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New Past for the Sake of a Better Future: Re-inventing the history of the Kirant in East Nepal

Grégoire Schlemmer

In the Hindu kingdom of Nepal, official history was for a long time only the genealogy of ruling dynasties, and it focused mainly on national unification. This phenomenon reflects the domination of the Indo-Nepalese in the country, which was unified through conquest in the second part of the eighteenth century. Consequently ethnic populations, as well as low castes, were rejected for a long time as marginal and prevented from holding any kind of influential function, and also from writing a history of their own. With the democratic revolution in 1990, which has led to the emergence of freedom of expression, ethnic minorities now want their share of the cake, and they fight for social, economic and political recognition. While traditionally any wish to elevate one's position in society implied a full adherence to the high caste model, now perhaps the only common feature of their claims is to question the Brahman domination in the country, the so-called *Bāhunvād* ('Brahmanocracy').¹ The wishes of ethnic minorities are founded on claims of a common identity and culture, and one of the privileged ways to express this is through possessing a proper history. Indeed, for the Kirant (which is one of these ethnic groups)² a new past is emerging, written in Nepali or English, portrayed in booklets, and sometimes found on various web sites. These publications are my main

¹ Nepal is officially a "Hindu Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom." Brahmans constituted around 13 percent of a total population of more than twenty two million inhabitants in 2001. The *Chetri* or 'warrior' caste equivalent to the Indian *Kṣatriya*, who share with the Brahmans the status of a 'pure' caste, – make up around 16 percent of the population. Comparatively, the 'ethnic groups' category of the census constitutes a third of the population (the others being mainly other castes and religious groups; Gurung 1998). High castes exert much of the political but also economic and cultural power. On the relation between Brahmans and the state, see Bouillier 1995. On *bāhunvād* as a main factor of discrimination against the marginalized groups, see Lawoti 2001. On the perception of this phenomenon by indigenists themselves, see Tamang 1999.

² This name can be written *Kirāt*, *Kirāta*, *Kirāṭi*, *Kiranti*... To simplify the reading I have decided to use the term Kirant, and to use *Kirāta* when referring specifically to the old ruling dynasty (see below). The same applies to the word *mundhum* (written *mudhum*, *muddhum*...). Nepali, if rendered in italics, is transliterated according to Turner's system.

sources of information.³ Through an analysis of these documents, this article attempts to describe how Kirant indigenists view their history in this new political context.

I use the term “indigenist” to refer to intellectuals who write about (usually their own) ethnic groups, promoting their culture, identity, and rights in the nation. They are usually cut off from most of the rural Kirant, but present themselves as spokespersons for their groups. So the rewriting of history is not initiated in rural Kirant: all discourses I will present came from a minority of partially uprooted intellectuals.⁴ This fact leads us to ask how urbanized and uprooted people perceive the culture they want to promote, comparing the rural life they leave behind and an urban middle class they emulate. Rejecting official history, Kirant indigenists try to write their own history by setting themselves up as a dignified nation.⁵ But given the lack of documents concerning the history of Kirant, how can these indigenists pretend to write an attested history? We shall see how this past emerges from a mix of sources, like the traditional myths collected among elders of the community (which can be considered as one kind of ‘local history’), and other materials, such as researchers’ books, classical Sanskrit literature (such as the *Mahābhārata*), as well as royal chronicles. I will try to show how indigenists deal with these sources and how they express their history and identity.

³ I should also note that data used for this article were collected in the field (between 1996 and 2002), but this subject was not my main concern at that time (my main research topic is the religious organization of the Kulung Rai, one of the remotest Rai groups).

⁴ A similar topic has already been dealt with by M. Gaenzle (2002), who shows a development from a “spatio-temporal production of locality” in a traditional context to a “translocal anchorage of Kirant identity” based on the affirmation of a distinct culture. The present article, more focused on political aspects of the rewriting of history and culture around the notion of Kirant, can be read as a continuation of his article.

⁵ Of course, not all these intellectuals are motivated by a unique and clear goal. There are different opinions, different ways to act and write, and also numerous contradictions, showing that views are emergent. Differences exist between Rai and Limbu writers (two major groups constituting the Kirant entity) and amongst Rai authors, who generally adopt a more traditional approach: they refer to their own village traditions (Bam Bahadur), deal mainly with their own group (Bhupadhwaj, Kandangwa), and express their personal points of view (Bhuidal Rai, Nepal Khambu), sometimes being very vindictive (Tanka Bahadur). In contrast, Limbu authors (S. Subba, Kainla, and T.B. Subba) have an academic style, even though they sometimes evince a militant tendency. It could be due to Chemjong’s influence (the most famous Limbu intellectual, appointed professor at the university of Kathmandu in 1961; see Gaenzle 2002), but it can be more generally explained by the Limbu’s higher social and economic integration, both in Nepal and in India. The majority of those Limbu writers were born far from the traditional Limbu area, have studied in India (Darjeeling, Bengal or elsewhere) and are still linked to universities, where some of them are teachers. On the other side, Rai authors are mainly born in Rai villages, did their (shorter) studies in Kathmandu and are not linked to any academic institutions. But they all live in cities and were educated outside their traditional culture, which explains why they express their wish to know more about their own culture.

Introduction: The rise of ethnic movements and intellectuals

Kirant is a generic word used to designate related ethnic groups mainly located in the mountains of East Nepal but also numerous in Sikkim and Darjeeling (India). They number approximately one million (around five percent of the Nepalese population) and speak languages belonging to Tibeto-Burman. Kirant culture is clearly different from the Tibetan and Indo-Nepalese ones, although it has been influenced by them through long term contacts. The Kirant are mainly composed of *Rāi* (also called *Khambu*) and of *Limbu* people (also called *Yakthumba*).

During the second part of the 18th century, King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of the modern Nepali state, conquered present-day Nepal. After a few years of violent war in which the king was confronted with strong armed resistance, he included the Kirant area in his kingdom. To conciliate these turbulent groups, he granted them a certain amount of political and cultural autonomy with regard to land ownership. But these privileges have progressively been withdrawn due to a slow but continuous process of land spoliation, limitation of political rights, and imposition of a strict Hindu model (Caplan 1970, Sagant 1975). Actually, less than a third of the population in the traditional Kirant settlement area are Kirant. These political, demographical and economical factors (all linked to control of peoples and resources) are of course fundamental for understanding the birth of indigenist movements (see, among others, Weiner 1978).

Resistance movements have appeared since Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest, but because of the government's repression and a ban on any kind of demonstration, they were not very well organized.⁶ Nevertheless, ethnic claims were upheld by the emigrant communities outside Nepal. The relative liberty of expression, coupled with an already existing ethnic awareness of the Limbu community, explains the early rise of Kirant ethnic movements in Sikkim in the second half of the 19th century.⁷ These

⁶ Nevertheless, during the Rana period (1846-1950) political meetings were periodically organized in the hills, sometimes leading to sporadic revolts. Rai leaders like Ram Prasad participated in the 1950 armed revolution against 'Ranarchy' (Rai 2051). At that time, Rai and Limbu armed units wanted to drive high caste peoples out of some Kirant villages. During the thirties and forties, another important movement was by Phalgunanda, a Limbu former adept of *Jasmāni* (a devotional *bhakti* sect). He created a new Kirant religion, drawing on puritan principles (vegetarianism and a ban on alcohol) and Limbu traditions and scripts. It became fairly well spread, and several temples were built, but it was in the end strongly persecuted as an oppositional movement, apparently because it began to revive Limbu nationalism (Jones 1976, Pradhan 1991: 171). There are still some adepts of this movement (Subba 1999: 116). Finally, sporadic political resistance movements (mainly lead by members of the Congress and Communist parties) appear between the revolutions of the fifties and the nineties, like the 1974 armed struggle in Okhaldunga involving several Rai; see "Human Rights Movement 1961-1991" web site.

⁷ During the middle of the 17th century, the new Tibetan rulers of Sikkim unified the Lepcha (the 'native' population of Sikkim) and the local Limbu under the Lhomongsongsum, the association of the Tibetans (*Lho*), the Lepchas (*Mon*) and the

movements were officially campaigning for the preservation of the Kirant language and culture, but were also fora for political discussions.

Over and above the Hindu and Buddhist influences on their social environment, Kirant intellectuals have been affected by different kinds of discourse. First, the British cultural, linguistic and historical studies carried out on Kirant were widely re-appropriated, in form as well as in content, and quoted by indigenists⁸. The second source of influence was Christianity, spread through British schools where some members of the local elite were educated. Even if not converted, some intellectuals (such as Chemjong) used Christianity as a model and as a source of inspiration, perhaps because it showed the possibility of the existence of a respectful religion, different from Hinduism and Buddhism. And thirdly, leftist movements played an important role in inspiring oppositional forces from the beginning of the century (Subba 1992). They often tint indigenist discourse with social demands. All these influences are still present in the way indigenists define themselves.

A fourth factor is perhaps coming from ethnic movements in India, both the tribal messianic movements (which share numerous similarities with the Kirant one, see Fuchs 1965) and, more surprisingly, the Hindu nationalist movements, which fight to “re-establish the Hindu nation in its superior and glorious splendour” (Pandey 1993: 240). It is difficult to know how far such movements influence Kirant intellectuals (no explicit reference is made to them), but several shared features exist between Kirant and Hindu nationalists from India. Reification of the Country, the Community, the Religion (all existing naturally and similarly since the beginning of time), anchoring the population in a territory (Hindus are the natives of the fatherland of India, in contrast to Muslims or Christians), the necessary link between a nation and a religion, or even the emphasis on the military values (*bāhubala*, the physical strength): all these points characterizing Hindu nationalist movements (Pandey 1993) are, as we will see, also fundamental features of the Kirant indigenist movements.

Limbu (*Tsong*). Organised on the basis of Tibetan values, this association tried to conciliate newly conquered groups but did not give real power to them. In any case, this endowed the Limbu with a sense of identity, and limited their absorption into the well-organized Gorkhali (e.g. Nepali) identity movement that appeared in Sikkim during the 19th century. Indeed, despite the Sikkimese government’s wish to federate all centrifugal forces in the country, Nepalese from all groups (numerous in Sikkim) organized as a political and cultural entity. Kirant could then play on both fields: they were members of the Gorkhali associations and also claimed membership in the autochthonous community of Sikkim (Subba 1999).

⁸ Campbell, Hamilton, Kirkpatrick and Hodgson are the most often quoted (e.g. R.K. Rai 1998). Some are thanked (as Hodgson, who wrote that Kirant are one of the most interesting groups of the Himalayas), and some are criticised (as Hansson, for having shown the linguistic diversity of Rai, e.g. their disunity). These examples show the difficulty of carrying out neutral research under these conditions: one is either for the Kirant cause, or against it.

After the democratic revolution of 1990, indigenist movements (locally known as *jana jāti*) gained new strength. Freedom of expression made room for the creation of diverse Kirant organisations. They all claim Kirant unity, but their multiplication reflects the endemic fragmentation of Kirant society. Although there are real cultural links between all Kirant groups, there has never been an ‘emotional community’ (Subba 1990), and these differentiations are a major handicap for the creation of a strong and unified community.⁹ These new ethnic organisations, officially motivated by cultural goals, coordinated political activities by establishing contacts between associations of the same type (some were united in the Forum for the Rights of All Nationalities that fought especially for a better political participation of ethnic minorities) and with foreign researchers, NGOs, the UN, members of the political parties, or the Maoist movement.

I. Rewriting history

a. Extension of Kirant: From clanic factionalism to pan-Mongol unity

In their books the first question the indigenists try to answer is often: who are the Kirant and where did they come from? In the absence of material evidence, the name of a group is sometimes the major basis for re-thinking history. For a long time there have been debates concerning the extension of the label "Kirant". Behind the question; “who are the Kirant?” there is a debate on identity leading to the question of legitimacy concerning the presence of different ethnic groups on Nepalese soil.

The term Kirant is not an endonym. It is an old Sanskrit word that apparently had two main meanings. The first one can be rendered as "highlanders"; it also referred to a form of Shiva (Frédéric 1987: 632). There is a complex link between this god, mountains, and tribal people (see below). The second (and apparently more common) meaning referred in a depreciating generic sense to Himalayan tribes, without further precision.¹⁰

⁹ This fragmentation even concerns each sub-community of the Kirant entity. The unity of the Limbu community is stronger than that of the Rai. Symptomatically, despite variations, the Limbu language is one while more than 20 Rai languages are identified (Hansson 1991, Driem 2002). Limbu culture and political organisation is more unified, perhaps because of the old centralizing influence of Sikkim. Similarly, in Sikkim there is a Rai group unified by a shared culture and a feeling of being one group. This unity probably results from the coexistence of migrants from different Rai groups: it certainly leads to the formation of a common Rai culture through cultural homogenisation and attenuation of differences. This is one more reason why Limbu and Kirant of Sikkim play an active part in the process of ethnic claims.

¹⁰ For an analysis of its use in Sanskrit literature, see, among others, Lévi (1905), Rönow (1936) and Chatterjee (1998: 27-36); for the history of its application to Rai and Limbu populations, see Gaenzle (2000: 2-12, 92-96). It also should be noted that different

There is evidence of the term's use in old texts, such as the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Purāṇa* as well as Ptolemy's writing. Later this word was used by the Nepalese to refer to the ethnic groups of East Nepal: especially the Rai and Limbu people. Its first documented occurrence in Nepal is in the *gopālarājavaṃśāvalī*, the genealogy of the herder kings, dating from the 14/15th century (Bajracharya 1971: 139). In any case, the Rai and Limbu people themselves, followed by the indigenists, have progressively appropriated this word, transforming it into a federative endonym, and have reconstructed this notion by giving it a new extension.

In Rai mythology, there is a common story explaining that the Kirant were originally four brothers. The first three (usually Rai, Limbu and, according to the group telling the story, Yakkha, Sunuwar, etc.) populated the Himalayas, while the last one stayed in the plains. Through this mythological lost brother, the Rai had the possibility to affiliate with different groups, and perhaps to be linked to a centre of power. Indeed, this fourth brother is often associated with the Meche and Koche, two populations from the plains who were apparently part of the Vijayanarayan kingdom, the earliest documented kingdom in East Nepal, going back to the time before the *Sen* rulers. This mythological period has been prolonged by indigenists; but rather than simply creating a link with populations from the plains, they rallied a large number of Asian populations around the banner of Kirant. Thus, indigenists were inspired by Western references containing different speculations of 19th century authors about physical, cultural and linguistic similarities between 'Mongoloid populations', with a view to building a theory of Asian people and the origin of human beings.

Chemjong (1967) is the first author who embarked on such a hypothetical archaeological and etymological synthesis. Adopting Chatterjee's terminology,¹¹ he regroups all Mongoloid populations under the category of Kirant, and perceives them as an *essence*. Any Sanskrit reference to "Kirant" (or supposedly related words) becomes historical evidence for a very large proto-Kirant group spread all over Eurasia. As an example, since the Rai are sometimes called *Khambu*, sometimes written *Kamboja*, the conclusion given by Chemjong is that Cambodia is populated by Kirant. Further, he quotes historians referring to an ancient population living close to the Mediterranean sea named *Kereti*, arguing that this can only be the

Indian ethnic groups present themselves as being Kirant (as some Mechei and Garo; Subba 1999: 26).

¹¹ Chatterjee is an Indian scholar. His book, published in 1951, is a historical work on "Indo-Mongoloid" groups (e.g. Tibeto-Burman speaking populations of India, a "group" he also calls "Kirata") and their 'contribution to the history and culture of India'. For indigenists, Chatterjee's book has the great merit of integrating Mongoloid people in Indian history... and calling them Kirant! But in fact it is not a panegyric to Mongoloid people: in this book the main Mongoloid contribution to Indian history can be summarized as a common wish to be converted to Hinduism and an effort to defend this religion against Muslim invaders.

deformed name of *Kirati*. Finally Chemjong lists various hypotheses which lead him to see a Kirant origin and influence in all the ancient civilizations from the Mediterranean Sea to Mongolia or Cambodia, and so to claim all (cultural, social, architectural...) achievements of these populations (the Persian empire, Ankor temples, etc.) as Kirant. For Chemjong and his numerous followers the historical anchorage and the guiding thread of their re-written history are confirmed by the recurrence of the word *Kirant* in all these references.

Thus the re-adoption of the originally pejorative name of Kirant offers glorious perspectives to Rai and Limbu intellectuals. By this “translocal anchorage of *Kiranti* identity”, the major concern of Chemjong is to show that Kirant history dates back as far as that of others and that *Kiranti* culture is on an equal footing with the great traditions (Gaenzle 2002: 340). But for some of his followers, like Tanka Bahadur Rai, the label Kirant becomes a synonym for the ‘mangol’ population,¹² unifying all Nepalese ethnic groups by a common history and common interests. And by the simple fact that the Rai and Limbu still bear the name of Kirant, these populations acquire the status of the purest and archetypal representatives of this ethnic entity. It provides them with historical depth, a prestigious past, and origins that are used to express their autochthony and ethnic specificity in opposition to the “Arya” (e.g. Indo-Nepalese), the “invaders” associated with the Sanskrit heritage and India.

b. Heritage and lost glory: The ancient nation of Kirant

The structure of Rai mythology is linked to a spatial and temporal axis extending from their mythical birthplace to their actual living area. This axis, or path, has several landmarks: one in Varāhakṣetra, the confluence of three important rivers and also the site of a famous and ancient Hindu shrine (linked to the Sen rulers, Krauskopff and Deuel Meyer 2000: 115); and one in Halesi, which seemed to be an important Rai political centre. Both are major places of pilgrimage (for Halesi, see Macdonald 1986). But some versions also add other places: talking about migration a villager explained to me that the Rai went to Kathmandu where they ruled. This claim, present in almost all Kirant groups’ mythology, seems strange. However, we can read in a Nepalese scholar’s book that “There were 29 kings of the Kirant dynasty who ruled over Nepal for about 1225 years” (from 900 B.C to 300 A.D); “They were the ancestors of the present day

¹² The word ‘Mangol’ stems from the Western scholars’ racial classification (mongoloid) of the Asian race (for example, some indigenists speak about “Mangolkirat nation”). In the Nepalese context, it refers to populations that western scholars actually call Tibeto-Burmese, by reference to a linguistic classification. But some indigenists do incorporate Austro-Asiatic or Indo-Aryan populations, like the Tharu and some other populations from the plains who, according to some indigenists, share among others with Kirant their status of natives.

Kirant” (Uprety 1994: 15). The existence of this ruling dynasty in Nepal seems to be an accepted fact, proved by old inscriptions,¹³ even if there is no evidence that this dynasty has any link with the current Kirant, except for the term.¹⁴

In any case, this fact, agreed upon by both Kirant indigenists and Nepalese scholars, is becoming a central element in the indigenist construction of memory and of the legitimacy of their culture. The chief consequence of this is to prove that “the first inhabitants of Nepal were Kirant”, even that they possessed “one of the oldest civilizations in the world”. Such affirmations of Kirant seniority can be found in almost all indigenist books. But they go further.

Several books written by Kirant intellectuals give an idealistic description of this glorious time of the Kirant rulers. They make up a long list of the brilliant achievements of Kirant civilization: some point out the socio-economic development achieved by its rulers (clay and weaving, development of irrigation, business, ‘developed and scientific administration’ are all Kirant inventions...), showing the Kirant as “contributing enormously for the thriving of ancient civilization” (Subba 1995: 17). One writer refers to the effects of this development: “because of its economic prosperity, people from different places, of different tribes and races came to Nepal and settled down” (www.infoclub.com.np/nepal), showing that this period was the origin of one of the oft-claimed characteristics of Nepal: its multiethnic composition. More frequent is the claim to greater social justice implemented by the Kirant: there was no social or gender discrimination, as in the caste system, and women were not subordinated to their husbands. As Bam Bahadur summarizes: “It seems that Kirāta have been practicing democratic socialism as their political system” (2055: 59). All those great achievements seem to be motivated by the high moral values of the Kirant race. Each author lists fundamental

¹³ According to Slusser, the earliest evidence of a Kirāta dynasty in Nepal is the term ‘Kirāta’ “in a newly discovered but disappointingly fragmentary description” (1982: 10). The first link between this Kirāta dynasty and the current Kirant is found in the genealogy of the Gopal Kings (*gopālarājavamśāvalī*), where we can read that, according to Vajracharya, “... there were 32 Kirata Kings. These Kiratas (now) inhabit the regions between the Tamakoshi and Arunakoshi rivers” (1971: 139). This implies that the link between the *Kirāta* dynasty and the actual Kirant population was extant in the fifteenth century.

¹⁴ We have to remember that Kirant is a Sanskrit word used to name tribes from the mountains. There is toponymic evidence that the people of this dynasty were in fact Tibeto-Burman, but this does not prove Kirant ancestry; they could also be the ancestors of the Newar. Interestingly, the linguist van Driem actually classifies Kirant and Newar – but also Magar, Raute and Chepang – in a large linguistic family called Maha-Kiranti (Driem 2002, ethnologue.com). In fact, the current Kirant could be linked with the Kirāta dynasty, not in direct filiation, but as descendants of this larger Tibeto-Burman substratum. But this affiliation would have no more (and no less) meaning than, for example, to say Gauls are the ancestors of the current French.

values of the Kirant, the most common being bravery, frankness, strong sense of community, and solidarity, principles they present as intrinsic to their religion, the Kirant *mudhum* (some say Kirantism). To sum up the indigenist discourse: the Kirant, their nation and their culture, which are independent from India (“the Kirats had created their own civilised society before the Aryans reached Sapta Sindhu”, www.exploredarjeeling.com), are the real founders of modern Nepal and its progressive values. We are confronted here with a kind of putsch in reverse: they, the Kirant, had been the State.

But if the Kirant reigned over Nepal and were the founders of such a brilliant civilization, how did they manage to become this small group of tribes far away in the mountains? In other words, how can they explain this divergence between the claimed past and the present? The most widespread explanation is simple. Let me quote an indigenist I questioned on this point: “Before, we had our king in Kathmandu. At this time, the *mudhum* (‘tradition’, see below) was unique and true. But Hindus arrived, declared war on us, and destroyed everything. Everything was divided, and many people were killed. They turned us into displaced people”. The origin of the decline is identified: Hindus (or Arya; both terms are used as synonyms) are guilty. This explanation became a corner stone of indigenist speeches, legitimising all identity claims and their vindictive aspects.

This does not mean that all indigenists express it so bluntly, nor do they all think in such a way. It is possible to distinguish two (ideal) types of indigenist opinion concerning the place of the Kirant in Nepalese society. The ‘moderate’ ones write in favour of a greater recognition of their group, but still think of themselves as being integrated into the Nepalese nation; on the other hand the ‘hard-liners’ believe that the relationship between the Kirant and the Nepalese people only leads to the subordination of the first by the second, and that both societies should be segregated. But even the ‘moderate’ writers express the idea of a kind of Kirant golden age having been ‘perverted’ by ‘outsiders’.¹⁵

¹⁵ Subba, one of the ‘moderate’ writers, wrote in a section called *Renaissance and Retrogression*, “The oral literature of the Limbu reveals that their ancestors have experienced a certain level of civilization in the remote past [; they] were enjoying prosperous life both culturally and materially in their ancestral land (...). But a long period of turbulence afterwards, continuous conflicts among various racial groups, intermittent struggles for survival and migration, hostile competition between divergent cultural codes (etc) might have caused cessation or discontinuation in the progress of indigenous material and non-material culture of Limbu which eventually brought aberration, incoherence and even some omissions in the contents of *Mundhum*” (Subba 1995: 292-294). Even the rich and analytic book of Subba is not exempt from ambiguity on his position, for example in his critique of Dahal’s and Regmi’s (two Nepali anthropologists, see Dahal 1983, Regmi 1976) opinion on Kirant (Subba 1999: 41, 105). But we should also note that some Kirant writers promote their inclusion in the Hindu world, (Gambhir Rai Arya, Swami Prapannacharya) claiming Kirant Aryan origin (Subba 1999: 97).

Tanka Bahadur, a ‘hardliner’, expresses it more crudely: the generous Kirant granted protection and gave refuge to Aryans who left India. But after that, the perfidious Hindus conspired against them, took power by tricking them, and tried to suppress any trace of their civilization. “Immediately after their settlement in the lands of Kirant, the Licchavis [the dynasty coming after the ancient *Kirāta*] started to conspire and plot against Kirant and to spread Hinduism and its values, which eventually made a negative impact on the religious and cultural values of Kirāta society” (2043: 116). The reason, as he says elsewhere, is that “Hindu society is a non stabilized, irregular, insecure society filled with similar characteristics such as cheating, insincerity, betrayal, selfishness, individualism, which is based on discriminative philosophies” (*ibid.*: 95). The grievance against Hindus is evident. But it is interesting to see that in Tanka Bahadur’s narrative, the process of Kirant Hinduisation, which historically took place mainly during the nineteenth century, occurred in ancient times (the Licchavis are situated from 300 to 800 A.D.). The projection of this process onto many centuries leads us in turn to view this mythological history as a metaphorical reading of the present.

Such a historical reconstruction has consequences even in the most remote villages. It is perhaps the only major point of these indigenists, writings that has a real impact on village life. *Dasaĩ* is a Nepalese festival in honour of the warrior goddess *Durgā*, during which hierarchical relations with regard to authority, e.g. the *tālukdār* (tax functionary), are reaffirmed (Krauskopff and Lecomte 1996). For the last five years, it has not been celebrated in my fieldwork area, the remote Hongu valley, Solu-Khumbu district, the homeland of the Kulung Rai subgroup. The answer I got when questioning a villager about this topic is, “At the time of our king, there were no *tālukdār*, they have been imposed by the Nepalese king. He killed our king; he mixed rice in his blood, and made *ṭikā* [an auspicious mark] with it. That is why we stopped performing *Dasaĩ*, and that is why now we are asking for a new king.”

c. History debate with ‘Hindu’ intellectuals

As indicated above, the fact that Kirant ruled over Nepal is also accepted by the Nepalese intellectual elite. But they, of course, do not draw the same conclusion from this fact. As an example, let us briefly introduce the thesis of Bhattarai and Joshi on Kirant history. Bhattarai, an Indo-Nepalese writer, recognizes Kirant antiquity in Nepal, and their specific contribution to the construction of the Nepalese nation. Similarly, Joshi writes, “the Kirata regime played a significant role in the growth of Nepalese nationalism” (1985: 22). In Nepal, anything that clearly distinguishes Nepalese civilization from Indian civilization is always a precious argument. But for Bhattarai, manifestly a pious Hindu, Kirant were fervent defenders of Hinduism. “It is a well proven fact that these Kiratas were Hindus, the main

brave Hindu nationality (2017:11)". He even denies the specificity of Kirant languages, arguing that they came from Sanskrit, the "mother of world languages" (*ibid.*: 76). Moreover, he argues that Kirant are in fact of Chetri origin (*chetri*, or *kṣatriya*, are a high caste traditionally having military and political functions). Joshi defends a similar thesis when he writes, "Although these *Kiratas* were of the Mongolian stock which is non-Aryan, they were very brave and valorous. So the Aryans, in later times, amalgamated them in their own folds (...). This is the very reason why [the laws of] Manu had accepted the *Kiratas* as [one?] of the *Kshatriya* class" (1985: 24). The laws of Manu do in fact refer to a group called *Kirāta* (but we should not forget this word was more or less synonymous with 'wild men' or 'tribesmen'), and are described as being *kṣatriya* degraded to *sūdra* status because of their rituals and Brahmans' negligence (Lévi 1905: 77). In Nepal and India, several groups (also some Limbu, see Utpreti 1976) present themselves as degraded *kṣatriya* (caused by deceit or self-sacrifice for a good cause) in order to reclaim this original status (Sinha 1995).

But how do we explain the fact that Kirant do not themselves claim this prestigious status? Bhattarai's explanation is that "they remained far from the Brahmans and it caused difference in their manners and behaviour. Consequently, they forgot to add the word Chetriya to their names" (2017: 74). It is this non-respect of the Hindu precepts that made Kirant forget their origin. Joshi's explanation of this rupture is more 'perfidious' in view of the democratic claim of Kirant indigenists: according to him, former Kirant were republicans by tradition, but "those Kirata (...) fully well understood the political conditions of the South [of India], where the big empires were being established and petty republican states were swept away". This is why they adopted the monarchical system (1985: 21). "But it is natural that the ancient people had no faith in the monarchical system, because they were brought up in republicanism. This was the reason why the ancient tribes of Nepal, revolting against the Kirata, had driven them out of the country" (*ibid.*: 23).

Thus Kirant are Chetri without knowing it; this is an argument frequently used by Indian nationalists to reintegrate 'tribesmen' into the bosom of Indian hierarchy. As Pandey notes, "in the case of many tribal and untouchable communities, it is commonly argued that they are 'fallen' Hindus, Hindus who do not know (or have forgotten) that they are Hindus and need to be taught this truth" (Pandey 1993: 257). In our case, Indo-Nepalese writers counter upon themselves a status craved by many groups on the South Asian subcontinent:¹⁶ everybody wants to be a *kṣatriya*, because a *kṣatriya* is a ruler. But Kirant indigenists do not want the *Kirāta* to be recognized as *kṣatriya* rulers, they want the (ruling) function without the caste! Now their primary wish is to be distinguished from the Hindu

¹⁶ See S. Sinha on the relation between the tribal people of Central India and the *kṣatriya* (Rajput) model (1995).

world. Let us just mention that when confronting different views on politics, both types of intellectuals make use of historical arguments in order to justify their particular vision of the cultural heritage of their nation.¹⁷

II. Revisiting the present

a. Reinvention of tradition

For Kirant indigenists history gives sufficient evidence: after ‘Hindus’ have destroyed everything the Kirant have to reconstruct their heritage, and their social fabric has to be renewed as well. Indigenists’ debates focus in particular on religion, which offers the most powerful social fabric, and this leads to the reinvention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

For most Rai living in their ancestral villages the religious system (called *mudhum*) is ritualistic knowledge and *savoir-faire*, necessitating neither devotion nor meditation, nor even explicit moral values, but respect for the ancestral order concerning the way to deal with spiritual forces. As the Kirant traditional religious system is clearly different from Hinduism, in local communities few conflicts occur with the Hindu world.¹⁸ First, their tradition concerns a *specific* way of life in a *specific* area transmitted by their *own* ancestors. Consequently, there is a kind of intrinsic relativism in their conception of tradition: each group has different ancestors, hence different traditions. But in specific situations, Hinduism serves as a reference point, i.e. when dealing with exterior forces (like forest deities, roaming spirits) and when invoking specialists (shamans) able to deal with them, or when citing common Hindu myths. Since these fields are, in principle, shared by all, such knowledge is expected to be common to all groups. This conception of unity in diversity is in harmony with the caste system.¹⁹ Secondly, there is no equivalence between the *mudhum*, which can be translated as ‘tradition’, and Hinduism, referred to as *dharma*. Rai from villages are reluctant to translate *mudhum* as ‘*dharma*’ (as indigenists often do); the meaning of *mudhum* is closer to what anthropologists sometimes call the ‘little

¹⁷ The political message of these historical writings is clearly perceived, and sometimes affirmed. For example, an article published in the *Nepal Digest* (“Ancient Kirant were Hindus?”, 06/07/94) concludes: “The icon of this rejection [of Hindu heritage] is the rejection of the Sanskrit language for schools by the modern day Kirats”.

¹⁸ By ‘Hindu world’, I mean the normative socio-religious conceptions and attitudes of the high caste people and of the Nepal state (e.g. “Brahmanism”). On the relation between Hindus and Kirant, see Jones (1976), Gaenszle (1993), Allen (1997).

¹⁹ As Dumont writes, “In the hierarchical scheme a group’s acknowledged differentness whereby it is contrasted with other groups becomes the very principle whereby it is integrated into society” (1970: 191).

tradition'.²⁰ A villager explained to me: "We, Rai, have only little *dharma*", as if having no *dharma* were not conceivable for the Rai. But *mudhum* is not the same as *dharma*. The latter term relates to supreme beings (e.g. *Bhagavān*) which are described as "what people from everywhere worship". It is understood as a universal and divine principle transcending all religious traditions, explaining why villagers are receptive to such Hindu ideas.

But for indigenists, villagers are wrong: "even the Kirāta today do not know anything about Kirāta religion" (Rai 2055: 28). Villagers are said to have misunderstood their own religion, and "being unable to find their own independent religion, the Kiratese have been travelling in a world of darkness for a long time. Without knowing what to do, some of them took up Hindu religion and some Buddhist" (Tandukar 1980: 45). And therefore, "Kirant are losing their language, script but also themselves" (Rai 2052: 1). According to indigenists, "Kirāta festivals and traditions are not only totally different, but in fact almost opposite to Hindu values" (Rai 2043: 93). So the *mudhum* is the real religion of the Kirant (some indigenists say of all autochthonous people), but "it has been perverted by the conspiracy of Aryans", and "if we find any influence of Hinduism [and in fact, there is], it is only because of the process of conversion imposed on Kirāta by the government".²¹ This leads to a wish to 'purify' it from any Hindu influence. And if not suppressed, those Hindu elements are being reinterpreted: e.g., Tihar, Lakshmi's festival, became the commemoration of an ancient Kirant king²² (see web site: msnepal.org/reports_pubs/ekchin/jan2000/7.htm).

The struggle has now moved on to the domain of religion. As religion is perceived as being the "spirit of the group directing Kirant's life" (Khambu 2052: 13), Kirant identity depends on its preservation. The political aspect of religion is evident²³ and clearly perceived by some indigenists, such as Bhuidal Rai, who claims: "because to accept others religions means to accept a defeat in the religions battle [sic], (...) and to accept to be governed by others"(Rai 2052: 4).²⁴ Bhuidal Rai argues in favour of changing Kirant

²⁰ It is interesting that in the area caste people like Chetri also use the word *mundhum* to specifically qualify ritual practices concerning local spirits not present in 'pure' Hinduism.

²¹ Subba has a quite different view on the question. For him, Kirant religion shares similarities with Hinduism, but this is mainly due to pre-Aryan (e.g. Kirant) influence on the formation of Hinduism (Subba 1995: chap.XV).

²² The fundamentals of Kirant nationalism are well formulated by Subba: "(re)creating the Kirata nation, which means picking up certain commonalities and ignoring the differences within the groups categorized here as 'Kirata'; and two, showing how much such features differ from those existing among other categories, particularly the Tagadharis [high castes carrying sacred tread]" (Subba 1999: 84).

²³ As Sales writers, "it may be more accurate to see religion as the frame within which people make politics" (1999: 81).

²⁴ Rai criticizes a number of adverse religious communities who influenced the Kirant. For example, he presents them as sources of *factionalism* (or *communalism*). In South Asia, this argument is commonly used to criticize ethnic movements, as any movement fights

religion's "bad" aspects, such as killing animals and drinking alcohol, explaining these negative features are not religious, but cultural (though he accepts the Hindu model of purity). But even to rid Kirant religion from its "bad" cultural aspects and from external influences in order to find again its original purity is not enough. Bhuidal Rai goes further and proposes to "revise our own authentic religion", and explains that "it is really true that today we need a completely new vision and work about religion. Our Kirāta community needs to start something new in this matter. Even our attempt would not be a universal one, it should be competitive. We don't want to be late even in religion" (2052: 7).

For most of the indigenists, the objective is clear: the Kirant have to (re)discover their 'real' religion. Their religion is not the kind of jumble anthropologists can actually study in remote villages. For indigenists, the *mudhum*, the original religion of the Kirant, is one of the oldest in the world: "Kirāta had already their own religion before other religions existed and spread all over the world" (Rai 2055: 26). This knowledge of the universe given by the ancestors forms "one of the world's most beautiful epics", often compared with the *Mahābhārata* or the Bible. The *mudhum* is sometimes presented as a kind of positivist religion with a scientific basis, but also mystical (based on devotion, meditation), offering supernatural power (like vision of the past and of the future, apparition, illumination, telepathy...). It is also perceived as a moral and ethical religion, teaching love and tolerance (principles sometimes expressed as the *ten commandments*²⁵). It is also a philosophy leading to harmony between land and nature, and it is political, giving "the guidelines for the creation of a beautiful human society".

Such a religion has to have respectable gods, not like those worshiped by villagers, who are closer to roaming spirits than a supreme god. If ancestors are still present in indigenists' discourse (they are "the source of energy and power"), *mudhum* is mainly defined as a 'worship of nature' referring to 'mother earth', and a devotion to supreme gods. The main god for the Limbu is *Yuma* (also called *Niwaphuma*). She is described as "the ultimate and supreme deity. She is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, infinite and eternal" (Subba 1995: 284). And in the case of the Rai, there is an emerging consensus that the main gods are Paruhang and Sumnima.²⁶

for interests of a particular group. Secondly, it shows Hindu and Christian religious acts as non-economic and governed by political manipulation. Both arguments are frequent in Christian and communist rhetoric of conversion.

²⁵ This term suggests Christian and/or Buddhist influence (the 'tenth sin', *mi dge ba gcu*).

²⁶ Ironically both Paruhang-Sumina and Yuma are identified by villagers as Shiva/Parvati. All Rai groups identify Paruhang as their first male ancestor and as being Shiva. According to Sagant, Limbu associate Yuma with Parvati, Shiva's wife (1996: 295). Some indigenists recognize this link: ("Shivaism is our main religion" wrote Bam Bahadur Rai 2055: 27), while others, as Tanka Bahadur Rai, deny it: "Kirāta used to live in this area for thousands of years and since then they believe in authentic mundhum religion since. It is only after a long time that Aryan Hindus entered Kirāta land as refugees. They tried to attract Kirāta

I should also mention graphic (or iconic) representations, which necessarily are a part of a respected religion. While some explain the absence of any representation in a positive way (“just like Buddhism, they do not worship any image and regard light or knowledge as their god, which is omni-present,” Tandukar 1980: 53), others try to prove the existence of such representations.²⁷

b. Shamanic speech and sacred books

But how do these indigenists legitimise their claim to define true religion? A difficulty with putting the *mudhum* and universal religions on an equal level lies in the former’s lack of a script. For most Kirant, the absence of books is perceived as a big problem, and it is interesting to look at the Kirant relationship to scripture. They encounter it mainly in two ways: through Hindu, Buddhist, and later Christian sacred books, and through the Nepalese administration. In both cases, the existence and use of a script was perceived as contributing to the power of these institutions: it is partly the Kirants’ ignorance of any script that has led to their loss in the struggle for land ownership. So we could see the promotion of a Kirant script as a response to the wish to possess such a powerful tool. But in fact, indigenists claim that the Kirant already possess a script. “Long after, some Kiratese such as Mr. Imansing Chemjong and others, were able to discover their own religion beautifully written in old manuscripts” (Tandukar 1980: 47). Therefore, indigenists are able to speak of a true religion.²⁸

Unfortunately this script, dating from the end of 18th century, was based on a Sanskrit and Tibetan model and has never been used by the population (Vansittart 1896/1992: 135). Kirant intellectuals had two main concerns regarding this script: to prove its great antiquity, and to prove that it was the specific property of the Kirant. It is said to have been invented by Srijanga, a

in their religion through many ways. Thus they created a hypothetical god having the same characteristics as Kirāta. They called him Shiva, who used to drink alcohol, takes all kind of hallucinogens and if angry destroys everything (...). Thus, the reason behind relating Paruhang to Shiva is a conspiracy to convert Kirāta to Hindu religion. But Rai are not confused by this funny and baseless attempt and will never be (Rai 2049: 47). It would take too long to explain the reasons for this identification of Shiva with Kirant. Concerning the importance of Shiva’s figure in Nepal, notably among tribal people, see Bouillier 1992).

²⁷ Among such common representations are the re-appropriation of the Mahadev Kirateshvar statues (an old statue of Shiva in the Kathmandu Valley having slanting eyes), a now widespread picture of Yelambar (a famous – but hypothetical – Kirant king, victim of his frankness and honesty but having the “dubious honour of being slain by Lord Krishna himself”), Srijanga (the father of Limbu script, a martyr, represented in Saint Sebastian’s posture, bristling with arrows), or the Subhas Rai paintings representing Shiva and Parvati with Mongol faces and traditional Kirant ornaments.

²⁸ On the relation to script among local groups, see Oppitz 1998 and Carrin 2002. This rediscovering of sacred book also evokes the Tibetan ‘hidden-treasures’ (*terma*); see Blondeau 1999.

Limbu who was a former Buddhist monk from Sikkim and who was killed on the orders of a Sikkimese ruler because of his political activities (Chemjong 1967: 107). Based on the existence of another person called Srijanga in the 7th century, some conclude that this script was created then, and on top of that, they present the second Srijanga as an incarnation of the first (Chemjong 1967: 49). Consequently, this script is associated with an ancient king and with a religious leader, who died like a martyr. This first 'historical figure' represents the symbol of the Kirant golden age when they had a country, while the second represents the Kirant decline, which is due to foreign forces.

If the Kirant have such a script, where are the books? The rhetoric is the same as the one employed with respect to politics: "First we had our Kings, we had our books, and *Mudhum* was unique and true, but the Hindus destroyed everything. So *Mudhum* had to be reproduced orally by shamans. But the shamans distorted and deteriorated it", a member of an indigenist movement explained to me. The existence of a script is perceived as the foundation of respectability and unity of a culture. This is particularly conclusive because of the handicap caused by the *mudhum's* diversity that shows disunity among the Kirant people. For indigenists, the Kirants' linguistic diversity is the most obvious sign of their disunion. So finding a script for their language means fixing and unifying it.

Having a script enables them to claim a prestigious standardized religion, but also "to maintain, preserve, develop and standardize our endangered Kirat mother tongue" (Dhan Raj Rai, *Rising Nepal*, Sept. 20, 2000). This goal, the preservation of culture through language, is the main basis of the Kirant associations since the beginning: they have tried to promote their languages written in Srijanga's script from the beginning of the 20th century. All these associations give priority to the work on language (like publishing dictionaries, novels, or sacred books in Kirant languages, retranscription of myths and of ritual speech). Actually, the Limbu script is taught in Sikkim (around 5000 students in 1988). This fact, perceived as an important victory, encourages the Kirant in Nepal to be more assertive with their demand to implement the teaching of ethnic language at schools (legally allowed but never implemented).

c. Putting history into practice: The ritual dances of the soil

To sum up, the new 'refreshed' version of the *mudhum* tradition, adapted to modern values and transformed into a religion (i.e. rationalised, intellectualised and moralised), is said to be the basis for identity preservation; that is why it has to be unique. The difficulty is that the *mudhum* not only displays significant variations in theory, as we have seen, but also in practice. Indigenists want to minimize or deny any variation and put forward new unified practices to promote it.

The 'chosen' federating element is the ritual dance (called *Sakewa*, *Sakela*, *Chandi*, *Sili*, *Yalang*, etc. according to the groups), presented as an "intrinsic entity of Kirant culture."²⁹ Effectively, despite important variations of details, Rai and Limbu communities all practice ritual dances. These dances are usually performed once or several times a year, depending on the agricultural calendar, with people (only men or both men and women) usually dancing in a circle, accompanied by cymbals and/or drums, while dancers sometimes mime agricultural acts. For villagers, these dances are to ensure agricultural prosperity by pleasing the ancestors and the Land (perceived as a kind of divine entity).

Despite important local variations, indigenists view these dances as specific as well as common to all Kirant (Gaenszle 1997: 367). Following a policy of promoting them as their cultural heritage that should be nationally recognized, these dances are now performed in public in cities of Nepal and Sikkim (where they are considered as 'state holidays'). It is easy to understand why these dances have been chosen as a federative Kirant symbol. It is one of the few rituals performed collectively, and is present among all Kirant groups. Moreover, dance is a pleasant and apparently neutral folkloric practice, often the only kind of ethnic manifestation that the State tolerated. But it is something of a paradox that urban people should have chosen a rural cult with the aim of requesting agricultural prosperity from the ancestors, the symbolic landowners. Of course, indigenists have introduced significant changes, reflecting a wish to purify the cult (no blood sacrifice, no alcoholic drinks), to modernize it (e.g. using a sacred book in a modern permanent temple), and to give it more "noble" motivations, such as the feeling of togetherness in mystical harmony with a deified nature.

In Kathmandu these dances are followed by a ritual carried out three days later. On the full moon day of *maṅsir* (November-December), the *Chasok* ritual of *ubhaūli* (the 'descending time'), was performed in Sano Hattiban (in Patan). It was organized by Kirat Rai Yayokkha, Kirat Yakthum Chumlung, Kirat Yakka Chuma and Sunuwar Sewa Samaj associations, but seemed to be controlled by members of the Phalgunanda sect.³⁰ According to C. Subba (1995: 46), *Chasok*, or *Chasok-Thisok*, is a harvest ritual

²⁹ As each Kirant sub-group has its own rituals, it is difficult to find any unifying ritual events. Some indigenists emphasise life-cycle rituals because they vary less than others; that is with good reason: they are strongly influence by Hindu practice.

³⁰ Apparently, a similar "important Kirant religious festival where thousand of people participate" is organized every year, in the village of Laramba (Bajho VDC, Ilam district). This festival, called *Yakwasewa Maha Astayangya*, is realized in honour of 'Lord *Kiranteshwar*', as well as for praying to the gods "for good harvest and for welcoming the coming of spring". It is organized by Atmananda Lingden, 'great priest' of the *Kiranteshwar* temple, with support of the Association for the Upliftment of Kirant Religion and Literature (adepts of the *Satyahangma Dharma*, i.e. Phalgunanda's religion). (See Suman Pradhan, Katmandu Post, Jan. 20, 2000).

dedicated to Yuma (but includes several other gods), conducted by the Limbu community, individually as well as collectively. It includes animal sacrifices as well as alcohol, and is a festive celebration. In this case, the atmosphere is quite different. It was described to me as a land (*bhūmī*) and harvest (*bali*) festival addressed to the supreme god, *Bhagavān*. The ritual took place on top of a small hill where these associations plan to build a big temple. The ritual area was composed of a large platform with pyramidal terraces in the middle. Close to it, there was a big trident surrounded by two large bells, and a little further a triangular fireplace. The entire area was decorated with flower garlands and prayer flags (on which are words in the Srijanga script) flying above benches with moons and suns painted on them, reminiscent of the commemorative resting places built after funerals in Kirant communities. On the pyramidal terraces and on the ground, offerings brought by devotees and ritual paraphernalia could be seen (such as incense, candles, fruits, flowers oil for lamps). Men and women, young and old, all Kirant, were gathering, mainly from the urban middle class. The ritual borrows a mix of Hindu and Buddhist elements, with some Kirant symbols such as the two-headed drum, and ritual books written in Srijanga script. The performance consisted mainly of ritual speeches by the priest, while devotees walked clockwise three times around the altar and the fireplace (as it is common in Kirant rituals) for praying. The performance ended with a vegetarian and non-alcoholic communal meal (*prasād*) and the giving of *ṭikā* (auspicious mark). Except for some details, hardly anything was reminiscent of village rituals; rather the ritual organisation evoked sectarian Hindu practices.

But since there are no community links between ancestors and villagers, the *raison d'être* of the original ritual, is this cult not an empty shell transplanted into a city? By celebrating such a cult in the heart of Kathmandu, do these people, claiming a direct filiation with the glorious Kirant Kings, perhaps try to express their rights to the soil, their soil?³¹ Different Western researchers have argued that such a cult of the soil, known as *bhūme*, could have developed among tribal groups from Nepal as a response to Indo-Nepalese domination on the land (Lecomte-Tilouine 1996, Krauskopff 1996). These cults are perhaps a continuation of this phenomenon. Kirant indigenists all insist on their privileged and symbiotic relationship with the motherland, as a Limbu leader, Manju Yakthumba, stated in a discussion on indigenous people and territorial rights during a

³¹ Slusser points out that in “Tikhel, southwest of the old city [of Patan, Kathmandu Valley] proper, Kiranti recently restored a shrine in deference to their tradition that a Kirāta temple once stood there.” And she concludes “What, if not some ancient association, should bring modern Kirantis of distant and inaccessible eastern Nepal to a particular temple site in Patan, or induce them to foregather about their clan god at a secluded spot in the interior of the city?” (1982: 96).

UN conference. He did so by referring to Caplan:³² “Kipat [traditional land tenure and ancestral territory] is fused with and articulates the culture, and any assault on Kipat is seen as a threat to the very existence of the Limbu as a separate community within the society.”³³

We now understand how these dances can be quite subversive folklore. They are performed during all cultural programs, and these programs as well as the booklets previously mentioned are always media used to express criticism of Brahman domination, the status of Hinduism as a national religion, the teaching of Sanskrit, the low political representation of ethnic minorities or the question of land ownership. Some demands are more concrete. For example, Kirant associations did obtain the governmental recognition of a religious forest (Kirat Dharmik Ban) in Lalitpur and of a Kirant graveyard which had to be destroyed because it was situated in a Hindu temple’s garden as Kirant sacred areas. Another aim of the campaign was to declare the ‘Kirant Hangsam Mojollug Manghim’ area (Banjho VDC, Ilam district) a religious place, as part of the world's cultural heritage, and the recognition of the Kirant dance ceremony as a national holiday. Kirant associations send volunteers campaigning for Kirant community members to register as Kirant in the census because census figures are always perceived as of great political importance: the numerical importance of a group is a sign of its political force (Cohn 1987). Moreover, after the 1999 census, the Kirant activists gained the right to add ‘Kirantism’ as a new religious category.³⁴

Conclusion

In the indigenists’ scheme of historical analysis everything is linked: the ancient and glorious Kirant nation was governed by true religion, educating

³² Caplan's famous study (1970) focuses on the relationship between high caste Hindus and Limbu and describes this process as a progressive appropriation of Limbu lands and power by the Indo-Nepalese. This book has been recently criticized by Dahal as partial, showing Limbu “as an innocent and naive people, in stark contrast to the Brahmins who are portrayed as cheats or otherwise dishonest in their dealing” (himalmag.com/96may/deviant.htm). Regarding the criticism of occidental researchers' clear-cut opposition between “Hindus” and “Tribals” see also Sharma 1978.

³³ Concerning the Limbu mythology’s emphasis on the relation to their territory, see Gaenzle (2002). On the declaration of the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) made in 1994 after a UN Resolution calling for a decade of Indigenous Peoples, see Gellner (1997: 20). This declaration shows the wish to present the ‘Indigenous People of Nepal’ as being not Hindus but Animists and as being the first settlers of Nepal, but ‘displaced from their own land’ and subjugated by the State.

³⁴ It is interesting that less than 40% of Kirant regard themselves as belonging to ‘Kirant religion’ (1999 census). Apparently the more communities are influenced by Hinduism and disintegrated, the more the answer is positive (32% for eastern mountain area, 46% for eastern hills and 53% for eastern Terai). It shows a low influence of the indigenist thesis on rural Kirant people.

people with a moral principle and a rich modernist and socialist philosophy, and unifying people in regard to their ancestors and land. The religion is defined in holy books, ensuring its purity, unity and perpetuity. But Aryans invaded the country, destroyed their society, burnt their books, occupied their land, divided the Kirant, and marginalized them. These outsiders are the cause of Kirant disunity and of the perversion of the Kirants' traditions. This finally led to the disintegration of the *mudhum* and the loss of harmony between the Kirant, their land and their ancestors, and was moreover the cause of their current poverty, backwardness, and low political representation. While the struggle is founded upon historical arguments, numerous claims are very specific and refer to current economic, social and political issues. Through the promotion of language, culture, religion and a new version of their history, indigenists' wishes lead to more aggressive actions, like the defence of political and economic interests and land ownership rights. It is clear how this vision of the past legitimises the claim to their lost rights and to the nation they should inherit. And since material aims are linked to spiritual ones, the Kirants' desire to regain their lost rights inevitably involves the re-establishment of the *mudhum*. Subsequently, inventing the past is inheriting the future.

Everything could conjure up a messianic movement except for one important point: messianic movements are linked to political projects, usually focused on a charismatic leader. Up to now, nobody has emerged as a leader (except Phalgunanda, but his movement was short-lived). The endemic tendency to fragmentation of the Kirant movement (despite the wish of unity always claimed in all discourses) and the confrontational and generalized politicisation of Nepalese life³⁵ prevent any unity. Moreover, it creates a rupture with the more traditional view of inter-community relations. By trying to give their culture a noble character, in the course of time indigenists adapt it to the current standard values of the dominant Nepalese culture of urban elites, ironically mainly urban high caste Hindus. The most obvious example is the appropriation of the ancient *Kirāta* genealogies to claim, on a typically Hindu royal model, to be the first settlers and rulers of Nepal. Indeed, all indigenists are from the urban middle class and the form of their contestation can partially be understood as a response to their exclusion from the social status group they emulate.³⁶

They do have specific values, but they are also inspired by external ideas: military values represented by the British, communist social claims, a

³⁵ According to Subba, Kirant indigenist organizations are no exception to the rule. For example, the *Kirant Yakthung Chumlung* is close to the United Marxist-Leninist Party while *Kirant Yakthung Songchumbo* is pro-Nepali Congress (1999: 122).

³⁶ Weiner argues that "nativism tends to be associated with a blockage to social mobility for the native population by culturally distinguishable migrant population" (1978). For a more general analysis of the relationship between the "tribal" and the "Hindu civilisation", see Sinha 1981.

rhetoric of development, a special relationship with nature, influenced by the Western infatuation with animist religions perceived as intrinsically ecological. Even this claim to be the original inhabitants of the country can be seen as a consequence of the British legal framework established in India (see, for example, Bates 1994). The wish to have a culture independent from the dominant one leads them to reconstruct their culture in total opposition to their “enemies”. By doing so, the rejected culture still remains a model: a mirror version, but still a model³⁷. I tried to show briefly that villagers inscribe their tradition in their locality but think of it as integrated in a wider context, showing unity in diversity. By contrast, indigenists build a new culture in total opposition to the dominant ones but, in the end, similarly oriented: everything is done to show the cultural gaps between ‘Hindus’ and Kirant, but religious, economic and political goals are in fact much the same. There is a feeling of diversity in unity.

Such a position led to the relatively slight indigenist influence on the majority of Kirant still living in rural areas. Even though, as we have seen, villagers accept the historical part of this reconstruction and its political implication, such as is evident from the boycott of the *Dasai* festival, they still adhere to their traditional vision of religion. And it is rather the growing Maoist movement that has become the outlet of increasing anger. The armed Rai movement of the Khambuwan Mukti Morcha has joined and is now almost assimilated to that of the Maoists.³⁸

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³⁷ Even this is not unique to the Kirant movement. According to Frykenberg, modern Hinduism is the product of a socio-political process of reification which has evolved during the past two centuries and which has led to a syndicated or organized religion: “Indeed, perhaps no single set of movements did more to further the growth of modern Hinduism in its ‘corporate’ and its ‘revivalistic’ forms than [Christian] missionary institutions which were of this alien or colonialistic character. Both in the radical reactions which they provoked within local societies and in the educational institutions which were resisted, infiltrated, utilized, and ultimately copied by these same local elite societies did the rise of ‘Hinduism’ in its modern manifestation probably owe more to certain missionary institution than anything else” (1991: 39). See also Pandey (1993) for the construction of ‘Hindus’ in opposition to Muslims.

³⁸ In the rural area, Maoist leaders try to tug at the heartstrings of the new ethnic conscience, inscribing in their program a semi-autonomy of the ethnic area, as I could see written on houses in my fieldwork area. Neither Maoists nor Khambuwan are very popular. Nevertheless, this movement attracts many young people (on the relation between ethnic movements and Maoists, see Sales 2001).

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