notwithstanding caste and ethnic divisions. This notion is also enhanced by the opportunity provided to the various actors to 'use' the ritual setting for action important to individual actors or collectivities taking part in the festivities—for instance ritually linking one's own lineage to the deity worshipped during Dasai, or pointing to a particular importance of one's group within the local society.

The second instance evoked in Belkot's Dasai pertains to the ritual ordering displayed during celebrations. Especially on the tenth day, the relative status of the different castes and ethnic groups living in Belkot is displayed, reflecting, among other things, the prevailing power relations. On this day, a goat is sacrificed in the morning. Its head is put on a leaf plate and placed in the Durga puja



house. Outside, Brahmins gather and they read from the *Devi-Mahatmya*. A crowd gradually assembles in and around the sacrificial ground. Inside the ritual house the priest worships the objects symbolizing the goddess. After the ritual objects, including the last goat's head, are brought and arranged outside the ritual house, the priest gives the first tika to the political village head (i.e. to the *dware* under the Ranas and to the *pradhan panc* until 1983). Afterwards elaborate tika exchanges between the ritual specialists begin, leaving the village head in the centre with the villagers coming to him to receive the tika, to bow, and to offer a gift. The special signal character to Dasai in Belkot was demonstrated by the fact that before the panchayat period (i.e. before 1962) all villagers had to attend the celebrations, to bow in front of the dignitaries, to receive tika from them, and to present them with gifts of prescribed items and in prescribed amounts. As we shall see the Dasai celebrations in Belkot are currently 'read' afresh, that is, as a particularly oppressive situation on the occasion of which ritual ranking and actual power structure reinforce one another.

### Re-reading and Re-interpretation of the Established Signs: Local and National Examples

The recent actions by various ethnic and low-caste activists cast a new light upon the prescribed interactions and the signs invoked in them. What could earlier be interpreted either as outcomes of prolonged acculturation processes (see Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997) or of fascinating cultural devices allowing for peaceful accommodation, in multicultural settings emerges, at least to some extent, as a ground of cultural struggles over the politics of representation. Signs described above as forms easing the mutual interactions tend to transform partly, into symbols of oppression, of subordination, of enforced acculturation—as various ethnic and low-caste activists claim. While the ethnic markers expressing difference bear conflictual potentials, those markers expressing distance tend to enhance a harmonious co-existence. Strikingly, however, distances and differences can be expressed by the same markers—being put forward and interpreted differently by different set of actors—according to the social context. Elements which have been taken

for granted over long time periods can emerge as powerful political symbols within comparatively short spans of time. On the other hand, elements highlighting conflict may lose their symbolic salience when re-interpreted, or when other cultural or religious elements are incorporated along with them. Let us consider some striking example of re-reading and/or of re-interpretation of cultural forms.

The Dasai celebrations in Belkot are one case in point. In 1986, the new political head of Belkot did not attend Durga puja festivities at any stage because he, a Tamang, opposed their communal performance. As a consequence, the 'political power' was represented by the village secretary who was a Chetri. That a Tamang was the elected leader of the village (*pradhan panch*) was a novelty. Until then the village head has always been a member from the twice-born castes. His decision not to participate in the event was a departure from Durga puja celebrations during the preceding periods under high-caste Hindus. Though the villagers were not any longer obliged to deliver any tokens (foodstuff) to the village headman in the panchayat period from the early 1960s onwards, a majority *felt* compelled to appear on the tenth day and to bow in front the *pradhan panc*.

It is noticeable that the Tamang opposed Durga puja immediately after they came to power, so this was already the fourth year in a row with this kind of conflict. Originally this opposition came especially from young, dynamic leaders of the Tamang community who had a radical vision of change in Nepalese society. Gradually they came to be supported in their opposition against the public displays of hierarchical relations on Durga puja by a very large proportion of the Tamang community. In the view of many Tamangs, nowadays actively expressed mainly by the younger generation, Durga puja is an expression of the Hinduist predominance within the Nepalese political system under the rule of the king and the dominance of his clients who belonged to the twice-born castes over the local society.

According to the Tamang leaders, by promoting the local cult in Belkot the rulers both expressed their religious feelings, and at the same time conveyed a message substantiating their worldly power while extending their possessions (see Burghart 1984). The local population was expected to acknowledge this fact by demonstrating



its deference. Confronted with a specific symbol of the emerging political culture shaped by central rulers, the local élite (holders of administrative offices, priests, influential families) took the opportunity to express their loyalty, but also sought to substantiate, in turn, *their* power of elevated status, by linking their prerogatives to symbols related to the central rulers. The local population, subjects to the central rulers and to the local élite, was made to witness such endeavours. They were not merely invited but compelled to come, to bring tributes, to bow, and to watch. By displaying obedience they were forming a part of the festive background. Their presence served to assert the importance of those who were able to establish themselves as the focus of the celebrations.

While the high-caste members of the local community have been striving to make the festivities a resource substantiating their importance, the members of the hitherto low-ranking (by Hindu standards) ethnic community, the Tamangs, have undertaken action in order to stop the Durga puja celebrations altogether after they acquired political power. The Tamangs in Belkot made a conscious choice not to endorse the central values of the ritual even though, having attained political power, they could have turned the ritual order to their political advantage. Claiming, however, that the Durga puja ritual not only commemorates their political subjugation but also symbolizes their ritual inferiority within the Hindu hierarchy, the Tamang leaders have decided to boycott the entire complex: the Tamangs have chosen to 'read' Durga puja as a symbol of their oppression within the Hindu realm. It is remarkable that after a period of over 200 years of a seeming accommodation within a ritual complex, they wanted to effect a break with the past. Let us note in passing that in other parts of Nepal, members of non-Hindu communities have taken to performing purification rites on the occasion of Dasai, that is in order to wash away the sin loaded upon Nepal in the course of the animal sacrifices conducted on the occasion of Dasai (Paul 1989).

Since at least two decades, low-castes are opposing their treatment in tea shops. That they were made to use either special cups, or that they were made to wash the cups themselves unlike other customers has increasingly become a bone of contention not only in Belkot, but also in other central Nepalese villages (see especially

the film *Makai* by Garlinski and Bieri; Blustain 1977). Another contested sign is the dress. While the Parbatiya attire of *kurta-surval* seemed to be replacing the earlier forms of clothing, there is an effort to encourage the wearing of 'traditional' clothes made from local material and the local human resources, corresponding well with the notion of self-sufficiency at the grassroot level.

All over Nepal a process of 'exodus from South Asia' can be observed. The major feature of this process is to reject Hindu notions as intrinsic components of ethnic cultures. Alan Macfarlane's (1997) account of the activities among the Gurungs is probably most relevant (for similar process among other ethnic groups, see especially Krämer 1996; B. Campbell 1997; Gaenszle 1997; and Russell 1997). The two related cases are the re-interpretation of the ethnic chronicles as well as the re-assessment of the social structure of one's own group. Both cases are related because they are put forward as instances representing a thorough critique of Brahmanic practices. Gurung activists who have acted as Alan Macfarlane's informants endorse a common pattern visible in Nepal. Brahmin priests are blamed for having distorted the *vamsavalis* and for having misrepresented ethnic cultural forms. On 13 March 1992 Macfarlane received in Cambridge (UK) a fax sent from Pokhara (west Nepal) signed by Gurung activists, informing him that at the national relay earlier that year the Gurungs had formulated several resolutions: (1) Gurungs' history has been written and distorted by the Brahmins; (2) there exist no higher and lower Gurung clans; (3) the traditional Gurung priests have been Pachyu and Klabri, the Lamas came later.

Four elements are salient. First, the insistence upon equality within the Gurung community put forward in the claim that all Gurung clans are equal (but see Höfer 1979). Secondly, equality also manifests itself in the insistence upon equal importance of marriage with the matrilineal cross-cousin as much as with the patrilineal cross-cousin. The idea of the exodus from South Asia manifests itself in the revised version of the *vamsavalis*. Gurung activists claim that contrary to the earlier depictions they did not migrate into the Nepalese territory via India, but that they came from Mongolia. Thirdly, they stress the special importance of the Bön religion. The fourth element highlights the interaction between

the ethnic activists and the scientific community: among the reasons why Alan Macfarlane was confronted with all this information was that he and Sarah Harrison were working at that time on the translation of the famous monograph on the Gurungs by Bernard Pignède into English. While criticizing the Brahmins, the Gurungs activists have pointed out that Pignède's analysis of their culture tended to impose a South Asian perspective on them. They stressed that Pignède was Louis Dumont's student who has perceived all of South Asia through the prism of Hindu values.

An examination of the recent efforts of Gurung activists reveals the following. What becomes a symbol (of cultural oppression; of political subjugation) does not appear to have been public issue in the previous one or two decades. It might have been an issue, but was hardly ever raised at a national or even a local public forum. We could claim that overt conflicts were more or less absent before the 1990 'revolution'. But caution has to be exercised in saying this. Haven't there been overt conflicts, or did we, social anthropologists of western as well as of Nepalese provenance, just fail to record and to analyse them? The film *Makai*, my own data on overt disputes during the Dasai celebrations, Paul's statement about the Buddhist activists' reactions to the animal sacrifices and some other examples have all been recorded before the 1990 movements. One can assume, therefore, that similar instances have occurred in the past.

The second inference relates to the shift in emphasis on specific elements and of rendering them prominent. What seemed to go without saying a decade or so ago, currently acquires new connotations. Signs which formerly were hardly noticed emerge as new, important tools in conflictual situations. The description of signs and rules in interactions given in the first part of this paper can easily appear as a naive description of specific modes of ordering under the conditions of a clear cut hegemony, while currently cultural displays and mutual encounters turn into contested grounds. What is striking in these processes—this is my third inference—is a certain kind of homogeneity in the cultural debates observed throughout Nepal which brings us to the topic of the national, international, and local exchanges in the cultural production of meanings.

### The Cultural Production, Reactions, Common Patterns, Role Models, and the Importance of the (inter) National Audiences

What accounts for the shift in orientations of signs? The increasing salience of ethnicity formation in Nepal is a widely observed phenomenon, and the processes of ethnicity formation are all about symbolization. The easier it is to coin one sign as standing for the internal unity as well as a sign for mobilizing action, the more it is likely to be used in politics of representation. Signs comprising positive (identity marker) as well as negative (opposition to other groups) connotations acquire a strategic importance. Further, symbols are especially effective when they can also be transmitted to audiences which are not directly involved in particular conflicts. Therefore, querying the reasons for the shift in the use and in the interpretation of symbols, enables us to answer crucial questions relating to ethnicity formation.

It is still impossible to assess how the ongoing endeavours to redefine the politics of representation in the national context will impinge upon cultural manifestations of different groups. Growing interest in one's own culture, the search for origins, new cultural projects, public discussions of culture, cultural comparison and cultural competition come about through a variety of processes. Partly, members of minorities react to earlier neglect of their cultures in official rhetoric. Furthermore, tactical manoeuvres by activists may result in highlighting particular symbols at the expense of others. Also, searching for roots of one own community may be pursued as a hobby among intelligentsia. While struggling for rights and resources some members of minorities have taken recourse to 'cultural' arguments. At the same time, some members of the majority, notably the supporters of Hindu organizations, seek to preserve the status quo in a counter-movement. It is not possible to discern one single tendency for cultural change, or one major factor underlying the unfolding processes. In order to understand the current processes of symbolization it is important to acknowledge the public character of the ongoing endeavours. The activities of organizations and their individual exponents indicate the nature, direction, and discontinuities of the broader process. Since the 1990 movement,

the previously neglected, marginalized, or even suppressed groups and organizations have been able to act within a new legal framework. At least in theory, all Nepalese citizens are invited to participate in the development process: as clients to welfare, through party politics, and also as concerned citizens with access to the public sphere.

At the same time, it has become obvious that minority formation has been closely connected to the politics of representation. If we envisage the public sphere as being an arena where any civic action can be subjected to public scrutiny, one is immediately confronted with the question as to the actual share of the ethnic population involved in *cultural politics*. One may ask whether the majority of members of the Nepalese minorities know that they are being represented by their leaders on public occasions, and whether they agree with the way in which they are represented, or whether they comply with the objectives particularly stressed by their self-appointed spokespersons. There are very often village teachers or learned opinion-makers exposed to the national, and—increasingly—international politics of representation who are in charge of defining issues on the local agenda, of re-shaping symbols and of popularizing them. The great interest in the *vamsavalis*, to take one example, is related to the special interest of the learned men who are informed about the measures taken by other activists. Interestingly, the interest in the *vamsavalis* has grown among several ethnic groups, by and large as a uniform process.

The simultaneity of assimilation to a new, dominant culture and revitalization of one's own old one results in a paradox: the search for distinction and uniqueness creates somehow a unifying factor in the national perspective, as if those seeking to distinguish themselves are striving to establish a common denominator at the same time. This is one of the outcomes of the national exchanges in which well-educated activists play a prominent role. Such exchanges tend to result in shared models of action: when activists of particular groups successfully start to put forward specific notions, there is a tendency that similar practices will be adopted by other groups: rejection of Hindu notions, re-interpretation of the historical accounts, social and cultural reforms, a greater care in religious expression, including the erection of new religious structures, or even invention of a new script. All of these measures can mean

endorsement of specific cultural elements, but the politics of reaction may not be overlooked: after a century-long subjugation under Nepalese rulers encouraging or even enforcing (especially after the collapse of the Rana regime) the adoption of the cultural-religious elements of the Parbatiyas, most ethnic activists are eager to reverse the trend of the cultural change.

Whenever cultural forms are made official or public, specificities or 'inconsistencies' fall prey to the different process of cultural translation. Traditionalism tends to simplify tradition for the same reason. Traditional elements to be displayed are selected after culture is subjected to careful scrutiny. If shamanism—fascinating for foreign tourists but embarrassing to many among the Nepalese intelligentsia—is to be considered an intrinsic part of the tradition, shamanism without blood sacrifice may appear as a compromise solution in the process of adopting a progressive outlook (see Ramble 1997). Several accounts (see Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka and Whelpton ed. 1997; Krämer 1996) reveal that within minority groups, discussions about valid versions of their cultures abound. Diverse sections of ethnic groups, guided by their elite, differ in their visions of what is to be understood as the 'cultural content'. While cultural purists opt for retaining practices disapproved of by others, reformers advocate modifications in ritual practice.

Let us finally look at the audiences for whom the politics of representation are partly intended. Minority representations are a pertinent factor in the present political process in Nepal. They indicate the scope of an emerging pluralism corresponding to the enhanced access of citizens to ongoing debates. However, pluralism does not preclude inequality, especially where the decision-making process is concerned. In the present field of popular representation, new forms of differentiation are likely to emerge and old inequalities may well be reinforced. Second, the emerging public sphere is a contested ground. Institutionalized rules governing the ways in which 'potential issues are kept out of the political process' (Lukes 1974: 21) and 'control over political agenda' (ibid.: 25) are being produced and reproduced. In the process of minority formation in Nepal, the public sphere is simultaneously moulded by the international aid scene, international 'capital', international audiences (tourists, religious disciples, see Ramble 1997; Burkert 1997), members

of the ruling groups and their clients (as a counter-movement) as well as various spokesmen for minorities promoting sectional visions. In pursuing these interests, current values which guide action are being negotiated. In the present context, a particularized notification of ethnicity emerges as a political resource since it serves various interests such as the new 'development discourse', the new entrepreneurial culture, the western 'dream' of authenticity—especially of archaic communities—presently invoked in the aid scene, the power-holders' image as politically progressive, and the minority leaders' newly acquired role of intermediaries as a new type of political resource. Certainly, in the complex and contested public sphere, a variety of cultural manifestations confront each other. That the politicization of ethnic difference should be affected by such a variety of factors making for a proliferation of ethnic repertoires comes as a surprise—probably not only to the foreign analysts, but to those involved in ethnic politics as well.

### Notes

1. There are exceptions, however: Bennett (1983); Campbell (1978); Gaborieau (1977); Stone (1977); Gray (1980); Ramirez (1996); Höfer (1979); Pfaff-Czarnecka (1989).
2. Rather, forms of harmonious co-existence were stressed by authors indicating the economic interdependence between different groups (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1971) or showing how prolonged contact situations have made for cultural adaptations, as described for instance by Höfer (1986).
3. See especially Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka and Whelpton (1997).
4. Dumont (1966) uses the term *séparation*, but *distance*, as we shall see below, seems more appropriate.

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