

FIELDS AND WRITINGS: FIFTY YEARS OF FRENCH ANTHROPOLOGY IN NEPAL

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Introduction

When reading books about the general history of anthropology, I often feel disappointed and sometimes even bored. Information on the intellectual life and the academic environment usually fails to grasp the process by which field data are made into a monograph. More precisely, such literature provides little understanding of the relationship between the field worker and his or her writings, a topic in which, as I see it, lies the quintessence of anthropological work. Biographies of specific scientists and details about their lives and achievements often offer more rewarding insights into such epistemological issues. However, ideas circulating in the anthropological milieu, along with personal and intellectual influences, play an important role in the production of academic works. There is no doubt that they have to be taken into consideration, and compared from one country to another. Without a questionnaire, a list of queries and pre-notions, however contentious, about religion, social groupings, or kinship terminologies, researchers will hardly understand anything in the field. They will be practically blind to the things hidden behind observable realities. Furthermore, despite the significant intensification of scientific networks throughout the world, national schools still retain certain specificities. These are the reasons why, after many years and much hesitation, I have finally decided to respond positively to the invitation made by the *SINHAS* journal to write a paper on French anthropology in Nepal. This account, after all, is an important part of the wider historical development of Himalayan and South Asian anthropology. The aim of this article is therefore primarily to situate French scholarship on Nepal in a historical (roughly from 1958 to 2008/2009) and sociological context.

Most surprisingly, the writings of French-speaking anthropologists about the Himalayas have been very little influenced by the French structuralist school, although its “chef de file,” Claude L vi-Strauss (1908–2009), was considered to be a prominent intellectual figure, perhaps the greatest, in his country. In stark contrast to the high level of theorization and formalization of the author of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969) and *Mythologiques* (1964–1971), monographs written

by French anthropologists specializing in Nepal are generally ethnographically oriented. They carefully consider historical facts (see, for instance, Krauskopff and Deuel Meyer 2000) and apply inductive modes of reasoning rather than the deductive logic frequently adopted by Lévi-Strauss. They also tend to lend great importance to power relations (see Ramirez 2000), a subject rarely tackled by the master of structuralism. Besides theoretical considerations, the particular condition of academic production in the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), an organization which, as we will see later, plays a crucial role in France in many scientific fields, and in particular within Nepal studies, has obviously encouraged a specific type of very detailed scholarship. The condition of being a pure researcher at the CNRS, namely, the almost total lack of teaching duties leads to rather meticulous articles or books, but they lack engagement with general anthropological issues.

It is noteworthy that these characteristics are not specific to works on Nepal. Most French anthropological scholarship on the South Asian, South East-Asian, Chinese, and Middle Eastern cultural areas is of the same type as that produced about the Himalayas: it pays special attention to facts and to indigenous cultural categories, as well to the historical background of the society studied. Formal systems of correspondence and universal patterns of thought at work in different spheres of activities are not the main focus in their quest. There are in fact huge differences between complex Asian societies, whether literate or semi-literate, even those located on the peripheries, and the small-scale groups of hunters-gatherers of the Amazonian forest, where no archives exist, thus relying exclusively on oral tradition, which is apparently better suited to a structuralist analysis. It is true that authors such as Stanley Tambiah or the Indian sociologist Veena Das have tried, and in many ways succeeded, in adapting the structuralist approach to various religious phenomena in South Asia and South-East Asia. Yet, their methods of analysis are somewhat distinct from the ones used by Lévi-Strauss in his study of Amerindian kinship and mythologies. In particular, they lack the sense of universalism very specific to the author of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969). All in all, they are more in accordance with the style of works undertaken by Georges Dumézil, the French comparative philologist, on the religious representations of Indo-European religions and myths (see for instance Dumézil 1968–1973). The structures revealed by these authors reflect a particular way of thinking, a given religion, not a universal mode of thought common to all humanity.

Similarly, French books and articles on Nepal have hardly been influenced by the postmodernist French theoreticians such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, all widely known and highly esteemed abroad. Most of them do not question the validity of the anthropological mode of knowledge nor do they substitute for the more classical, positivist trend respectful of facts and of the reality of things a reflection on the inherent constraints of texts. For them, ethnography is not a mere word-game, as fiction is supposed to be. They display a very strong positivist stance, far from certain “post-structuralist” monographs by American anthropologists over the last decades that have introduced a pluralistic view point into their works, playing on the external position of the observer and the internal perspectives of various informants, or else between the discordant voices that exist within a specific culture. On the whole, French Himalayan specialists favor ethnographic production: only a minority of them try to develop broader theoretical views and use comparative ethnography. All this contrasts with a persistent stereotype and conventional image of French anthropology and social science as seen from abroad.

What about Louis Dumont, another prominent figure of French anthropology, so important in South Asian Studies? In France, the vision of South Asia has long been anchored in the holist versus individualist debate put forward by Dumont (a vision largely rejected in India itself). This scholar has been very influential, particularly among those in Nepal who have studied caste groups, Muslims’ social organization or Hindu renouncers. Yet none of the French researchers who have worked on the former Himalayan kingdom may be considered to be his disciple, save Bernard Pignède, who, as we will see later, died prematurely. No one has been associated with his comparative program concentrated around holism and individualism, hierarchy and egalitarianism (Dumont 1966). On the contrary, severe criticism has been made of his theories and of their applicability in the field. In her study of Nepali renouncers, Véronique Bouillier (e.g. 1979, 1983 and 1993) questions the excessive opposition between the individual-outside-the-world and the individual-within-the-world. Marc Gaborieau emphasises the internal hierarchy prevailing in the Nepali Muslim communities and therefore undermines the egalitarian vision Dumont had of Muslims. Gérard Toffin (1984) shows that the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley have castes, not only status groups (Dumont 1964), and that their caste system focuses on kingship, as was shown by Hocart (1938) in his book on castes. This

anthropologist was thus unjustly criticized by the author of *Homo Hierarchicus* (Dumont 1966).

The Marxist approach has exerted even less influence among French researchers, to the exception perhaps of Brigitte Steinmann's first book on Tamang daily life and religion (1987), which used a Marxian vocabulary (based on the work of Karl Marx). In this work, Steinmann sought to establish some connection between material life and the religious representations. Yet, her interesting approach relies more on philosophical concepts than on the analysis of any types of production systems. Therefore, the "Marxist" label can be seriously contested. What is more, the author never claims to be identified as such. Apart from this exception, the great majority of French works focus either on religious phenomena or on social relations, and rarely consider links with the economic infrastructure. The lack of economic studies is a striking feature of their scientific production.

For convenience's sake, I will first of all portray the main initiators of this scientific undertaking and explore their paradigms, background, and position within the broader theoretical/epistemological options at work within French anthropology. Subsequent developments, consolidation and expansion, will then be presented. The third part deals with the areas of research on which more emphasis has been laid. It is arranged both thematically and geographically. Given the space available to me here, it will be impossible to go into the details of everybody's research, lives and works. This article is less encyclopaedic than analytical in nature. It will suffice to present the main lines of research. In the fourth section, I will provide information on fieldwork methods, those of individuals as well as the interdisciplinary approach that has been favored in certain cases. Lastly, I will deal with more recent research that focuses on changes, particularly political changes after the 1990 democratization period and at the time of the "People's War." This troubled period saw the emergence of new paradigms, new focuses of attention. It has led to a new way of practising anthropology, which has also affected other national schools of anthropology. Some general thoughts are given in conclusion.

One further remark: this essay concentrates on social anthropology. However, it must be recalled that over the last decades France has also sent out scholars belonging to other fields of social sciences and to the humanities, especially linguistics (Martine Mazaudon and Boyd Michailovsky) and geography (Monique Fort, Annick Hollé, Joëlle Smadja, Denis Blamont, Olivia Aubriot, Blandine Ripert, Tristan

Bruslé),¹ not to speak of geology and botany, in which important work has also been achieved, in collaboration with the relevant Nepali institutions such as the Bureau of Mines and the Botanical Garden of Godavari. However, no French historian or economist is currently working in this part of the world. Sometimes, the difference between disciplines is blurred, such as in the case of Olivia Aubriot whose research on water and water rights in Gulmi District (2004) pertains both to geography and to anthropology. Similarly, in the field of political science, the work of Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal (2004) on the position of women in Nepal (and India) and its links with politics needs to be mentioned: it has a clear anthropological dimension.

Admittedly, there is a certain artificiality in dealing with French scholarship in isolation. Some researchers belonging to other European countries have been deeply influenced by such a school. András Höfer (1979) for instance, a German of Hungarian origin, fluent in French, long ago followed an anthropological seminar in Paris and wrote an article entitled: “On re-reading *Le Népal*. What social scientists owe to Sylvain Lévi” (on this tutelary figure, see below). Similarly, some French anthropologists have openly recognized their debt to foreign researchers: Philippe Ramirez to Lynn Bennett, Véronique Bouillier to Axel Michaels and Richard Burghart, etc. The increasing internationalization of research also needs to be taken into account. There are for instance no longer any French nationals holding a professorship to teach Tibetan civilization at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (EPHE), Sorbonne, the main university in Paris for philological studies and oriental religions. The current professors are either American (Matthew Kapstein) or British (Charles Ramble). Nonetheless this constraint was part of the challenge proposed by *SINHAS* editors and such a viewpoint can be defended in many other ways, some of which I hope will be clear in this paper.²

For the author, this essay presents one more difficulty which has not been easy to come to terms with. This paper belongs both to the history of Himalayan anthropology, i.e., the past, and to the contemporary period, i.e., the present time. As part of this undertaking myself, I have tried to

¹ Some of these works have an obvious anthropological content: e.g. Smadja (2009) and Bruslé (2008). Blandine Ripert, who was trained in the fields of anthropology and geography, has written an article on conversion to Christianity among Western Tamangs, which can also be considered as specifically anthropological (1997).

² For an overview of the history of anthropological studies in the Himalayas, see Fisher (1985).

remain as objective as possible and to restrict my statements mainly to historical and verified facts. However, I will give my own interpretations and personal views. To present the things more positively, it can be argued that my proximity to the subject of study allows me to address these questions “from within,” with all their complexities and intricacies. Last but not least, I will inevitably be accused of giving more room to my own studies than to those of others. I have tried to minimize this possible charge by mentioning all major and/or representative works of my colleagues.

The Initiators and Their Backgrounds

French anthropological research in this Himalayan country began in the late 1950s and continued through the 1960s, shortly after the fall of the Rana regime (1951) and the opening of the country to foreigners. The field was broached by four pioneers: Alexander William Macdonald (b. 1923), Corneille Jest (b. 1930), Bernard Pignède (1932–1961), and Marc Gaborieau (b. 1937). Interestingly enough, the first two started work in the eastern Himalayas: Jest among the Lepchas (Kalimpong District) and Macdonald in North Bengal (Kalimpong), before carrying out research in Nepal. Pignède, for his part, reached Nepal after travelling extensively over the world at a time when he had not yet been trained professionally as an anthropologist. He passed away very young, at the age of only 29, in an accident. These scholars have followed different directions in their research and have founded specific scholarly lineages (something like the *paramparā*, the successions of teachers and disciples in traditional Indian culture). More importantly, in the French school of anthropology, they represent three currents, three intellectual orientations, very different indeed from each other. These currents, which have their own networks and institutions, have often competed with each other.

In most of his writings, A. M. Macdonald represents the textual Indology/Tibetology stream. He never undertook lengthy fieldwork within a single community and never produced a monograph comparable to those of his colleagues. Of all the French anthropologists who have worked in Nepal, in my view he is the closest successor to Sylvain Lévi, the French Indologist and Buddhologist and professor at the Illustrious Collège de France, Paris. Lévi (1863–1935) visited Nepal three times between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century during the Ranas’ rule, and between 1905 and 1911 he published three volumes on the history, the religion and the populations of Nepal on the basis of earlier works by foreign scholars as well as his

own research. Lévi is a mythical reference for both Nepali and French scholars, and his book was recently translated into Nepali (two volumes), and published by Himal Books in 2005 and 2007. Yet despite what some have said (e.g. de Sales 1995), Lévi cannot be considered the ancestor of anthropological studies in Nepal. He first went to the former Himalayan kingdom mainly to study ancient texts, inscriptions and manuscripts; he only stayed in the country for a short period of time; and, as far as its populations are concerned, he relied on information already published by British officials.

Macdonald was born in Scotland and was first educated at Oxford, but he decided to settle in France in 1949 since, as he explained later on, he admired French orientalism. He married a French Tibetologist, Ariane Spanien who taught at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris. His first trip to Nepal only dated back to 1964, although the couple had already lived in the Kalimpong area between 1958 and 1960. In this region, Macdonald collected Tibetan tales and observed Nepali healers (*jhāṅkrī*). He joined the CNRS in 1951. In Nepal itself, he embarked on a study of the Sherpas' history and religion through local texts in collaboration with a Sherpa monk. He visited other places in Nepal (Helambu, the Dang Valley), occasionally carrying out fieldwork. His two collections of papers, published by Ratna Pustak Bhandar in Kathmandu (1975 and 1987), testify to his proclivity for orientalism. They contain a series of useful articles published mainly in Indological and Orientalist journals, such as the seven papers he published in the French *Journal Asiatique* between 1952 and 1968. His papers about anthropology in its strict sense often start with the study of a local text, written or published either in Nepali or in Tibetan, and translated by Macdonald himself. This is, for instance, the case with the *Tamba Kaiten*, a book published in Darjeeling by Santabir Lama, a former governor of Ilam, on Tamang culture, with a pilgrim's guide to holy Buddhist places in Nepal written in the eighteenth century by a Tibetan monk (1975), and with a Lama's view of mountaineers attempting to climb Mt. Everest (1987). Similarly, Macdonald translated some sections of the old National Law Code *Muluki Ain* (the one promulgated by Jang Bahadur in 1854), related to the repression of witches or supposed witches, and the classification of lower castes (1975). These documents, which are unfortunately never placed in an anthropological perspective, enable the author to grasp the local vision and indigenous knowledge. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that Macdonald spent time on various fields, not only among Tharus, but also in Kathmandu, in Solukhumbu and in Kavrepalanchok. In addition, the

chapters related to shamanism are ethnographically-based. They are particularly remarkable for their novelty at the time they were published and for their attention to detail. Perhaps, to portray him as an anthropologist among Orientalists and an Orientalist among anthropologists is the best and most appropriate way.

Macdonald (“Macdo” as he is informally called in France) has always been interested in rituals. He edited a special issue of the journal *L’Ethnographie* (1987b) on this subject, along with five papers written by French anthropologists. In his opinion, ritual has a life of its own, independent of the text on which it is theoretically based. By the same token, several sections of his works interpret Tibetan and Himalayan ceremonies as important practices in the production, maintenance and distribution of social power. Paul Mus (1902–1969), another Professor at the Collège de France, a philologist and archaeologist, as well as a sociologist, greatly influenced the views of Macdonald in this field of research. Among many other things, Mus underlined the importance of the old local substratum, squeezed between China and India, which can be found in many peripheral places in Asia. Macdonald even translated into English Paul Mus’s *Magum Opus: Barabodur: Sketch of a History of Buddhism based on Archaeological Criticism of Texts* (1997). His ideas related to the cultural interactions between small local societies and highly literate civilizations are taken directly from there. A “Festchrift,” *Les habitants du Toit du Monde* [‘The People on the Roof of the World’], edited by Samten Karmay and Philippe Sagant, was offered to A.W. Macdonald in 1997 (he was 74 years old at the time) along with nine papers on Nepal by French and foreign scholars.

Corneille Jest incarnates the museographic, ethnographic school of anthropology. He was long associated with the Musée de l’Homme, which was this school’s stronghold. His supervisor was André Leroi-Gourhan (1911–1986), a notorious archaeologist, palaeontologist and ethnologist interested in aesthetics and in primitive modes of technology both in general and in relation to ethnic groupings. This important current in French anthropology laid emphasis on descriptions, fieldwork, the study of material culture, linguistic competences and museology.³ Exposure to the field was thought to be crucial. Ethnographers belonging to this stream passionately reject the excessive theorization, to their eyes, of Lévi-Strauss and his followers. They adopt an anti-structuralist posture, blaming Lévi-Strauss’s analysis for relying mainly on secondary sources

³ On the French school of ethnography, see Parkin and de Sales (forthcoming).

(not on myths collected by the author himself) as well as for its ahistoricism. They also accuse him of what can be called a “mathematization” of social facts and an exclusive preoccupation with symbolic affairs. For them, structuralist interpretations resemble poetry much more than science: their findings are absolutely impossible to verify. In spite of this empiricism and a certain obsession with detail, I hesitate to speak of “ethnographic essentialism” with regard to these scholars (Parkin and de Sales forthcoming). Such a term conveys excessively derogatory connotations. These French ethnographers simply wish to stress the material aspects of existence, life-style and the weight of human beings’ basic needs.

Jest’s first sojourn in the Himalayas took place in Kalimpong District during the summer of 1953. The same year, he went to Nepal (therefore preceding Macdonald and Pignède by a few years) and trekked with David Snellgrove, the British Tibetologist, up to Dolpo, north of Dhaulagiri. Jest is the author of a monograph (1975a) on this region inhabited by a Tibetan-speaking people, which focuses mainly on material life, but also deals with some aspects of society, rituals and religious life. It is the first all-embracing book on a Tibetan community in Nepal. Tibetologists belonging to the philological school were very surprised that these Tibetan people practise cross-cousin marriage. They even had some difficulty in believing it. Jest then travelled extensively throughout the hills and the mountains of Nepal, more often than not in the company of French non-anthropological scholars, and he published short non-theoretical articles on the Thakalis of Thak Khola (1966a), the Chepangs (1966b) and the Kuswars (Majhi) of Kavrepalanchok region (1977). He focused his attention on photography; he himself is an excellent photographer as well as a talented filmmaker. Some of his articles consist mainly of a series of photographs, chronologically arranged. This was the theme of the special issue of the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* (1998–1999) that was dedicated to him (Dollfus and Lecomte-Tilouine 1998–1999). His photographs taken in various places of Nepal are currently being scanned and saved in a database at the Centre d’études himalayennes, Villejuif. As we will see later on, Jest played a key role in coordinating French research in Nepal.⁴

⁴ Corneille Jest was the curator of the important exhibition: *Nepal, Men and Gods*, held in Musée de l’Homme (December 1969–March 1970), with the participation of the National Museum of Kathmandu.

Bernard Pignède was too young at the time of his fieldwork in Nepal (1958) for his writings to be clearly associated with one of these two groups. Yet, the mark of his supervisor, Louis Dumont (1911–1998), is clearly visible in his posthumous book on the Gurungs (1966). Dumont, whose work on India is widely known, and still largely discussed, started as a backroom boy at the Musée de l'Homme (Paris). However, after his sojourn in Oxford, at the Department of Social Anthropology, he rapidly turned to a more classical British social anthropology. He ultimately lent an extremely sociological theoretization to his way of thinking, shifting progressively from observation to ideas. Dumont in many ways incarnates a third distinct current, coming from the French school of sociology that considers Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) as one of its forefathers. This sociological school has always been distant from the orthodox structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Pignède's book derives from this inspiration, at least in dealing with Gurung kinship (seen as similar to the asymmetrical marriage systems of India).

Pignède spent some seven months in a Gurung village (Mohoriya), at the western end of Gurung territory, at the foot of the Annapurnas, yet he never had the chance to visit this community again. Despite this, his work offers valuable data and paints a complete picture of a Gurung village, particularly of its clan structure and complex religion. It is still considered to be a major contribution. Nonetheless, the author overstressed the asymmetrical aspects of the Gurung kinship system, i.e., the preference for marriage with a mother's brother's daughter (matrilateral cross-cousin marriage). In fact, the system is much more symmetrical with marriages occurring just as often with father's sister's children. Both types of marriage are equally desirable and equally frequent. This reciprocity is consistent with the kinship terminology, as occurs among the nearby Tamangs. Pignède's book (1966) was translated into English by Sarah Harrison and Alan Macfarlane and published in Kathmandu in 1993 with updates, supplementary material and comments from the two English translators. The English edition is also enriched with the comments that a few learned Gurungs made on the text.

Marc Gaborieau for his part incarnates a kind of synthesis between the three aforementioned schools, the textualist, the ethnographic and the sociological currents, with considerable overlapping occurring between the three. He read philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure (Paris) and was already learning classical Arabic in Paris before his arrival in Nepal. In 1963, he obtained a post as lecturer in French language at Darbar school, Kathmandu, in lieu of military service. During each of his

holidays up until 1968, Marc Gaborieau undertook a study of a Muslim dominated village located in Tanahun District. Interestingly enough, he rejected his philosophical education and embraced empirical studies, paying particular attention to ethnographic and linguistic complexities. He published two books on Nepali Hill Muslims (1977 and 1993), as well as a French translation of the account of a journey made by a Kashmiri merchant from Kathmandu, where he was based, to Lhasa in 1882–1883, containing much detail about trade, the social life and Buddhist religion in Tibet, viewed from a Muslim perspective (1973). The account of this journey, written in Urdu, is taken from this trader's unpublished autobiography.

Gaborieau's masterpiece: *Ni Brahmanes, ni Ancêtres, Colporteurs Musulmans du Nepal* ['Neither Brahmins, nor Ancestors. Muslim Pedlars of Nepal'] (1993) is a remarkable book, combining the analytical and the empirical. The author here analyses the socio-religious structure of a Curaute bangle-makers community in Tanahun District. He underlines the common features between this Muslim minority and their Hindu neighbours with regard to religion and society. There are two distinctive elements however: shallower lineages with little solidarity between their members and the absence of any ancestral cult. These works on Nepali Muslims are all written in French, though some pieces did appear in English in two articles published in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1972 and 1978b) and in one other journal (1996). Gaborieau also conducted fieldwork in the Karnali region, West Nepal, in 1967 and 1968, on various cults (Masta in particular), partly with Prayag Raj Sharma, and in Kumaon on the bards' repertoire in this Pahadi-speaking region (1974 and 1976). His book, *Le Népal et ses Populations* ['Nepal and its Populations'] (1978a), is a valuable portrait of the erstwhile Himalayan kingdom during the panchayat period. From the 1970s onwards, Gaborieau shifted his focus to India where he developed an historical anthropology of the Muslims of the whole sub-continent.

Further Developments: Consolidation and Expansion

Macdonald, Jest, and Gaborieau, three major veterans of Nepali studies, and to a lesser extent Pignède, played a major role in shaping the field of Himalayan anthropology. They initiated a movement that has gained enormous momentum over the years. In the 1980s, around ten trained professional anthropologists conducted sustained anthropological research in Nepal. Chronologically, it is possible to identify a first group for the period 1966–1980 including: Philippe Sagant, Mireille Helffer (both

started in 1966), Gérard Toffin, Véronique Bouillier (both from 1970 onwards), Fernand Meyer and Anne Vergati. A second group emerged from 1980 onwards. Its main figures are: Brigitte Steinmann, Anne de Sales, Gisèle Krauskopff, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine and Philippe Ramirez. These scholars graduated either from the University of Nanterre or the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, the two foremost universities in this field and they were trained or supervised by Macdonald, Jest, Bernot (a Burma and Chittagong Hill Tracts specialist), Gaborieau, Hamayon (a Mongolianist and a specialist in shamanism) and Toffin. Between Ethnography and Indology, or to put it more personally, between the fearsome, bitter Macdonald and the cold, somewhat Prussian-looking Jest, the path towards real social anthropology dedicated to cross-cultural comparativism and open to sociological issues was narrow and not without risk. Few of us have embarked in that direction.

New researchers have been recruited across the generations, therefore passing on and expanding on inherited scientific knowledge. This strategy has been so successful that it has provoked the jealousy of French colleagues belonging to other cultural areas: they suspect “Nepalologists” of constituting a sort of “mafia” in the relevant selection committees in order to obtain posts for their students. Whatever the case may be, obviously, France’s position within Nepali studies on the international scene has strengthened over the years. Very recently Nicolas Sihlé, assistant professor at the University of Virginia, USA, produced a monograph on Tantric priests in Baragaon and lower Mustang (forthcoming) and has been offered a position at the French CNRS. Most of these scholars still pursue their research in Nepal. It should be noted however, that since the 1990s, Bouillier has moved over to Indian studies, along with, up to a certain point, Vergati, and that Ramirez left Nepal for Assam in the early 2000s. And while Sagant’s literary talent and imaginative reconstruction of the Tibetan religious landscape have fascinated students at the University of Nanterre, unfortunately, since the very end of the twentieth century, health problems have prevented him from continuing his scholarly career.

For these anthropologists, the Nepali Himalayas represented an outstanding laboratory, poorly researched until very recently. It was exceptional not only because it provided free access to Tibetan communities at a time when accessibility to the Tibetan plateau was denied by the Chinese authorities, but also, and perhaps more significantly, because it was largely assumed that Nepal was a sanctuary of old socio-religious forms now extinct both in India and in Tibet, which

have continued to evolve in their own way in these mountains. This Himalayan area was and still is seen as a peripheral space, a borderline, an “interstitial zone,” at the junction between the well-defined South-Asian civilization to the South and the Chinese/Tibetan cultural area to the north. To study these fascinating margins, researchers have specialized in specific fields and have conducted prolonged intensive field studies in various parts of the country. They have published a considerable corpus of writings, especially printed monographs (around 30 altogether, including collective volumes), but also various academic articles (more than 500) based on direct, first-hand observations collected in the field. These works have been written for the most part in French, but a fair number of them are now to be found in English and these French authors are at present writing their publications directly in that language (e.g. Krauskopff, Lecomte-Tilouine, Ramirez, de Sales, Toffin, etc.). Special emphasis has been laid on religion, cults, rituals, possessions, performances, sacred kingship, and the like; yet material culture, life-style, architecture, ethnobotany, local medicine, social organization, politics, ethnomusicology, and so forth have also been explored and studied. On the whole, French anthropological expertise on Nepal can be advantageously compared with that from two other leading countries: the United States of America and the United Kingdom. German scholars have also carried out considerable work in the Himalayas, but their main focus has been Indology/Tibetology, i.e. cultural history, with only sporadic though excellent work on anthropology and human geography.

Geographically, research has focused mainly on the mountainous regions and on the hills (see Table 1). In terms of works on the Tibetan people (Bhotiya) and the Sherpas, Jest, Macdonald, Helffer, Meyer, and Sihlé should be mentioned. They have shed new light and contributed very important data on these Tibetan enclaves in northern Nepal. At a lower altitude, Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic groups have attracted a number of researchers – perhaps because Westerners feel that they are admitted into these families on a more equal footing than among orthodox Hindu high-caste people, where caste restrictions possibly still prevail against *mleccha* “Barbarians.” These ethnic minorities include: Magars (de Sales, Lecomte-Tilouine), Chantels (de Sales), Thakalis (Jest), Chepangs (Jest), Tamangs (Steinmann, Toffin), Newars (Toffin and Vergati), Paharis or Pahis (Toffin), Sunuwars (Fournier), Rais (Schlemmer), Hayu (Michailovski), and Limbus (Sagant). Research has

Table 1. Distribution of French Anthropologists according to the Geographical Areas and Populations of Nepal.

	Tibetans (or Bhotiya) and Sherpas	Ethnic groups (<i>jana-jāti</i>) and Newars	Parbatiya Hindu castes, Nepali native speakers	Madhesi people from Tarai
High mountains	Buffetrille (Halase) Gauthard (Bodnath) Helffer (Bodnath) Jest (Dolpo) Macdonald (Khumbu) Meyer (Kathmandu, Nuwakot District) Sihlé (Baragaon/lower Mustang)			
Middle and low mountains, hills		Alirol (Tamang) Bernède (Néwar) Fournier (Sunuwar) Jest (Thakali) Lecomte-Tilouine (Magar) Macdonald (Tamang) Michailovsky (Hayu) Schlemmer (Rai) Sagant (Limbu) de Sales (Magar, Chantel) Steinmann (Tamang) Toffin (Newar, Tamang, Pahari) Vergati (Newar)	Aubriot (Gulmi) Bordes (Doti) Bouillier (Giri, Kanphata Yogi) Gaborieau (Hill Muslims, plus Jumla District) Helffer (Gaine, Damai) Lecomte-Tilouine (Dullu, Gulmi Districts) Macdonald (Gaine) Ramirez (Argha Khanchi)	
Mahabharat mountains and inner Tarai		Jest (Majhi, Chepang) Krauskopff (Kumhal, Tharu)	Bouillier (Kanphata Yogi, Dang Valley)	
Tarai plains				

also been carried out among Muslims (Gaborieau), and high and low Hindu castes (Parbatiya), speaking the national language, Nepali (Gaborieau, Bouillier, Macdonald, Helffer, Ramirez, and Lecomte-Tilouine). Preliminary notes have also been published about certain groups which raise the problem of whether to classify them either into caste or into ethnic groups, such as the Kumhal (Krauskopff) and the Majhi/Kuswar (Jest). The Tarai has obviously hardly been studied, or more precisely has not been studied at all, this being a broader problem that also concerns the other foreign national schools. However, the Tharus of Dang (in the inner Tarai) were first investigated by Macdonald, and then by Krauskopff, and research is currently being carried out on some Hindu sects in the eastern Tarai (Toffin).

The main support, the sustaining pillar of this undertaking has been and is still the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), a government-funded research organization, under the authority of France's Ministry of Research. The CNRS covers nearly all research fields, from chemistry, physics, astronomy, and life sciences to philosophy. Most French anthropologists working in Nepal belong or have belonged to this organization, although a minority of them also come from Universities. For the time being at least, once they enter the CNRS, anthropologists, just like other researchers in this state institution, can still devote all their time to their research and are granted life-tenure which guarantees them continuity in their perspectives and the possibility of shifting smoothly from one project to another. None of them have had to join development programs or international aid agencies to fund their presence in Nepal. Furthermore, except for Jest on temporary contracts, no-one has joined international organizations such as the World Bank, ICIMOD, UNESCO, and so forth. A contributing factor to Nepal's great prominence and notoriety in the anthropological field has obviously been an attraction to the country, its glorious scenery and views of the Himalayan peaks, the temperate climate in comparison to India, particularly in the hilly regions, and the diversity of its languages and cultures. For a long time Indian studies have suffered from this fashionable trend towards studying the Himalayas. It is only over the last decade that the Republic of India, and not only its Himalayan regions, has once again started to attract young scholars.

Areas of Research and Achievements

Material Culture, and Local Knowledge about Man and Nature

Besides C. Jest's monograph on Dolpo's Tibetan agriculturists and pastoralists (1975a), both Sagant (1976) and Toffin (1977) have produced books on this subject, the first one of these being on Limbu agriculture in Mewa Khola, in Taplejung District, and the second about Newar (Jyapu) agriculture, weaving, basket-making, food and jewellery in Lalitpur District (*Pyāngāon*). Toffin has studied local beer manufacturing processes in Nepal (1987a) while Steinmann has dealt with what she calls the "usage of things" (food, agriculture, portorage, washing, houses and dwellings) in Temal region (Kavrepalanchok District) among the eastern Tamangs (1987). As has been stated above, Steinmann has focused on the way Tamang religiosity is rooted in people's most prosaic daily practices. Central Nepali forms of pastoralism have been studied by P. Alirol (1976) and a special issue of the French journal *Ethnozootechnie* (1976), edited by J. Bonnemaire and C. Jest, was devoted to yak breeding, especially in the Langtang area. Similarly, a special issue of the *Technique and Culture* journal was published in 2001 on the various types of swing-plough found in the Himalayas, with three articles by French authors on Nepal. Two geographers, Denis Blamont and Olivia Aubriot, and one anthropologist, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine contributed to this special issue (Aubriot *et al.* 2001). It should also be mentioned that 2,377 ethnographic objects used (or formerly used) in the daily or ritual life of a large number of different Nepali groups were brought back by anthropologists, particularly between 1960 and 1975, and deposited in the French Museum of Ethnography (Musée de l'Homme) or donated by antique collectors and travellers. These Nepali collections are now in the newly constructed Musée du Quai Branly, Paris.⁵ All these samples are, of course, of tremendous interest with regard to the cultural heritage of the country's various *janajāti* ethnic groups.

Few detailed studies have been carried out on local knowledge about plants and animals. Jest has written an article on the use of wild plants in Dolpo (1972) and another one on the conception of animal life in the Tibetan world (1975b). In addition, Toffin has documented plants widely used among the western Tamangs (Northern Dhading and Nuwakot Districts) and has published an article on the ethnozoology of the same

⁵ Details and photographs of each item can be found on its website at the following address: <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/documentation/le-catalogue-des-objets.html>.

group of people. Tibetan medicine in Nepal has been extensively studied by Meyer, whose book, *Gso-ba Rig-pa* (1981), based both on written Tibetan materials and observations from a traditional Tibetan medical practitioner, *amchi*, living in Kathmandu is a landmark.

Urban Space and Architecture

Dwellings and settlements can be studied from the point of view of techniques, society and religious representations. Such a multifaceted approach has been adopted by Sagant (1976) and Toffin (1977) in their respective descriptions of Limbu houses and Newar (Jyapu) habitat. In the early 1980s, Toffin launched a project on Nepali and Himalayan types of houses and settlements in relation to their environments and the various ethnic cultural traditions. The conclusions were published in the form of two books: first in 1981 (Toffin 1981) and the second in collaboration with the geographer Blamont (Blamont and Toffin 1987). The first, *Man and his House in the Himalayas*, has been translated into English (1991). These two volumes show how ethnoarchitectural principles reflect important social and cultural categories and relationships. Beyond the protective function of any dwelling in Nepal, special attention is paid to the sacredness of the inhabited space and to the religious ideas associated with territorial units. Both houses and rural/urban settlements are in fact seen to be sacred realms, fenced off against lingering evil forces. Toffin also published a book on the urban and domestic space of a Newar urban community in collaboration with three French architects, Vincent Barré, Patrick Berger and Laurence Feveile: *Panauti* (Barré *et al.* 1981). The results of this project complete the work undertaken by Niels Gutschow and Bernhard Kölver in Bhaktapur (1975) and infuse the field with a constructive anthropological viewpoint. This ultimately led to a restoration program, run by the French government. The main temples of the small city were renovated and various schools were built. Finally, Toffin has carried out research on the socio-religious aspects of Kathmandu, particularly its thirty-two agriculturalist neighbourhoods that constitute the backbone of the old city's organization and of its ritual activity (2007).

Social Organization

The caste system prevailing in the hills among Parbatiyas has been investigated with much attention to detail in publications by Macdonald (1975, 1987a), Gaborieau (1977, 1978a, 1978b, 1993, 1996) and Bouillier (1979, including references to the old *Mulukī Ain* prescriptions). Its

religious aspects, the ban on relationships between castes, the links with temples and sanctuaries, and the old system of payment in kind and in particular of exchanging products have been fully described. The Newar urban caste system in the Kathmandu Valley, whose complexity brings to mind the one in the plains of India much more than the Parbatiya one, has also been extensively studied and a global interpretation has been given in terms of kingship and the ritual division of work (Toffin 1984 and 2007).

Gaborieau, Ramirez and Toffin have thoroughly studied the internal dynamics, factionalism and workings of the constitutive social units: lineage, neighbourhood, village community among Parbatiyas and Newars. In 1979, Gaborieau edited a special issue of the French anthropological journal *L'Homme*, entitled: "Caste, Lineages, Territory and Power in South Asia," with three papers on Nepal (Gaborieau, Sagant, Toffin). Furthermore, the Newars' unique *guthi* association system, triply linked to death, caste and territory, has been researched by Toffin (2007).

Power, Kingship, Political Systems

Sagant, whose ethnography remains unparalleled in its abundance of detail, was interested primarily in power. He presented a very fascinating picture of the political life of Limbuwan, made up of individualist conflicts between headmen, local potentates, *thulo mānche*, and their followers (1996). It challenges the common holistic view of tribal social life given here and there. Among French scholars, Sagant is the only researcher who studied in economic and political terms the relationships between Parbatiyas and autochthonous people speaking Tibeto-Burman languages (1976, 1978). He later emphasized the links between local chiefs and the soil or the mountain deity. The work of Philippe Ramirez (2000) in the Bahun-dominated Argha Rajasthal, the former capital of a Hindu micro chiefdom belonging to the Chaubisi rajya, and currently in Argha Khanchi District, is also noteworthy. He underlined the importance of the dependency links built around the powerful, large landowning Bahun/Chetri lineages in assisting the caste system to work, a system that is too often, according to this author, reduced to a mere religious affair. For Ramirez, these patron-client relationships play a key role in the overall caste society.

Combining anthropological data and historical documents, Toffin (1993) has investigated the religious ideology of the Malla kingship system in the Kathmandu Valley. He has stressed the kings' relationships to transcendent tutelary and territorial deities: Taleju, Pashupatinath, and

Narayan. The royal territory ultimately belongs to protective deities of whom kings are the protectors and the devotees. All in all, royalty in medieval Nepal emerges as very similar to Hindu ideas prevalent at the same period and in earlier times in India, despite the unique presence of Mahayana Buddhists in the Nepal Valley. Lecomte-Tilouine (2009a) recently gave an interpretation of the *kāṭṭo* ritual performed at the death of Shah sovereigns and explored some unnoticed aspects of this erstwhile kingship ideology.

Shamanism and Possession

Since the very beginning, shamanism has fascinated anthropologists, of French as well as of other nationalities. It has often been seen as an original feature of Himalayan culture. Besides old articles by Macdonald (1975), de Sales's study conducted among the Kham Magars (1991), a group who, interestingly enough, only have one type of religious specialist, i.e., the shaman, deserves particular attention. Sagant's *Dozing Shaman* among the Limbus (1996) is another important reference, as well as Steinmann's study (1987, 2001) on various priests, including shamans, of the eastern Tamangs. These last works illustrate the various influences, including Hinduism, at work in this Himalayan tradition and they explore their relationship with other types of religious specialists, Tibetan lamas and tantrists for instance. On the Sunuwar shaman *puimbo*, considered in opposition with the other priest of this ethnic group, the *naso*, the study of Fournier (1974) needs also to be mentioned. The book edited by Bouillier and Toffin (1989), *Prêtrise, Pouvoirs et Autorité en Himalaya* ['Priesthood, Powers and Authority in the Himalayas'] offers a synthesis of these questions and sheds light on two different models: one linked to magical power, the other related instead to institutionalized authority.

Spirit possession is widespread among all castes and ethnic groups throughout Nepal, and is often associated with witchcraft. The phenomenon takes on specific forms in Western Nepal, which are very fascinating indeed and quite pervasive in regard to the way society works. Gaborieau's works on the Masta cult in the Karnali (1976) sparked off research on this topic. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine recently edited a publication, *Bards and Mediums* (2009b), that presents the findings of a study on mediumism in Jumla, Dullu, as well as in eastern Kumaon, on the other side of the Nepalo-Indian border, a region that belongs to the same cultural area as Western Nepal. Historical studies appear at the end of this collection of articles, following fascinating ethnographical enquiries. As Gaborieau demonstrated four decades ago (1974), this

highly institutionalized system of possession is associated with a rich bardic tradition. In the context of the Kathmandu Valley, possession (tightly controlled) often takes the form of masked religious dances. This constitutes another facet of mediumism, studied by Toffin (1996 and 1999).

Religion, Rituals and Pantheons

Most of the printed monographs include religious data or analyses about religion, whether Hindu, Buddhist, or “tribal” in its various aspects. It may even be said that religion has been and still is the main focus of French research in Nepal, and more generally in the Himalayas. To begin with, the pantheon has been studied in relation to landscape (gods of the mountains, of the rivers, of the village, of the forest, etc.) in a special issue of *Études rurales*, edited by Toffin (1987b). It has also been investigated in relation to politics and the classical Indian Puranic tradition (see Bouillier and Toffin 1992). The role of the territorial deities among *janajāti* groups and their legitimating role vis-à-vis the first occupants of the territory or the eldest local lineage has been underlined. Similarly, it has been shown how rituals are often steeped in layers of long-past history (Toffin 1999, forthcoming) and illuminate the subordinated relations of certain ethnic groups to Brahmans (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a). The relationships between religion, territory and society appear to be very strong everywhere, but perhaps nowhere more so than among the Newars (Toffin 1984 and Vergati 1995).

Bouillier has historically and ethnographically documented the Nepali monasteries (*math*) of Kanphata Yogis in Nepal and highlighted the importance of these ascetics in relation to the Shah kings (1998). She has also studied a group of rural Giri householders (Dasnami) in the district of Kavrepanlanchok District, in *Nâitre Renonçant* [‘To be Born A Renouncer’], 1979. Buffettrille (1994) has emphasized the intermingling of Tibetan Buddhism and Hindu traditions in one specific sacred place: the caves of Halase-Maratika of Eastern Nepal (Kotang District). Toffin, for his part, recently began studying the Pranami reformist sect in Nepal as well as in India. Interestingly enough, this sect, though rather obscure in the past, has attracted a number of adepts in recent times.

Rites and ceremonies performed at turning points in the life of an individual (birth, initiation, marriage, funeral) have been thoroughly described. Festivals, especially royal festivals, performed at specific intervals, have particularly been investigated. Bearing this in mind, one should not forget the special issue of the journal *L’Homme* (1982) edited

by Toffin (*Les fêtes dans le monde hindou*), with three articles on Nepal. In many ways, this collection of papers has opened up the field to the study of public pageant performances. The book *Célébrer le pouvoir. Dasain, une fête royale au Népal* [‘Celebrating Power: Dasain, a Royal Festival in Nepal’], edited by Krauskopff and Lecomte-Tilouine (1996), is an important subsequent contribution on a major festival. It is based on materials taken from various ethnic/caste groups dealt with from various angles. Toffin’s book on Kathmandu’s old city’s Indra Jatra, another major Nepali festival, is to be published in French in 2010. This work highlights the spectacular aspects of the performance, as well as how the festival has changed over the centuries.

Musicology, Oral Literature, Theatrical Performance:

Mireille Helffer was the pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology. She came to Nepal for the first time in 1966, and she is known for her studies on the ritual music of Buddhist monasteries in Nepal (mostly in Bodnath) and elsewhere in the Himalayas (1994). However, prior to this she had already carried out worthwhile research in collaboration with Alexander W. Macdonald and Marc Gaborieau on the Gaine singers in the central hills of Nepal, their songs and their short-necked lute, the *sāraṅgī* (1966, 1977). Part of this study appeared in English in Volume 1 of Macdonald’s *Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia* (1975). Helffer also has a large discography on the various types of music in the Himalayas. More recently, the special issue of the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, edited by Franck Bernède (1997b), on “Himalayan Music, State of the Art,” can be considered a milestone, at least as far as recent research on this subject is concerned. This issue contains an article by the editor on the music of the Maharjan farmers in the Kathmandu Valley (Bernède 1997a). From a different perspective, theatrical performance is particularly rich in the Kathmandu Valley, especially in the Newar context. Toffin has studied several theatrical traditions, both rural and urban, generally associated with the former royal palace (forthcoming). He has shown how theatricality is embedded in Newar festivals and how a number of plays are acted out on these occasions. Recently, Nathalie Gauthard (Nice University) has submitted a PhD on the Cham Tibetan dance performed in Shechen monastery (Bodnath) (2004), and Rémi Bordes (INALCO, Paris) on the oral literature of Doti District in Far Western Nepal (2005).

Anthropology of Art and Aesthetics

A.W. Macdonald and A. Vergati-Stahl's *Newar Art in the Malla Period* (1979) is a pioneering work in the field of the anthropology of Nepali art. Vergati also published a book on Newar masks (2000) and another more recent work in French on the extremely brilliant Newar artistic creations in the Kathmandu Valley (2005), whether in stone, wood or gilded metal. There is no other group in Nepal where the word "art" can be more used from an anthropological viewpoint. In addition, Toffin has tried to circumscribe the "ritual logic" behind Newar images and their ceremonial usages (2009a). Beyond the Nepal Valley, popular art and aesthetics are still unexplored themes. Mention may be made of the descriptive study undertaken by Pascale Dollfus, a French specialist of Ladakh, on the household carved wooden *ghurrās* (*ghurros*) used in Western Nepal for holding the churn handle upright while butter is being made (Dollfus 2008). This study of churning-rod holders has been based on a series of objects belonging to private collections in Paris.⁶

Field Methods, Interdisciplinarity and Cooperation

A history of French anthropology in Nepal would not be complete without exploring the practices of anthropologists, their methods of investigation, as well as the institutional and material contexts of these works.⁷ These aspects are in fact part of the undertaking. They provide significant elements with which to appreciate the validity and the accuracy of the analyses provided. On the whole, it might be said that most of these practitioners, with perhaps the exception of Macdonald (who could read both Nepali and Tibetan), embarked on lengthy fieldwork, like other Western colleagues outside France. They collected first-hand material and have practised what is called participant observation in the micro-locality of their research. They have been more or less adopted by the family where they stayed, establishing not only friendly but also familial relationships with certain persons. Most researchers, if not all, speak Nepali – some can even speak a second vernacular language – and have used an assistant or interpreter only for more difficult enquiries regarding oral literature, myths, vernacular texts,

⁶ The main collections of Nepali art and handicraft in France are located at the Musée Guimet (Paris), Musée du Quai Branly (Paris), Musée de la Castres (Cannes), Asiatica, Museum of Asian Arts (Biarritz), and Museum of Asian Arts (Nice).

⁷ For comparative perspectives related to the history of anthropology in India, see Assayag and Bénéï (2003), as well as Uberoi *et al.* (2008).

and so forth. Given the verbal nature of most ethnographic work, this ability to communicate in the local language is essential. It must be recalled that Paris University is fortunate enough to have been able to offer a Nepali language and civilization course at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) since 1967. What is perhaps more striking is the fact that a number of these researchers have revisited the villages studied after their first fieldwork to check various data or to launch a new field of research. To my eyes, these regular visits, which are not yet considered to be a necessary phase in the ethnographic procedures, contribute greatly to the authenticity of the works produced. In some cases, but not all, the narrow scope of the village community has been transcended by a wider comparative approach extended to other villages or to the study of a neighboring ethnic group.

By and large, the field in all its forms has dominated the scope of researchers and has directly dictated the style of their works, to a larger extent than any theoretical issues. However, the forms of monographs have varied from case to case. There is a tendency to cover all aspects of the chosen community's life within a single publication, from its material life to its religion. Certain authors thus present a complete picture, with different chapters related to agriculture, housing, economy, kinship units and religion. Jest's book on Dolpo (1975a) is a clear example of this genre. It expresses an old-fashioned but clear categorization of society adopted in most books by the French ethnographic school in the first half of the twentieth century, if not later, to the detriment of links between different fields. Some anthropologists, however, have tried to arrange their data around one main central idea or have opted for the study of a single phenomenon (shamanism, kingship, the caste system, or a festival, for instance) that could offer a general view of the chosen group encompassing the whole of society. The Maussian (from the name of Marcel Mauss) model of the "total social fact" prevails here, i.e., the idea that social, economic and religious domains are woven together, interconnected, around some social and cultural forms, which may differ from one culture to another. A "total social fact" therefore designates phenomena or institutions that penetrate every aspect of the social system and have implications throughout society, in economic, legal, political and religious spheres.

Given that anthropology is embodied in the lives of its practitioners and entails a deep personal experience with "others," it seems logical that some authors have written individualized accounts of their research. Two anthropologists, Steinmann and Toffin, have chosen a more literary or

even autobiographical form, at least in one piece of their respective work. Steinmann's *Les Enfants du singe et de la démonsse. Mémoire des Tamangs* ['Children of the Monkey and of the Demoness: Memories of the Tamangs'] (2001) includes, for instance, personal accounts inserted among the ethnographical data. Toffin's *Les Tambours de Katmandou* ['The Drums of Kathmandu'] (1996) narrates in an intimate manner the author's various field experiences in the Kathmandu Valley, both in rural and in urban areas. This unconventional (yet recognized) type of anthropological writing, which can be labelled "ego-anthropology," derives from a feeling that academic works are inadequate to convey personal experience. It not only exposes the inner uncertainties of the ethnographer at work; it is also a means of escaping the anonymity of the detached observer and of raising methodological questions about the material conditions of fieldwork, the role of informants and the blunders made by the ethnographer. It reveals various latent aspects in the scientific monograph and adds some substance to the standard impersonal mode of text construction.⁸

French anthropologists partaking in this Nepali endeavor have never shared an explicit common project. They belong in fact to different research units, often (but not always) competing with one another. In nearly all cases, these social scientists have total freedom to choose and pursue their own research programs. They usually carry out their fieldwork in an isolated and separate manner. However, it might be assumed that the general aim, not explicitly mentioned, yet pervasively present at national and international meetings in the 1970s and 1980s, was to map Nepal's linguistic, social and cultural diversity – which is exceptional given the country's surface area. The inventory of these features is almost complete now, except for some persisting gaps that are left in the inner Tarai and in Eastern Nepal. It is likely that research will soon turn to a second phase, more comparative and more interpretative in its approach.

Yet, between 1971 and 1985, the team headed by Corneille Jest and Jean-François Dobremez (1942–2009), a botanist and the foremost expert on Nepal's flora, also had a broader overt objective. These pioneers aimed

⁸ Michel Leiris (1934) and Lévi-Strauss (1955) are the two paradigmatic French models of such "ego-anthropology." These two books antedated the general trend towards "reflective anthropology," of which Paul Rainbow's work on his fieldwork in Morocco (1977) is emblematic. Steinmann and Toffin's books pertain to both these currents. See for instance the review of Toffin's *Les Tambours de Katmandou* by David Gellner (1997).

at constituting an interdisciplinary group of experts to study the relationship between man and his environment through the combined angles of different disciplines. Biologists belonging to that group tended to develop a holistic, syncretistic, systemic vision of the reality. This goal did not fit in with the complexity of social facts, and so quite naturally failed to be achieved. Yet it succeeded in many other ways, for instance in enriching the vision of a given artefact, field, house, settlement, or tool through the eyes of researchers from different disciplines. This scientific policy was greatly encouraged by the CNRS and generously funded. Four localized projects must be mentioned: (1) the Langtang interdisciplinary study (1971–1973), bringing together anthropologists, botanists and zootechnicians, which focused mainly on yak husbandry; (2) the Upper Ankhlu Khola project, in northern Dhading District (1972–1976), run by an agronomist, two anthropologists, and a number of biologists from Grenoble University; and (3) the Salme project (1978–1983), the largest and most ambitious, which mobilized a larger number of people, and concentrated on an eastern Tamang/Ghale/Kami binucleated settlement of Nuwakot district. Agronomists, geographers, biologists, social anthropologists, nutritionists, physical anthropologists, and so on took turns or coexisted in this community for varying periods of fieldwork. At one time in the year, more than fifteen scientists lived together in two different houses rented in the village. It was a golden moment for sharing experiences between various disciplines, a crossroads for dialogues of many kinds. Yet unfortunately the team was constricted by the small-scale of the study and the absence of any theoretical perspective. Villagers were puzzled by such an invasion of Westerners who wanted to know everything about them and their environment, yet they played the game of the “observers” most of the time, responding patiently to our queries. Nonetheless, I must admit that, from a strictly anthropological viewpoint, the necessary conditions for establishing an intimate relationship with the villagers such as one solitary researcher is able to create during his or her fieldwork, were not fulfilled. The main findings of this research were presented in the two volumes edited by J. F. Dobremez (*Les Collines du Népal central* [‘The Hills of Central Nepal’], 1986). This publication is one of the many French works of great scientific use that have unfortunately never been translated into English. This research has also proved to be a valuable training ground for a number of young French PhD students (as well as two students from other European countries, namely the Netherlands and the UK), from different disciplines: they collected the material for their respective PhDs from Salme. And then

there was also (4) Gulmi-Argha Khanchi (1985–1993), an entirely new project, which did not focus on a village or a valley, but on two large districts of Central Nepal, inhabited mostly by Parbatiyas, with significant Magar, Gurung and Kumhal minorities. It is from these regions that Ramirez and Lecomte-Tilouine collected their material for their PhDs and subsequent books (Lecomte-Tilouine 1993, Ramirez 2000). A collective work, edited by Ramirez, appeared in English in 1999, presenting some of the results of this joint research project. Entitled *Resunga: the Mountain of the Horned Sage*, it was published by Himal Books. Despite its importance, this work went unnoticed and was rapidly forgotten. In all these projects, the selected field was conceived as a laboratory, at the intersection between disciplines, on the edges of institutionalized and academic boundaries. Other interdisciplinary programs on a much smaller scale were launched in the Kathmandu Valley and its surrounding area, the most successful being the ethnoarchitectural survey and study of Panauti settlement (1977–1980) published in Barré *et al.* (1981), and Toffin (1984).

A number of Nepali scientists, biologists, botanists, and agronomists, were associated with these projects. Yet very few or no Nepali anthropologists took part in them. The question of the type of anthropology practised by Nepalis would require a separate article, but it must be acknowledged that at the time of the first French ethnographic works and until the 1980s it remained rather under-developed. For a long time it has been associated with development-oriented programs, fitting in with the plans of the Nepal Government or of international agencies. In this connection, A.W. Macdonald held a post in the early 1970s at Tribhuvan University, yet he taught anthropology to Nepali students on account of his British nationality (he had in fact dual nationality, both French and British). Some Nepali students in anthropology were trained in France (Khem Bahadur Bista, Hikmat Bista, Sushila Manandhar, Satya Shrestha-Schipper) and were awarded PhDs there. Unfortunately, they have all turned to other jobs and have not followed an academic career.⁹ As far as the official Nepali counterpart of French research in the country is concerned, it has varied over time. The CNRS first signed an agreement with the Royal Nepal Academy, and then latter with the Department of Archaeology. Regrettably, these arrangements did not prove to benefit either party, French or Nepali. Since 2000, the CNRS has been associated

⁹ Sushila Manandhar and Satya Shrestha-Schipper are still affiliated to scientific organizations and occasionally publish academic papers.

with the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS). A number of Franco-Nepali seminars have been held in connection with this center in Kathmandu or France.

New Paradigms: Social and Political Changes

Until very recently, French anthropological experts in Nepal mainly concentrated on old customs, archaic social structures, the bardic repertoire celebrating kingdoms long since gone, and so forth. These features appeared to be relatively untouched or little affected by modernity. Retrospectively, the blatant fascination with shamanism, oracular cults, the cross-cousin marriage system among certain central and western *janajāti* groups, funeral associations reminiscent of European institutions during the medieval ages, and so on, no doubt stemmed from these ideas. In short, like their other Western colleagues, French anthropologists were first attracted by the otherness of remote, underdeveloped people. From the standard Nepali viewpoint, such research reveals an outsider's outlook, an imaginary creation pervaded by exoticism, a construct of Western ethnocentricity. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that there was some urgency in recording, observing and documenting ceremonies, types of bonds between territorial and social units, and objects of daily life that in all probability will disappear or will be greatly altered by the tide of change. At any rate, the positive consequence of this quest is that in the near future books and articles by French authors (like those of other foreign researchers) are likely to become the archives of an erstwhile largely illiterate country, which is changing very rapidly since its opening onto the modern world after the fall of the Rana regime in 1951.

Now, this static vision reflects a patent undervaluation of internal dynamics and historical processes. As has often been pointed out and as some researchers pertinently showed from the very beginning, many of so-called "archaic" features have changed gradually over the ages and have become mere customs practised by rote only at a relatively later stage. In all probability, they have been influenced by a number of external models or transformed, sometimes drastically, by a new political situation. The unification of the country in the second half of the eighteenth century was, for instance, a shock for most of the conquered territories and the defeated groups. Some cases of invented tradition, at least to a certain extent, such as the Indra Jatra festival (Toffin forthcoming), have been reported. A ceremony that appears to be linked to an immemorial past, like the erection of the pole on the first day of this

celebration, is in fact a product of the early nineteenth century. It was introduced mainly to legitimate emphatically the power of the Shah dynasty in its newly established capital. In a very different context, it has been demonstrated how the shamanic hymns sung by mediums of Western and Central Nepal, which at the time of their first recording were thought to be extremely close to Siberian shamanism, are in fact influenced linguistically in a profound manner by the Nepali language and Shaivite Hindu notions.¹⁰ In other words, today there is a need to view the different Nepali groups as historically constituted and as changing communities.

As is clear from the above account, studying social and economic changes was not of prime importance in the first French research on Nepal. Concern for social and economic changes emerged for the first time in its fullest form in a seminar on migration directed by Sagant in 1976–1978. The seminar took place at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Centre des études indiennes et de l'Asie du Sud* (Centre for Indian and South Asian Studies) (Sagant 1978). Such issues have considerably broadened the scope of research and introduced a more dynamic viewpoint. From this perspective, the enrolment of Gurkhas in the British army since the first decades of the nineteenth century as well as the ancient migrations of populations from eastern Nepal to the Districts of North Bengal and to Sikkim suddenly appear to be crucial to understanding Nepal. In other words, Nepal needs to be understood in relation to its neighbouring countries.¹¹

Nepal's move towards democracy in the 1990s and the fall of the monarchy have profoundly affected the country and provoked massive changes in all sectors of life. Concomitantly, urban society has expanded considerably and the new urban middle class has started to forge its own values, to carve a new cultural space, between the elite and the laboring masses, much more oriented towards modernity than before. For these groups, the boundary between East and West as it was experienced five decades ago is increasingly becoming obsolete. The paradigms and current issues in social sciences have changed accordingly. The anthropology of Nepal has entered a new phase: conflicts, civil war, mass

¹⁰ See for instance Maskarinec and his study of shaman oral texts of the Bhujji valley of Western Nepal (1999/2009).

¹¹ In addition, some isolated studies on economic and social changes have been conducted here and there. For instance, the transformations among Tamangs induced by the monetization of the old mutual aid *parma* system in agricultural work have been documented in Toffin (1986).

media, political ideologies, power, state institutions, even electoral processes, new forms of associational life, modes of citizenship, gender studies, these have become the fields most favored by scientists. The study of events that transform structure has become the priority. Many presuppositions from the previous period, the exclusively rural nature of the country for instance, have ceased to apply. Social scientists are now more and more confronted by half-modern, half-traditional societies. In some ways, everything becomes political. These far-reaching changes are reflected in the book edited in 2006 by Steinmann on the Maoist movement and on the “People’s War”: *Le Maoïsme au Népal: Lectures d’une révolution* [‘Maoism in Nepal: Readings on a Revolution’].¹² On related subjects, Ramirez (1997) and de Sales (2003) deserve also to be mentioned. Research therefore took another direction. In 2005, Lecomte-Tilouine launched a project on the “People’s War,” its origins and the transformations of the rural zones controlled by the guerrillas. Some results have been published in her collection of articles published by Oxford University Press, Delhi (2009).¹³ The last two chapters of *Newar Society* (Toffin 2007) also deal with important changes such as the progressive “substantialization” of castes (a concept introduced by Dumont in his book *Homo Hierarchicus*) and the emergence of a new generation of women who are eager to engage in occupations traditionally reserved for men. Krauskopff (2003) documented social changes among the Tharus and described the role of the intellectuals in raising ethnic consciousness among the so-called *ādivāsī*, autochthonous people (*jana jāti*).

Under these disorienting circumstances, notions of identity and belonging emerge as promising new themes of research. The ascriptive bounded forms of social membership are gradually dying out and being replaced by more optional bonds. Personhood is still embedded in kin relationships, but individuals are more open to new forms of grouping. Dual types of identity and divided personalities are coming to light. Even the role of religion is being challenged. A process of secularization, not totally new, has turned out to be of critical and topical importance: since Hinduism has ceased to be Nepal’s official religion, a new equilibrium between the different faiths has to be found and a new secularist policy implemented (Toffin 2006). Yet many other issues are important and will deserve investigation in the future. As the political volatility of the post-

¹² The use of the word ‘revolution’ here is of course questionable.

¹³ On this book, see recent review by Dahal (2009).

monarchical period reveals, the power of the state remains limited, while Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), for instance, turn out to have a more and more important role to play in the general functioning of society.

The *janajāti* ethnic movement which appeared on the national scene during the 1990s put Western anthropologists in an embarrassing position. The boundaries and the outlooks of their works have been redefined by the political engagement of social groups that had long been merely “observed.” Most French anthropologists (like those elsewhere) express their sympathy for minority cultures. However, they encounter some difficulty in sharing the somewhat over-politicized visions of these movements and of their leaders.¹⁴ It has been particularly problematical for them to endorse the old-fashioned, racial ideas about autochthony and ethnic groups that some of these organizations have overtly professed (Toffin 2009b). These outdated theoretical conceptions date back to the very beginning of the history of anthropology. They convey a substantialist vision of culture at a time when anthropologists have subjected the notion of “tribe” to a systematic destruction. The intermingling and hybridity of all cultures are being negated. The anthropologist finds himself, most reluctantly, actively engaged in the process of creating and re-interpreting ethnic identity. Pignède’s book (1966) for instance has been reviewed and reinterpreted by the Gurungs themselves to fit in with their fight for autonomy and to be recognized as a distinct group separate from the Hindu mainstream. This is much more than a constructive dialogue between observers and the communities observed. In spite of the sympathetic allegiance to the ethnic group or caste that hosts him, the researcher must try to achieve at least some partial objectivity and not turn into a propagandist.

Conclusions

All things considered, over the last fifty years, France has produced a long series of dedicated, serious, solid, committed scientists in the field of Nepal Studies, remarkably independent from any theoretical school or local political lobby. The review of their research is impressive. This anthropological scholarship has yielded a rich harvest of precise ethnographic observations anchored in personal experience, textual studies and contextualized data that will be of great use in the long term.

¹⁴ On the rewriting of the past among Kirant groups according to an ethno-nationalist vision, see Schlemmer (2009).

Admittedly, most of these works are currently in French and are scattered in difficult-to-find publications in Nepal. Yet the overwhelming bulk of the literature produced so far has already recorded a large variety of customs, linguistic terms, usages, social arrangements – some of them on the verge of extinction – ready to be passed on to the next generation of Nepalis, if translations into English (or Nepali languages) become available for those who find it difficult to read French. Indeed, it has already become history, part of the Nepali national heritage. In addition, in their great majority these works constitute a body of objective and critical writings of vital interest to historians and sociologists who wish to decipher Nepali society in a dispassionate manner. They therefore contribute substantially to the building of a scientific tradition that refuses to be politicized and to bow to international and national intellectual fashions.

Despite this, French anthropology reveals important shortcomings (also shared more or less by other national schools, I am afraid) that must be pointed out. The first one, and the most obvious, is the truncated view it offers of Nepal. I have in mind the absence of any studies (save on the Tharus and on a Kanphata Yogi monastery of Dang Valley: Krauskopff 1989, Krauskopff and Deuel Meyer 2000, and Bouillier 1998) on the Tarai, a region that now shelters the majority of the Nepalis and whose weight will increase in the future if it remains an integral part of Nepal. The centrality assigned to the hills is totally disproportionate to the real economic importance of these regions. In other words, the cartography of the fieldwork undertaken reflects an old vision of the country, belonging to the monarchical period, in which the Tarai was loosely integrated into the kingdom. The second drawback is the exclusive concentration on rural communities, save for the studies of Toffin in Panauti and Kathmandu (1984, 2007). Nearly all fieldwork has been undertaken in villages. This emphasis, like the aforementioned one, offers only a partial view of contemporary Nepal. The third limitation is linked to the almost exclusively micro-local approach taken, namely that of studying villages and/or ethnic groups viewed as almost entirely autonomous communities. Tamangs, Gurungs, Limbus have been studied from within, in their specificities, to the detriment of their links to the global state.¹⁵ They have

¹⁵ There are, however, some remarkable exceptions, particularly in the more recent works of Ramirez (1999), Krauskopff and Deuel Meyer (2000), and Lecomte-Tilouine (2009a). These three researchers have invested great efforts in considering the relationships between Hindu castes and ethnic groups, or

been considered as tribesmen, carriers of a glorious folk and vernacular tradition, rather than as peasants and mountaineers, members of a wider society in which they frequently occupy a subaltern position. I believe that the whole anthropological undertaking was until recently anchored in such an antiquated vision: Nepal was seen as a mosaic of unrelated groups having their own specificities and identities. This assessment, which could perhaps (but not entirely) be endorsed for times now past, is less and less valid today.

The fourth weakness, linked to the preceding one, is the lack of comparative studies, and, for those that exist, their embryonic state. In the course of the first decades, French anthropology on Nepal concentrated exclusively on the differences between socio-ethnic minorities and underestimated the relationships between them. For a long time, the following equation: one anthropologist = one ethnic group (“tribe”) or caste, prevailed. The time has now come to investigate their interactions and the manner in which these groups constitute a nation. Obviously, a comparative study of beliefs, rituals and social institutions would reveal common features, and interconnect elements – indicative of ancient links, antedating to the probable differentiation between ethnic groups that occurred when these populations settled within separate bounded territories. Similarly, French anthropology has not generated dynamic intercaste or interethnic works, such as the British school has for instance produced. It has greatly contributed to the understanding of the Nepali culture and religion, but on the whole the work of its researchers does not help to decipher Nepali society better than other national schools or traditions. Finally, it is worth noting that Nepal studies have not contributed significantly to the history of ideas within French anthropology or to any major current theoretical debate on the international scene.

The last issue I would like to raise concerns the specificities of the French school of anthropology in Nepal. Does it display distinctive peculiarities? Do its practitioners share some common family features? The interdisciplinary method, mixing the anthropologist with other disciplines, immediately comes to mind. Yet the Germans have also carried out such cross-disciplinary undertakings. In addition, the fact that English is used more and more in writings tends to undermine the

between the former hill states and the Tarai over various historical periods. In many ways, they have followed the pioneering enterprise of Sagant (1978) in that direction.

particular manner of dealing with things in French prose. In reality, as I have shown above, the origins of French anthropology are multiple, as are its main orientations. To confine it to a restricted number of features reduces the multiple qualities and the diversity it has demonstrated over five decades, even though a noticeable uniformization has occurred since the 1990s. Meanwhile, things have radically changed. Ethnography is still of great value for the comprehension of the inner values of one's culture. Its ability to place accounts of behavior within a network of affective and symbolic structures that render them coherent, as in the "thick description" advocated by Clifford Geertz, remains unrivalled. Yet the old descriptive and particularistic modes of writings pertaining to the early French school of ethnography have become out-dated, for better or worse. They are in fact of little help in understanding the radical transformations in the country and the aspirations of its inhabitants. To produce worthwhile research, the scientist increasingly needs a more theoretical/thematic objective – a position that is shared by other national schools of anthropology.

Paradoxically, the weight of orientalism, particularly of Indology (Tibetology applies to a very limited number of Nepali groups) has left a most distinctive mark in this field of research. This of course goes back to Sylvain Lévi. This orientalist stance has gained unique importance in French scholarship. Indology long remained the centre of gravity of South Asian studies in this country, even in anthropological works. In my opinion, this prevalence is double-edged: it is both a strength and a weakness. A strength, since Nepali society cannot be understood without taking into account its main religious sources, its Sanskrit culture and Puranic models. A handicap since it leads scholars (myself included) to overemphasizing religious and symbolic issues quite generally and concomitantly to de-emphasizing economic and political realities. Besides, one is often tempted to impose mechanically these religious Indological notions on contemporary data, ignoring the successive manipulations of power, the contextualized situations and the historical transformations, admittedly difficult to evaluate in cases where changes can be documented only through oral texts. Scholars thus become easily trapped within what becomes an uncritical rhetoric. Today, Nepal has obviously embarked on a new type of history, much more influenced by the modern world and globalization. Nepali anthropology has undergone quite a metamorphosis over the last three decades and there is an evident shift in its repertoire. Old conceptual models conceived by philologists and historians of religion fit in less and less with the complex and

changing realities of the country. New horizons, moving away from old ideas and boundaries, have to be explored.

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