CLOSE-UP AND WIDE-ANGLE

ON COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY
IN THE HIMALAYA AND BEYOND

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Back cover show Mahesh Chandra Regmi in the audience at the inaugural lecture on 24 April 2003. Photograph by Bikas Rauniar.

When I arrived in Nepal for the very first time on the 10th of March in 1965, I stayed for a few days in a stucco palace hidden behind a curtain of palm trees, the Royal Hotel of Boris at Kantipath, before I moved to the huts up in the eastern hills where I remained for the next six or seven months. These huts were in fact solid stone houses with wooden shingle roofs, built by the Sherpa of Solu Khumbu. Here, I collected data for a demography of the area and for a study of the local clan system. By chance I came across a number of historical documents, written partly in Tibetan and partly in Nepali, which were to shed new light on the migration of the Sherpa from Kham in the eastern part of the Himalaya to their present dwelling areas; on the subsequent segmentation of their clans; and on their relation to the new Nepali State. For the translation of the texts written in Nepali (on *kāgat* and on copper plates), I was conducted—after my return to Kathmandu— straight to Mahesh Chandra Regmi, who, for a reasonable remuneration, translated them offhand into English.

I was impressed by his efficiency and his agile curiosity. He performed his scholarship like a stockbroker. More, however, I was impressed by his ability to put the historical documents I had found and considered unique into a serial context. They were, in the majority, *lāl mohar* decrees, stamped with a royal seal and dealing with land-taxation in the early 19th century, with *hulāk* porterage and transportation services, trade grants, the appointment of state intermediaries and tax collectors *(mizhār* or *pembu)*, and with *kipaṭ* and *raikaṛ*, the systems of customary communal landownership and state landlordism. They also contained moral admonitions from the crown down to the tribal

subjects in a period before the legal code *(Muluki Ain)* came into force. They were documents, in other words, of the sort that Regmi had stocked in his archives by the dozen. This encounter with Regmi came to me as a sobering and clarifying shock: no matter how original you might find your discoveries, such discoveries are also made by others elsewhere. Whatever your findings as a researcher, I learnt, you ought to see them in a wider perspective.

More than a decade later, I set out for a second field experience, this time in the northwestern part of Nepal—among the Kham-speaking Magar of the Dhaulāgiri region. Before I took off for the hills and my companion, Charlotte Hardman, returned to her people—the Lohorung Rai in the upper Arun valley—we invited Mahesh Chandra Regmi one evening for dinner to the house we had rented for a month in Chauni. For the occasion we had bought a pound of shrimp and a bottle of white wine, in the hope of pleasing our guest. It was a disaster. While we had no difficulty in shelling the crustaceans with both our hands, poor Mahesh tried his best by using only his right hand. It took him five minutes to peel a single shrimp, while ten more waited on his plate; he sweated and suffered; and we suffered seeing him suffer. Yet, while we took to the Burgundy to drain our unease, Mahesh asked for water and so remained unreleased. Our bookish knowledge of Robert Hertz and Rodney Needham notwithstanding, we had neglected the impact of left and right symbolism in its most mundane application. Even the best anthropological background had not prevented us from making a grave mistake. While we felt like silly hosts, Mahesh remained a hungry man for the rest of the evening. As you know, he survived it. Encounters of this kind must not end in a clash of cultures; they can be funny, food for anecdotes, food for thought.

50 YEARS OF LOCAL STUDIES

If you take a bird's-eye view over the last fifty-odd years of Himalayan studies, which happen to be also the *first* fifty-odd years of such research, you can easily make two observations: one, a lot has been done, in unequal density over the geographical range; and two, the great majority of works have been local studies. By unequal density I

mean that certain areas—and the people living in them—have received considerable attention, while other regions have been comparatively neglected. I shall not try to sort out the various reasons for this, but a hunch I have may be voiced. I suspect that researchers—especially foreigners—preferred and claimed spectacular and pleasant places as their domain. I am tempted to call this the Mountain Resort Syndrome. As for the quantity of fieldwork studies, the late Sixties to the early Eighties seem to have been the most fruitful years.

Now for observation two: the preponderance of local studies. This can be explained in various ways. One may begin with the physical conditions. A long, uneven row of white teeth rising up into the sky divides the Himalayan landscape: to its north a huge, high altitude plateau spotted with gentle cones; and a folded, rugged terrain on its southern and eastern fringes with high ridges, deep valleys, countless veins of riverbeds—many secluded biotopes. Such climatic and topographical conditions have caused nature to bring forth an astounding diversity in fauna and flora; and they have provided challenge and shelter also on the human plane. These many local biotopes of the Himalaya have favoured the emergence of—if I may say so—numerous localised sociotopes.

And, thus, as soon as this country was opened to foreigners, an immense variety of local cultures in the rugged folds of the Himalaya attracted scores of anthropologists who seized the opportunity they presented, unique and unexpected in the second half of the 20th century. At first, the anthropologists were few, countable on a single hand; then on two hands; and soon they came flooding in great numbers. It was like a gold rush—the promise of a lucky dig almost guaranteed for everyone. At one point the foreign anthropologists became so numerous that they could be counted as the 42nd tribal population of Nepal. Today, there are other foreign groups populating the country: the Foreign Aid, the NGOs, the World Bank, and the various Cultural Preservation tribes. But back then, indeed, there were many blank spots on the ethnographic map of the Himalaya to be filled: so many local cultures, unknown, unstudied; and in each locality local knowledge abounded, waiting

to be registered, classified, translated, contemplated.

You may wonder why I put such emphasis on the expression *local culture* rather than on labels such as *ethnic group* or *tribe*. In my opinion, this term is a useful one, for it stresses geographical criteria rather than racial, caste or ethnic ones: limited geographical entities as the units of cultural membership. And due to the relative isolation, even seclusion, of the areas in which these cultural micro-units came to flourish, it is 'place' more than 'ethnos' that constitutes them. Moreover, a spatial definition of a small cultural whole is more flexible than other definitions: it is open to fluctuation between neighbouring cultural units, to minimal variation from one valley to the next. This does not preclude the employment of conventional ethnonyms such as Tamang, Gurung, Magar and so on, names whose practical usefulness, as well as arbitrary and fuzzy nature, need not be further discussed here.

The expression *local culture* has not had the same success in academia as *local knowledge,* even though the latter presupposes the existence of the former. The latter was propagated in the 1980s by Clifford Geertz who even put *Local Knowledge* (1983) on the cover of one of his books, confirming his fame as a populariser of anthropological catch-phrases. The former term was coined half a century earlier, by the German sinologist Wolfram Eberhard, who spoke of *Lokalkulturen im alten China* (1942), denoting by this title the minority groups of the western and northern borderlands of Han-China, outside the Great Wall. Some of these were Himalayan local cultures situated in the Sino-Tibetan marches, and of some interest in the later course of my talk.

The comparison of the anthropological rush into the Himalayan region with a rush of gold-diggers comes to mind not only because there were rich mines to be prospected, but also on account of similar attitudes held by the two types of searchers with regard to the soil. Once an ethnographer had completed his or her reconnaissance trip and chosen a particular location as suitable, the place was soon considered to be his or her property. Such behaviour might even lead to invisible fences around the appropriated research area. The fantasy of

ownership was silently tolerated because it was generally shared by other researchers with regard to their own claims. Absurd as this may sound to the outsider, the effect was that most ethnographers—and, in particular, those that did extensive field-work—transformed their plots of land into closed universes, inside of which they were the sovereigns. The other local universes that were generated around them did not concern them, as they belonged to other sovereigns. The fences produced blinkers. And so we have, after 50 years of Himalayan ethnography, many disconnected, small universes with many local accounts, but few regards over the fences.

The advantage of this state of affairs is that a good number of the reports coming out of these 24 Little Kingdoms are very detailed, very specific, rich in views and perspectives from inside—in short, rich in local knowledge. Ethnographies of this kind constitute the indispensable basis for higher aspirations—be these middle-range or general theories or clear-cut comparative studies. The disadvantage is that most of the sovereigns over village worlds in all their industry towards assembling the thousand chips of their detailed local knowledge, have neither had the time nor the intention to look beyond the tips of their own noses or—as the Germans say—to look beyond the rims of their plates *(òber den eigenen Tellerrand zu schauen).* The time has come to do this and, thanks to the elementary research of the ethnographic prospectors, the prospects to get somewhere are not too dim.

REALMS FOR COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY
Before I touch upon two specific comparative domains I shall name some realms within ethnography which in my opinion seem particularly suitable for such studies.

But, first, what do I mean by comparative ethnography? Comparative ethnography in its simplest understanding is to put the facts of knowledge of one local universe side by side with those of other local universes. The facts to be assembled and held against each other should belong to the same kinds of things: apples to apples, pears to pears. The primary task of this exercise would be to find out similarities and differences between comparable sets of facts in the local universes

thus confronted and, perhaps, to suggest reasons for such differences and similarities. A second step would be to sort out to what degree the local cultures confronted might be considered as related within the framework of the things compared. And a third, optional step might be a speculation on how to explain such kinship between a series of local universes—a theory on interrelation.

As for the realms in which I think comparison might bring some promising results—or rather has already brought such results—I must warn you that their list is formed on the basis of my own orientation and predilections and is by consequence highly partial. Everyone is invited to enlarge the list according to his or her orientation, expertise and gusto.

In the large sector of 'material culture' (which I understand as material*ised* culture, as cultural production mirrored in physical things), comparisons beyond the rim of the plate could be made in artefacts— both tools and objects of daily use, and objects and paraphernalia of religious use; in architecture, which combines physical shapes with immaterial concepts, such as the symbolic ordering of inhabited space; and in fields of aesthetic production with less apparent practical services, such as paintings or sculptures, with regard to both style and meaning.

Other realms of cultural production such as dance; musical traditions; verbal arts like folksongs, myths, legends and other narrative matter; as well as ritual practices, all of which I group together under the general heading of 'performative culture', offer ample opportunity for comparison in view of content and of form. Even 'culinary culture', which is both material and performative and offers insights into ways of thinking, provides with its rules of etiquette and food taboos solid ground to draw regional comparisons. The greatest challenge for comparative studies lies perhaps in the immaterial realm of what, since Mauss and Durkheim, anthropologists have called 'collective representations'. To these belong all sorts of classification systems, taxonomies, cosmological concepts, worldviews; and in particular social classifications, which mould the shapes of social groups and determine behaviour within and between them. Among such socio-

logical concepts and practices I emphasise particularly alliance systems generated by marriage rules; lineage systems; and systems of social stratification. Finally, there are the languages, by which material things are named and the immaterial facts and significations are connected and expressed. For a long time the historical or conjectural interrelations between languages, within language families and between branches of language families, were considered to be the absolute basis, the ultimate legitimation even, for any kind of cultural comparison.

Let me now turn to some examples of comparative ethnography, selected from the fields just enumerated, in which I happen to be part of the picture. As you will notice, the impetus to compare accrues, more often than not, right out of local research—as a logical next step. When I went to the northern Magar in the Dhaulāgiri region, I was attracted, first and foremost, by their rich and vivid shamanic traditions; my film *Shamans of the Blind Country* (1981) tried to document this. But I soon realised that, no matter what these people up there were doing, their conduct was channelled by social regulations which gave all their acts—religious, economic, festive or leisure time—a particular tinge.

ALLIANCE SYSTEMS

These social codes could be traced back to a single marriage rule: that a man should marry his mother's brother's daughter (or a classificatory equivalent of hers). Regularly followed over time by all descent groups of the society, this rule leads to the formation of fixed matrimonial alliance partners, whereby one group is always wife-giver to a second group and wife-receiver from a third group. In order to function as an exchange system based on marriage, at least three such groups are needed. Principally in such a system, any number of participating groups above two could be integrated into a single matrimonial exchange circuit.

This system of social organisation is not a feature peculiar to the Magar; it is, in fact, rather widespread over a vast expanse, stretching in various degrees of completeness from the Amur region in eastern

Siberia down to the east Indian frontier territories and, leaving out China, to northern Burma and even further south into the Indonesian Archipelago. Nowhere, however, is it as close to the ideal model and as rigorously minimalistic as among the Magar. If one compares both mythological and historical sources with contemporary demographic facts it can be stated that the Magar have always preferred exchange circles composed of only three partner groups. In the beginning, there was just one such triple-alliance; now, there are about 30 independent circuits in a single village of about 2000 inhabitants. This means that, on average, a present-day triple-alliance is composed of not more than 70 individuals, leaving each partner group at a size of 20 to 25 persons.

Multiplication and transformation of triple-alliances result from a small number of effective mechanisms—applied when defective or worn-out circuits need remodelling. These mechanisms from the emergency kit are named for the consequences they generate: one, called 'breaking the bones' *(hāḍ phorā)*, results in bisecting a patriline; another 'separating houses' *(zimla zimla cāhine)* leads to the spatial separation and split of a previously cohabitant descent group; a third one, 'participating in a single milk line' *(nui)* called *nagar bhāi* is enacted when two sisters are married by men of different alliance groups, the result of which is the merging of two exchange groups. The same happens when a man marries the widow of someone belonging to a different exchange group than his own; the children from both marriages of the woman will be part of a single exchange unit, and this is called 'teat brotherhood' *(cuci bhāi)*. A fourth mechanism is called 'inverting the direction of exchange' *(ulte cakra)* and turns the fixed relations between wife-givers and wife-receivers upside down; and a last one forms a 'tie of blood-brother-sisterhood' *(mit-mitini)* and results, if the partners of such a blood-friendship are of the same sex, in the proscription of matrimonial ties in the subsequent generations and, if they are of opposite sex, in the creation of new mutual marriage options for their grandchildren. All of these mechanisms to transform existing alliance circles—resulting in fusion, fission, participation or inversion— are final. They are applied only in emergency situations,

when, under demographic pressure or irreconcilable feud, a triple-alliance is threatened with collapse. Viewed positively, these measures, forbidden under normal circumstances, are antidotes: to repair, maintain and perpetuate the one and only rule—to marry one's mother's brother's daughter within a small circle of alliances.

The mode of alliance, the bond of union between different kin groups arising out of this marriage rule, has been called various things by various authors: a system of 'unidirectional exchange', of 'indirect', 'delayed', 'circulative' or 'asymmetrical exchange', depending on the characteristics the authors wanted to stress. In his epochal study *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949/1967), Claude Lévi-Strauss called this system, based on prescriptive matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, 'generalised exchange', juxtaposing it, after a world-wide comparative survey of marriage rules, with two other and different basic modes of alliance that he had isolated: 'restricted', 'direct' or 'symmetrical' exchange based on bilateral cross-cousin marriage; and 'discontinuous' type of exchange, based on patrilateral cross-cousin marriage.

According to Lévi-Strauss and the sources available during his time, the patrilateral type of prescriptive alliance, although a logical possibility, was practically inexistent in an undiluted form, the reason being its supposed lack of integrative qualities, whereas the matrilateral type had gained wide distribution due to its sociological potential of integrating several, if not all, exchange groups of a local society. The bilateral type of direct exchange, for its part, had its stronghold in the aboriginal societies of Australia, in ancient village China, and in the tribal societies of South America and Indonesia.

The indirect mode of exchange was characterised by Lévi-Strauss as an open but also risky structure, a 'va-banque game', a 'sociological adventure' even, arguing that a specific group A that gave its daughters to group B would never be sure of being recompensed by a group C or X with an equivalent set of women coming into the own group. This speculative theoretical assumption can be tested by a look at the Magar system as it actually works. No Magar wants to take risks, especially not where the most vital interests are at stake—the reproduction of the own group. What is sought, on the contrary, is

reinsurance; and this is provided, according to their own experience, when the matrimonial exchange circles are small, not exceeding three partners, and the participants are close neighbours. And this is why all their exchange circuits, both in the past and the present, are small and triangular. These qualities are the safest way to guarantee control over the functioning of the system, safer even than in a system of direct reciprocity. For, in an arrangement with three exchange partners, there is—at any dual transaction pending between a wife-giver and a wife-receiver—a third party present keeping watch as an arbiter. In the next matrimonial transaction, this arbiter will be cast into the role of wife-giver or wife-receiver of one of the two other groups, leaving his referee-post to the one of the two partners who is not immediately involved in the actual exchange deal. In direct exchange, on the other hand, the impartial third party, is missing; the system thus lacks supervision.

Seen in the light of the security and risks of the system, Himalayan test cases seem to render obsolete the sharp separation between direct and indirect exchange, between restricted and generalised modes of alliance that Lévi-Strauss had drawn in his early opus. Both modes, in different ways, serve the same purpose—to ensure the unimpeded rotation of the social wheel.

KIN CLASSIFICATION

In the trailblazing book referred to above, one chapter bears the title 'Bone and Flesh'. In it Lévi-Strauss assembles a good number of Asian societies that make a distinction between relatives of 'bone' and relatives of 'flesh'; 'bone' referring to those on the father's side and 'flesh' to those on the mother's. He considered this distinction an 'unmistakable symptom' of, even a 'leitmotiv' to the presence of generalised exchange. For, in a system of generalised exchange, two exchange groups form a fixed pair of opposites, where one is exclusively 'bone' to the other and the other exclusively 'flesh' to the one. In a society with restricted exchange, on the other hand, the distinction would be a contradiction, as each of the two alliance partners would be both 'bone' and 'flesh' to the other. Restated in other words, Lévi-Strauss's

central point was that the conceptualisation of 'bone' and 'flesh' makes sense in societies that favour the practice of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage; whereas in those that prefer the patrilateral or the bilateral type, including all others that have a form of symmetrical exchange, a differentiation between relatives of the 'bone' and relatives of 'flesh' would serve no distinctive purpose. I will now put this proposition to an empirical test by confronting it with a number of cases from the Himalaya not yet known at the time *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* was written.

Let me begin with the Magar, whose alliance system I outlined before. In this society a triangular relation between three exchanging partners is superimposed by three dual relations of fixed nature, each patrilineal descent group being wife-giver to one and wife-receiver to the other of the two matrimonial partners. In this fixed dual relation the local term for the patrilineal descent group, *rus*, or 'bone', automatically takes the meaning of 'wife-receiver'. Accordingly, the expression for the descent group of a woman, *sya*, or 'flesh', (alternatively called *nui*, or 'milk') extends to the meaning of 'wife-giver'. The double expression *sya-rus* designates consistently the unit of prefigured dual alliance partners: the pair of wife-taker and wife-giver. In other words, the Magar case accords perfectly with the Lévi-Straussian assumption.

The Tamang of central Nepal are divided into a number of patriclans which they call *rui* or 'bones'. 'Bone' can be characterised by the following features: by patrilinearity; by patrilocality; by a strict rule of exogamy according to which any 'breaking of the bone' *(hāḍ phorowa)*, i.e., sexual union inside the own clan, is considered incest; by the existence of clan-owned territories *(kipaṭ)*, and by the worship of clan-specific deities *rui-gyi-pho-lha*. Membership of a clan is inherited through the bones of a father's body, *na khru*. Tamang kinship terminology is predominantly symmetrical: parallel cousins and cross-cousins are separated by different denominations; cross-cousins on both sides, however, form a single category, whereas parallel cousins are grouped with brothers and sisters. Sister-exchange with symmetrical modes of reciprocity is frequently practised and is preferably repeated

in subsequent generations. Sister-exchange is locally called *depa*='swap' or 'barter'. This expression is used when Tamang refer to cross-cousin marriage of the bilateral type. Following Lévi-Strauss, all this should be incompatible with the distinction between 'bone' and 'flesh' relatives.

The various Kirati tribes of eastern Nepal also employ the metaphors of 'bone' and a complementary substance for affinal relatives. They call relatives on the father's side *hāḍ* or *hāḍ nātā*; those on the mother's side are called *dudh* or 'milk'. 'Bone' or *hāḍ* are the agnates, 'milk' or *dudh*, the uterine kin. In their kinship terminology, cross-cousins are usually paired with sisters. Sexual joking between cousins is prohibited, which indicates that marriages between them are not valued at all. Unions between agnates are taboo for seven generations, those with matrilateral kin for three. Once the taboo period of seven generations for bone relatives has run out, intra-clan marriages are not only tolerated, but intentionally sought. Such a marriage between agnates is termed *hāḍ phora* or 'breaking the bone line'. A single intra-clan connection of this type leads immediately to clan fission. What has been a solid exogamic clan group up to this moment is now split into two separate marriage units, between which, henceforward, marital ties will be contracted intentionally. The members of the two newly established clan segments receive different magical clan names. The institution of marriage does not promote outward communication. Instead, people prefer village endogamy and endogamy within those branches of clans that have split by the mechanism of 'breaking the bones'. This obvious tendency for endopraxis leads to an atomisation and localisation of society and may, according to Charles McDougal, have contributed to the fact that the Kiranti as a whole have split up into numerous tribes and subtribes in a much higher proportion than have other hill people of the Nepal Himalaya.

Even if cross-cousins of any kind are prohibited as marriage partners, the Kiranti praise nonetheless one particular form of direct exchange as their ideal: classificatory sister-exchange. Thinking and acting this way, they join what Lévi-Strauss would have found incom-

patible—the division of kin into 'bone'- and 'milk'-relatives with a tendency to direct matrimonial exchange.

The kinship system of the Naxi in northwestern Yunnan is based on the assumption that the paternal relatives supply the bones of an individual and the maternal ones the flesh. Fathers are 'bone' *(o)*, mothers are 'flesh' *(na)*; sons are 'bone', daughters are 'flesh'. Women are like trees, men like rocks; just like trees root on rocks, women take root on the 'bone' of men. Coming from the 'bone-line' of their fathers, women bring 'flesh' into the 'bone-line' of their husbands. Marriage within the 'bone' is frowned upon and considered as incest to be punished severely by the 'people of one's own bone'. 'Relatives of the flesh' can be both wife-givers and wife-receivers to the 'bone-line' of a person. This follows from the logic of the preferred marriage rule which recommends taking home as wife the daughter of the father's sister. In other words, the Naxi practise, at least in ideal circumstances, patrilateral cross-cousin marriage, which contradicts sharply the structural conclusions Lévi-Strauss drew from the division of kin into 'bone' and 'flesh'.

The social organisation of the Sherpa rests on strong patrilineal and patrilocal clans—at least up to the time before they became a ubiquitous lot of city dwellers. Their clans are called *ru*, or 'bones'. The complementary substance *sha*, 'flesh', designates the relatives on the female side. There is nothing peculiar to this, as it confirms a pattern followed by many Tibetan and other Himalayan local cultures. Two things, however, make the case of the Sherpa special. As can be reconstructed from their historical documents, all existing clans and subclans of today, over 30 in number, go back to four original protoclans. Although each of the split subclans adopted a new clan name and some even acquired new clan territories, they all continued to operate matrimonially, as if they had never divided, following the rules of exogamy that were fixed long ago by the four protoclans. In other words, Sherpa clans are extremely solid—the 'bones' may split or branch out, but they cannot be broken. This conspicuous feature of strict exopraxis over long stretches of time—supported by long, written genealogies—may be seen in the light of another characteristics of Sherpa social

organisation: they have never adopted any elementary form of marriage alliance—neither matrilateral, nor bilateral, nor patrilateral cross-cousin marriage. And yet, they distinguish between 'bone-relatives' and 'flesh-relatives'. For them, this distinction has nothing to do with restricted or with generalised exchange; it is just a reminder to the 'bones' to import 'flesh' from the descendants of one of the other protoclan 'bones'.

The last Himalayan case to be presented here—that of the Nyinba of the upper Karnali—introduces an additional element, stratification by rank. This local society of Tibetan origin builds, as Nancy Lévine has conclusively demonstrated, a complex genetic and social philosophy on the concept of *rö* or 'bone' and its complementary substance of *t'ag* or 'blood', sometimes also referred to as *sha* or 'flesh'. In Nyinba thought *rö* covers three meanings: 'bone', 'clan' and 'membership to a social rank'. As 'bone', *rö* refers to a corporal substance to be found in man and animals alike. As 'clan', *rö* describes people who share descent from a common agnatic line of acknowledged ancestors. In the third meaning *rö* (or *rigs)* hints at a 'social stratum' to which one belongs by birth. All three meanings overlap. The Nyinba believe that the substance *rö* is transported from father to offspring via the male sperm, the white colour of which is associated with the white of the bones. The soft, fleshy and red parts of a child's body, however, come from the bones of its mother and are transmitted by her uterine blood, or *t'ag*. No *rö* without *t'ag*. But *t'ag* is only complementary to *rö*, for the primary component for the production of uterine blood of a woman is the substance *rö* that she inherits through her father. Maternal relatives are collectively called *t'ag*-relatives; agnates are termed *rö*-relatives. Parallel cousins on the mother's side are referred to as *t'ag pun* 'brothers and sisters by blood', whereas children of brothers are spoken of as *röpa pun* or 'brothers and sisters by bone'. Cross-cousins, on the other hand, are collectively called *nyen* 'affines', as they are considered as possible marriage partners. In fact, marriage between real or classificatory cross-cousins (no matter of which side) is praised as an ideal union.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Nyinba society is divided into two social strata—higher ranking land-owners, *dagpo*, and lower ranking offspring of former slaves, *yogpo*. Only members of the upper stratum belong to established clans, or *rü*, with separate clan names; those of the lower stratum do not have clan names at all. Clans with names do not intermarry with clans without names. And so, one does not marry outside one's own stratum. The norms for rank-endogamy are based on the premise that people of different *rò* in the sense of 'social rank' represent incompatible types of human beings, whose mixture of substances is inappropriate.

As the example of the Nyinba shows, the concept of 'bone' can be employed also as a marker for social rank, indicating exopraxis within the own stratum and endopraxis against other strata outside. Such correlation is not an isolated affair. The Yi (formerly called Lolo) of Yunnan and Sichuan for instance, used to pair clan exogamy with class endogamy. Society was divided into three social layers, forming two classes. The uppermost layer was constituted by the ruling class *nuoke*, the aristocrats, who held the biggest share of land property. This layer/class was referred to as the 'black bones', in contrast to the 'white bones' made up by the two lower layers of society: on the one hand by people of free origin, called *qunuo*, who were owners of small fields; and on the other by people without land, called *ajia*. Marriage between members of the two lower layers was permitted. That is, marriage was allowed within the limits of the 'white bones', but strictly forbidden between the classes of 'black bones' and 'white bones'. Each of the two endogamic classes was composed of several exogamic, patrilocal clans and the preferred type of kin alliance was bilateral cross-cousin marriage.

The division of society into 'white and black bones' to denote hierarchical endogamous ranks is also widespread among the peoples of the central Asian steppes—but with an inversion of the colour assignment. For instance, the Kazakh of the Altai region used to employ two different terms to denote their patrilineal clans, both carrying the meaning of 'bone': one was *sök* and the other one was *uru* or *ruu*—the latter might be related to the Tibetan word *ru(s)*, also meaning 'bone', while

sök can be found both in Mongolian and in several Turkic dialects. Just like the Kalmuk, the Altai Kazakh distinguished between two layered ranks: the 'white bones', *aq syek (sök)*, designating the noble clans presumably descended from Jenghis Khan; and the 'black bones', *kara syek*, consisting of the commoners. Just as it was prohibited to marry within one's own 'bone', marriages between 'white bones' and 'black bones' were equally not allowed—for opposite reasons, however, the former being too close for marriage and the latter being too separate.

According to Lawrence Krader, the image of 'bone relatives' for the agnates on the father's side and the complementary image of 'flesh relatives' on the mother's side was a conceptual feature shared by all pastoral societies of the Asian steppes to express the supremacy of the principles of patrilinearity. Over time, this concept was used also to consolidate the interior division of society into classes, by separating the bones into 'white bones' (for higher ranks) and 'black bones' (for commoners). The societies concerned were the Ordos, the Khalkha, the Chakas and all eastern Mongolian groups; the Kalmuks among the western Mongols; and the Kazakh and the Usbek among the Turks. The only societies to escape these developments of stratification were the Altai Turks, the Kirgiz, the Buryat, the Monguor of Gansu and the Turkmen, and these had never made the distinction between 'white' and 'black bones'.

Let me sum up this excursion into comparative kinship studies. All things considered, it seems not justified to read the widespread kin metaphor of 'bone and flesh' as a clue to one particular type of matrimonial alliance: that of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, or indirect exchange. Only one case—that of the Magar—fits this hypothesis. All other Himalayan test cases point in different directions. The Tamang, the Nyinba and the Yi combine a preference of bilateral cross-cousin marriage with the 'bone and flesh' concept, which indicates, together with the Kirati case, in which classificatory sister exchange is striven for, a compatibility with the direct mode of matrimonial exchange. The Naxi, for their part, connect the kin metaphor of 'bone and flesh' with a discontinuous alliance system, generated by a preference for the

patrilateral type of cross-cousin marriage. And the Sherpa use 'bone' as a signifier for the indestructibility of the patriline, without practising any of the three elementary modes of kin alliance. In some, or should one say, many, cases (if one looks from the Himalaya further north to the Mongolian and central Asian societies and further east to the Sino-Tibetan marches), the kin metaphor of 'bone (and flesh)' is employed, by dividing it into colour components, to indicate social stratification. In short, 'bone and flesh' has been considered apt for social classification in numerous local societies of the Asian continent, irrespective of the modes of alliance involved.

MATERIAL CULTURE

Before I come to a close, I would like to touch upon an area in which I see considerable potential for comparative ethnographic research: that of physical objects. These have an advantage over immaterial subjects: they are visibly, tangibly, undeniably there; they have size, shape and substance, independent of the observer. As objects they have objective qualities; as material things they are pieces of evidence. They are apples, unquestionably to be compared with apples.

When I studied the local religious practices of the northern Magar, I soon realised—as others realised before and after me—that they were not only comparable to similar practices in neighbouring local societies, but displayed features similar to those found in the shamanic traditions of Siberia and other North Asian regions. These similarities covered various realms: the body techniques of the local experts, their gear and garment, the sequence and course of their acts, their repertoire of oral knowledge, their mythologies, their cosmological ideas and worldviews, their position vis-à-vis the society in which they stood out. Astounding as these similarities were, whenever I tumbled upon them, I found no convincing clue that would allow me to assemble them into a coherent picture, let alone to explain them. Any essentialist approach, such as Eliade's, pushed me off. Finally, I decided to reduce the scale of an unassailable topic by concentrating on a concrete and single object.

I chose one which all these shamanic experts—north and south—

shared; which they considered indispensable; which served a multitude of functions; which materialised immaterial concepts; which reflected or symbolised religious thought and ideas: a vessel of signification. This object, the ideal 'semiophore', was, quite obviously, the drum. The instrument's aura was amplified—apart from the fact that it radiated with meaning—because it was venerated by those who created and employed it. The respect it received equalled the respect shown to books in societies taking pride in their scriptures. In fact, the shaman's drum turned out to be, in those local cultures without writing, a worthy equivalent to the book.

So I started to compare drums of shamanic use as physical artefacts, first in the Himalaya and later in areas of the classical North Asian tradition. The first surprising conclusion was this: morphologically, all shamanic drums are of one and the same basic type. Wherever you look, from Lapland to Kamchatka, from the circumpolar regions down to the green Himalayan hills, from the Bheri to the Amur—the drum employed by the shamanic experts is a frame drum with a wooden hoop, formed by a bent and overlapping lath; the frame is covered, in the great majority of cases, by a leather membrane stretched over one side, while a handle, installed inside the hoop, is grasped from the other, open side; the membrane will be beaten by a single, separate drumstick.

The second observation was that although all shamanic drums belong to one and the same class, no individual specimen is identical to any other. Each drum is a unique piece. To a degree, this may result from the circumstances and techniques employed to fabricate the instrument, which are the complete reverse of a modular way of production, invented and perfected more than two thousand years ago in Ch'in, or China. But the individual shape of each shaman drum is also intentional—for drums are considered to be living organisms with individual births, youths, adult lives, ageing and deaths.

A single, elementary type on the one hand; and countless variation in the manufactured individual pieces on the other—within these poles unfolds the unlimited morphological wealth of the Asian shamanic drum.

As for the Himalayan region, two distinct types can be isolated, each of which has its own spread. The first, the western type, has its area of distribution around the Dhaulāgiri and Annapurna ranges. Its main characteristics are a frame covered with a membrane on one side only; a handle inside the hoop held through the uncovered open side; and a straight stick which beats the exterior side of the membrane. This morphological group may be subdivided into several regional variations: a Dhaulāgiri variation can be found among the northern Magar, the Chantel, the inhabitants of the Bhuji Khola and among various Kāmi populations westward up to the Jajarkot region; an Annapurna variation is found among the Thakali, the Kāli Gandaki Magar and the Gurung; whilst a jungle variation is used by the Chepang of the Tarai slopes. All these variants entertain close morphological similarities with the drums of Siberian and Mongolian shamans.

The second basic Himalayan type extends roughly from the Daraundi Khola in the west across the entire range of middle hills eastward up to Darjeeling, covering the areas of the Ghale, the western, central and eastern Tamang, the Thami, the Sherpa, the various Rai groups and the Limbu. This type is morphologically characterised by a frame covered with a membrane on each of its two sides and an exterior handle rising out of the bottom part of the hoop; the drumstick is usually bent. This basic eastern type displays organological affinities with the Tibetan Buddhist *nga-chen* drum. Even though the two elementary types of Himalayan shamanic drums appear to be rather different, they are in fact members of a single morphological class.

The North Asian drums are all of a single basic type, cognates to the Dhaulāgiri and Annapurna variants, with a few exceptions on the south-western and north-eastern (polar) fringes. These exceptions, found in Manchuria and in Chukotka, differ from the basic type in that they have a handle attached to the exterior rim of the hoop, a bit like the eastern Himalayan type.

Until very recently, the two large regions of the Himalaya and Northern Asia have not been seriously compared to one another, one reason being different histories and personnel of ethnographic exploration; and another being that they seemed to be separated by a gap. This gap

was marked by the extensive deserts between them and the little-known areas of the northern Sino-Tibetan marches. With regard to the shamanic drum, I was able to fill in a few blank spots by studying the membranophones of the Naxi in northern Yunnan and those of the Qiang in the Min Shan Mountains of northern Sichuan. Among the Qiang I made a discovery: their shaman drum resembles closely the Chepang type in the south of Nepal and the Darkhat drum of Mongolia in the north. It is a missing link, uniting, as it were, the two separate blocks.

Since then I have treated the two areas as a single comparative universe. The question remained as to how to deal with the apparent morphological similarities registered over such a huge territory with so many different societies and such divergent histories. I decided to put formal criteria to the fore, applying the tools of transformational theory, as had been developed successfully in modern biology to study the metamorphoses of living organisms, and in anthropology for the study of myths. In other words, I introduced to a 'science of form' (as D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson had called it) an object of material culture, taking each particular drum as a transformational manifestation of those around it. This led to the emergence of a huge web of interdependent pieces. And the lack of historical evidence to prove movements of diffusion could be balanced by installing a morphological navigation system. This enabled me to locate any given shamanic drum with considerable precision on the geographical and cultural map of the pegged-out universe of comparison.

As with drums, so with shamanism, or more correctly, shamanisms. For in the same way, as the material manifestations of this type of religious practice vary from place to place, so do the corresponding belief systems. Not regulated by any fixed written dogma, they transform one another from place to place, from one local culture to the next. Each shaman's drum is a peephole into a localised shamanic universe, its most compact materialisation. On account of its manifold functions, the shaman's drum paves the way for many entries: to the ritual practices it accompanies; to the mythological chants for which it pounds metre and rhythm; to the dances, kinetic movements and ritual

journeys it animates; and to the world of ideas and supernaturals, which it depicts on its membranes. Comparing shamanic drums on a large scale is an invitation to similar comparisons between those numerous localised cultures and their non-unified religions, bound together only by an invisible web of constant transformations.

Ladies and gentlemen, please let me end my talk as I started it—with a word of reminiscence. Last September was a black month for Nepal. In a single blow the country lost a score of its best people and some of its best allies. One of them was a friend.

I met Harka Gurung through Fürer-Haimendorf, who had convened, back in 1973, a conference on Himalayan Anthropology at SOAS. Harka had come down from Edinburgh as if he had just walked down from the Lamjung hills. His stout presence impressed everyone. Over the years the places of our encounters changed: New York, Naxal, Zürich. In Naxal, we had our best times together, in a stucco hut with no furniture in it. Fortunately, it had a fridge. In this house we would play our favourite game: daring ethnographic comparisons. The audacity of arguments was regularly fuelled by spirits from the fridge. Harka was always a few steps ahead. Our preferred topics were: the Pig Cultures of Nepal; the Green Religions of the Middle Hills; the Bamboo Cultures of the East. In his memory—in your vein, Harka—one may continue with comparative ethnography of the Himalaya.