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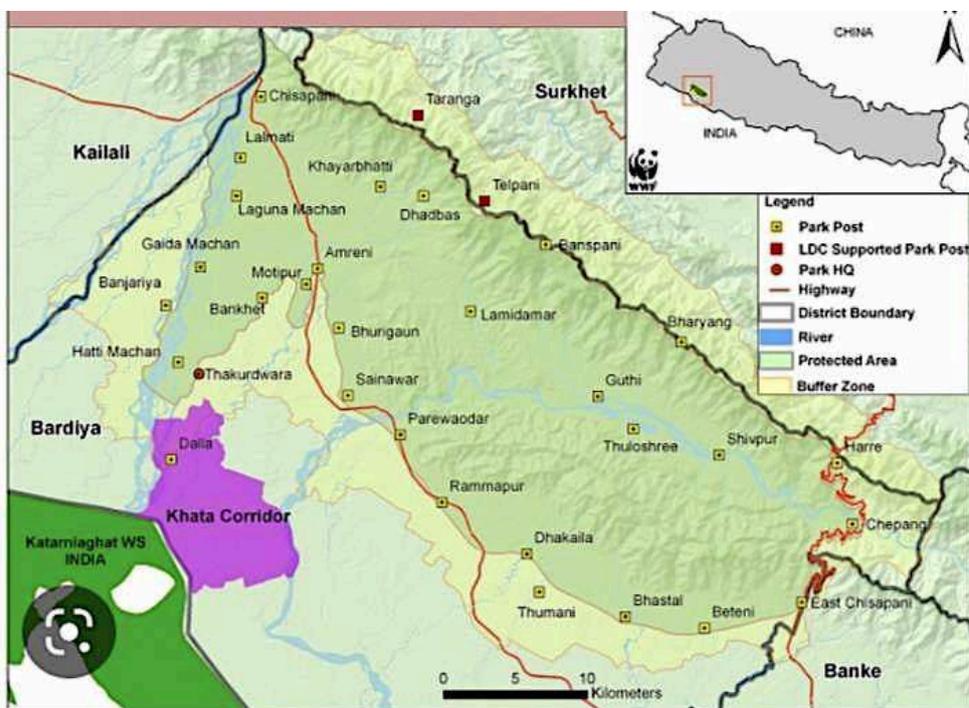
## Introduction

- 1 It's 16 November 2021. We've been cycling for about an hour now with a naturalist guide who is my interpreter and friend, Susela, along gravel roads in Bardiya, in south-west Nepal. Riding along past forests and mud houses at the end of the monsoon is very pleasant. I've been waiting several weeks to meet the famous Bhadai Tharu,<sup>1</sup> the survivor of a tiger attack, who has become a wildlife conservation symbol here and internationally. He lives on the side of a concrete road close to the Khata Corridor Forest (see fig 1). This forest links Bardiya National Park (BNP) in Nepal, which I have been studying for several years, to Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary in India. It was among these trees that, on 6 January 2004, six months after being elected chairman of the *Gauri Mahila Community Forest* (one of the Khata community forests), Bhadai Tharu was attacked.
- 2 Bhadai greets Susela and me with a smile. He's rather round, in his fifties and is going bald. He wears sunglasses to hide or protect his left eye which was ripped out almost twenty years ago by a tiger. I've brought some *namkeen* (fried snacks made of flour and, in this case, sugar) I cooked with my (symbolic) Nepalese mum, who also belongs to the Tharu group.<sup>2</sup> We sit in an empty room in his concrete house where the only decorations are his awards, a few photographs of him receiving them, and one of him and his wife before he lost his eye. I ask him questions, sometimes helped by Susela whose comments on Bhadai's narrative, we will see, interest me just as much. This isn't

the first time he's told his story, nor will it be the last. I'm struck by how he mimes the scene, imitating the tiger's load roar – my friend is surprised and bursts out laughing. The tone of Bhadai's voice changes at times and his whole body comes alive, bearing the indelible marks of this life-changing encounter.

- 3 While not all stories about people being killed, animals being attacked or crops and houses being destroyed are as impressive as Bhadai's, they are a daily occurrence for the inhabitants of the Khata corridor and the Park's buffer zone (fig 1). Set up between 1988 and 1989, the BNP covers an area of 968 square kilometres and is home to a particularly rare, diverse and potentially dangerous fauna. At first hunted largely by the royal family (Boulnois 1976), Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*), Indian leopards (*Panthera pardus fusca*), Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), Indian rhinoceroses (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) and crocodiles (*Gavialis gangeticus* and *Crocodylus palustris*) are now considered 'vulnerable' or 'endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).<sup>3</sup>

Fig 1: Map of Bardiya National Park



The map shows the Park's boundaries (968km<sup>2</sup>) and its current buffer zone (507km<sup>2</sup>). The Khata corridor is shown in purple.

Source: WWF, no date.

- 4 Although the number of tigers is on the decline on a global scale, their density has drastically increased in Nepal. During the St Petersburg Tiger Summit in 2010, 13 countries<sup>4</sup> pledged to double their tiger population by the Year of the Tiger (2022), according to the Chinese calendar, yet Nepal is the only one to have succeeded: on 22 July 2022, the country announced a tiger population of 355, nearly triple the number in 2009. This has played a major role in improving the country's international profile, while the increase in animal numbers has also contributed to the rise in 'human-wildlife conflicts' (HWCs). Between 2010 and 2014 there were no fewer than 465 'human fatalities' in Nepal (Acharya et al 2016), highlighting global issues of territorial

proximity and access to resources (Knight 2001, Gouabault et al 2010). Though HWCs are attracting more attention, they are still being overlooked in the social sciences, especially concerning individual feelings and experiences during encounters (Sharma et al 2021). The limited anthropological work carried out in Bardiya (Reinhard 1976, Bhatt 2006) has not even addressed human-wildlife relations. Experiences of directly encountering these animals and the phenomenon whereby some survivors of attacks attest to positive life changes, thereafter becoming conservation 'heroes' – as sometimes reported by media, local people and foreigners – are still poorly understood. At a time when protected areas are multiplying around the world and HWCs are intensifying, particularly in India and Nepal (Sharma et al 2021), it seems essential to fully embrace challenges involved in conservation and its consequences for local populations.

- 5 Using a monographic approach that places Bhadai Tharu's narrative at the centre, I set out to understand how he became a hero and decided to 'give his blood' to protect an animal that took his blood and nearly killed him. What role does the sociopolitical situation in Bardiya play in this turnaround among those who have been attacked? Are there any recurring themes in these unprecedented events? How do the 'victims' become 'heroes'? How are these terms used? Can conservation be seen as a symbolic human sacrifice?
- 6 I will primarily draw on a 2021 interview with Bhadai, along with insights from two Bardiya residents, Susela and Ram, who helped conduct and translate the interview, as well as from Nepalese and foreign media coverage of Bhadai's story. My analyses are based on over a year's participant observation in Bardiya, around forty semi-structured interviews with survivors of attacks, language learning and linguistic analysis of Nepali terms and direct observations of human-animal encounters in and around community forests and the National Park. The case study will be organised according to Bhadai's narrative on three temporal levels (before, during and after the attack). Transversally, I highlight both the psycho-corporal elements (physical reactions, affects, representations) and the contexts (historical, political, ritual) of this human-tiger encounter, showing the different elements that play a part in the narrative.

## Precursors of the attack: the idea of tigers and premonitions

### A childhood of uncertainty

'From childhood I knew about the jungle and animals. I met many animals. When I took goats into the jungle, the tigers didn't do anything. They had more prey species...We were really poor, we were *kamaiyā*,<sup>5</sup> we worked for other people. My house was in ruins, we cut trees in the forest to rebuild it. I didn't know about conservation, we took wood and killed deer for meat' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

- 7 In the 1960s, malaria was eradicated in the Terai (Nepal's lowlands) with the help of the United States, prompting hill-dwellers, or *pahādī*, to move into the fertile Indo-Gangetic plain in search of better land and food for their animals (Aubriot 2014: 4–5). Many Tharus, particularly from the Deshauri group (to which Bhadai belongs), lost their land due to widespread illiteracy and formal title deeds. They were exploited by newcomers and called '*kamaiyā*', forced to work for low wages or a share of the crops. Their

insufficient income made them reliant on loans from wealthy landowners, trapping them for generations in a cycle of debt and dependency.

- 8 In the 1980s, during the *Panchayat* system, a conservative and nationalist regime – when Bhadai was about 15 years old –, the BNP did not exist as such. The Khata corridor was still being cleared and the Maoist rebellion (1996–2006),<sup>6</sup> which resulted both in land being granted to some *kamaiyā* and in the establishment of numerous NGOs,<sup>7</sup> had not yet emerged, nor had the ‘Free Kamaiya’ movement. Although slavery was officially banned in Nepal in 1924, up until the 2000s there was still this ‘extreme form of socio-economic exploitation’ (Chhetri 2005: 22) in Bardiya more than anywhere else (Maycock 2012: 71), where 50% of the population was Tharu (CBS 2003). This system, which has affected so many people’s lives and led to countless deaths (through suicide or exhaustion), might have followed a less violent path, but nevertheless refers to a form of domination and poverty.<sup>8</sup>
- 9 When I met Bhadai, he showed many signs of wealth, according to south-west Nepalese standards: he lived in a cement house, had several animals and owned a dozen *kaṭṭhā* (3000 sq meter). A tourist guide, friend and interlocutor, whom I will call Ram, helped me to translate this interview a few weeks after my visit. He commented: ‘When I came to listen to his story a few years ago, a friend and I brought along a lot of clothes. Then I understood that he didn’t need them, he wasn’t interested. I felt a bit stupid’. The same goes for me, with my fried snacks that I wanted to offer Bhadai. Something about his painful past and the potentially dramatic event made us want to help him, but it’s as if Bhadai Tharu had already been saved and didn’t seem to need anything else. In fact, today *he* is the saviour.
- 10 This complicated past as a landless bonded labourer, from which our protagonist has emerged, reinforces our admiration for him and his sense of identity especially with Bardiya and the Tharus, while contributing to the idea of a ‘conservation hero in the true sense’ of the term.<sup>9</sup> Bhadai consciously fights against the injustices and old clichés (uneducated, backward, wild) to which his ethnic group has fallen victim (Guneratne 2002). He is one of those people who have succeeded in freeing himself from this first life, while at the same time demonstrating extraordinary physical strength (in this case by surviving the tiger): Bhadai is undoubtedly one of the ‘successful men’ described by Matthew Maycock (2019) or the *pāik* or *pāikelo* described by Walter Winkler (1984), one of the warrior heroes of western Nepal who have accomplished martial prowess and now appear to be independent.
- 11 When I met Bhadai, he said that he ‘knew about the jungle and animals’ but didn’t tell me about the tiger stories his parents had recounted to him as a child, which he had told a journalist during an interview.<sup>10</sup> This ran counter to what all the men I’d met told me, that is before they’d met foreign tourists visiting Bardiya, they hadn’t known there were any tigers in the forest. They spoke of a ‘turning point’ when they became aware of the animals’ existence, which prompted them to become guides – which, for them, is inseparable from the status of conservationist and ultimately ‘mediator’ between animals and humans, and also between people (Vouiller 2022a, 2023). Though Bhadai had grown up encountering the odd tiger without being attacked, this was no longer the case in the 2000s when the big cat’s usual prey was in fact on the decline, having been decimated by poaching. Today, 20 years after coming close to extinction, the tiger may still be hard to see but it has never been so real. The human population, which is

also much larger now (though possesses fewer cattle), is affected daily by the Park's wildlife.

- 12 In this first part of his story Bhadai recounts his childhood, full of insecurity and poverty, at a time when the tiger, by contrast, had more natural prey. He mentions an absence of fear associated with the animal and the possibility of his using the resources at his disposal. After this phase of his life, he became free of the *kamaiyā* system but discovered new constraints: conservation policies that determined his relationship with the forest and animals, as well as encounters with wildlife in the form of attacks. In Bardiya, these dangerous incidents, which do not systematically result in injury or death, have a common denominator: they are sudden, unique and barely predictable. We will now see how this contrasts with Bhadai's case where the encounter was planned and announced, and had a considerable impact on his heroism.

### The foreboding pre-encounter

'I saw this tiger in March/April (*cait*), in the river...at around 12 to 1 o'clock. And I thought that maybe the tiger was angry (*ris*) with me. He stayed where he was. The same month, some days later, another accident (*durghatanā*) happened. He came to swim daily in the river. I saw him there...One month before the encounter, I had a dream (*sapanā*) that a tiger would attack me, a kind of nightmare...I still dream about the tiger at night. Last year we had many accidents in the same area...When we don't offer up flowers and incense, we are not allowed (by the gods) to go inside the park...Our older generation is of the same opinion; some people now forget about those things. That's why Ban Devi (the forest goddess) is angry with us; she may think 'They don't care about me, they're killing the animals', that's why there is a human-wildlife conflict' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

- 13 The physical presence of the tiger, its appearance in dreams and the almost non-existent rituals associated with *Ban Devi* (the main deity who inhabits the forest in Tharu cosmology) are, for Bhadai, intertwined elements that explain the attack by the tiger and, more broadly, the current HWCs in Bardiya. These elements led Bhadai to believe that the forest is not the home of humans and that animals have the right to live there in peace, fully protected. I hypothesise that, like Bhadai's hard childhood marked by slavery and poverty, and his first contact with the tiger, these warning signs contribute to the originality of his narrative and the process of heroisation.
- 14 Indeed, the ongoing presence of the tiger in the middle of the day in the same place, whereas these animals are generally visible early in the morning or at night, is surprising. This is interpreted by Bhadai as a sign of 'anger', correlated with the accident. This anger is echoed by Ban Devi who, according to Bhadai, blames humans for the lack of rituals and offerings, even though they continue to go into the forest and have (especially in the past) hunted many animals. These rituals (*puja*) dedicated to the goddess (nowadays performed mostly by park or hotel staff), traditionally involve animal sacrifices and other offerings and are usually necessary before entering the forest in order for the divinity to protect humans during their expedition.
- 15 Bhadai also tells me about his dreams (*sapanā*), those that precede the encounter and those that come to him after the fight (the latter being more frequent among people who have been attacked). In Nepal, seeing an animal in a dream may call to mind a spirit (Schlemmer 2022: 14) but, for Bhadai, even though seeing a tiger may invoke Ban Devi, it mainly refers to the actual tiger he goes on to encounter or has already encountered. The theme of the feline as both an expression of the divine and a

harbinger of an encounter can be found elsewhere: where the lion in Greek mythology can be a 'sign, message, omen; sent by the gods, from the enigmatic depths of the cosmos' (Schnapp-Gourbeillon 1981:11), it can also directly foreshadow an encounter, as seen in the case of anthropologist Nastassja Martin (2019), whose face was bitten by a bear in Kamchatka (Siberia) in 2015, after dreaming about it.<sup>11</sup>

- 16 For Bhadai, the dream could potentially be seen as a form of oniromancy<sup>12</sup> within the overall practice of divination (Laugrand et al 2018). However, unlike so many societies where dreamers are seen as mediating shamans or diviners (Nathan 2013:160), people who dream of animals in Bardiya do not seem to be perceived as 'dream-elect' (Brunois 2007: 277) or as individuals with a special status (Laugrand et al 2018: 19). Similarly, the dream rarely predicts hunting encounters or focuses on the human group as a whole. This contrasts with societies like the one studied by Florence Brunois in Papua New Guinea, where people live in the forest and maintain a reciprocal relationship with its creatures (Brunois 2007).
- 17 Like Grégoire Schlemmer who has studied the Kulungs, an animist group in the eastern Himalayas, I cannot identify an 'established theory on the origin of dreams' in Bardiya, and have collected 'only scattered interpretations, more or less explicit and contradictory to each other' (Schlemmer 2022:13). Generally speaking, the anthropology of dreams, as addressed by certain authors (Poirier 1999, Brunois 2007), is a complex field and my data on the subject is too patchy for me to claim to make a substantial contribution to it. What is interesting however is to try to understand what these dreams and the way in which they are recounted say about human-animal relations in Bardiya and contribute to the construction of a wider narrative.
- 18 In Bardiya, humans have generally been regarded since the 1970s as intruders in the forest and have gone from being hunters to being hunted. My field research reveals that ritual offerings to Ban Devi can no longer take place inside the forest but are performed around it. Generally speaking, people living on the periphery of the BNP did not mention any dreamlike communication with animals or transformations (from one being to another), which can take place in a society where there is hunter-hunted reciprocity (Brunois 2007). Dreams also seem to be more individualistic, reflecting above all the dreamer's future or past experiences, although their persistence can be correlated with attacks on others.
- 19 The dream, however, a "royal road" of access to the ontological and epistemological principles of a society' (Poirier 1999: 175), falls within a context, just like the myth with which it can be compared (Segal 1991, Nathan 2013: 190-197). These dreams about animal encounters appear during a crisis, in HWCs,<sup>13</sup> and due to growing proximity to dangerous animals, where self-defence is implicitly forbidden in a society focused on preservation.<sup>14</sup> This idea has been fully assimilated because, even in the dream, it is the feline that attacks Bhadai, rather than the other way round. As a sign of future and past events, the dream corresponds to Bhadai's life: proximity to the forest (he is chairman of the forest management committee), linked to Deshauri Tharu cosmology, in a predominantly Hindu society where the tiger has long been given considerable importance (Marks 2006).<sup>15</sup>
- 20 The fact that Bhadai heard about the feline when he was a child and met it as a teenager, then spotted it ten months before the accident, and saw it in a dream a month earlier (and many times afterwards), is significant and also contributes to the persuasive power of his narrative. For all that, Bhadai is not a shaman but he gives

meaning to his experience of being attacked and to his daily life which is now committed to conservation: though humans are victims, they are also guilty. It's a question of being attentive to the signs (in dreams or during encounters), of respecting the invisible (including Ban Devi) and of acting in a way to appease spirits and animals.

- 21 However, though dreaming offers Bhadai some sort of meaning, it also generates, as it does for others, 'psychic instability' (Brunois 2007: 272), blurring the boundaries between the magical and the real, between life and death. This in-between can actually be experienced during the daytime and is reflected in the very event it heralds and recalls: hand-to-hand combat with the animal. The following section attempts to show how the intensity of the face-to-face encounter with the animal and the courage required during the experience establish the status of hero.

## Sudden encounter: eye-to-eye with the tiger

### Between life and death, hell or heaven

'There were something like 100 people, everywhere, but in the middle (bīcmā), I had this sudden encounter (jamkā-bhet) with the tiger. He attacked me straightaway, my head was turning (cakkār lagnu). I fell down and he scratched me here and here [he shows parts of his body, his arms]. I was very strong to fight...I made a loud noise... While I leant my weight on one hand, I used the other to punch the tiger. I jumped on his back and punched him again. The tiger went away and hid in the grass. It was impossible for me to walk, I fell down in the water. With a single punch, the tiger took out my eye...I was in heaven or hell, I don't know...I lost lots of blood, I didn't know if I was alive or not... I thought that I couldn't survive after that, I was only breathing from my mouth...I had many problems for three years...I have a really big pain in my bones...But more than with the body, I have trouble with my mind (dimāg)' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

- 22 The fact that Bhadai was the only one to be attacked among of a hundred or so people present gives the impression that he was chosen, as heroes can be. In fact, Bhadai's narrative reveals a complex form of tension between chance and destiny. He had previously talked about an 'accident' (*durghaṭanā*) and was now mentioning his bad luck at being 'in the middle', and his good fortune in surviving. However, he also views the encounter as foretold, predictable and explicable.
- 23 If we consider the psycho-corporal experience during the attack, one senses the violence and pain to which Bhadai was subjected. The protagonist, it would seem, experienced an 'extreme heightening of consciousness evoked at the point of death...a "moment of truth"' in the words of Val Plumwood, an environmental philosopher who was attacked by a crocodile in Australia (Plumwood 2012: 11). Bhadai had no weapon; the beast confronted him in a fight on his home ground, the forest, provoking screams and bloodshed. His courage in accepting the battle does indeed suggest that 'heroism is linked not to the outcome of the undertaking, but to the acceptance of risk and suffering, even death' (Albert 1999: 18). Bhadai claims to have climbed onto the predator's back, reminding me of the image of Durga, 'goddess of kings and princes, of authority and protection of the living' (Bordes 2017: 87) who is depicted, in the Hindu pantheon, riding a tiger. Whatever the case, his life was at stake and his 'martial achievements' (Winkler 1984: 46) saved him, to the point where he almost overpowered the ferocious beast, like a demigod.

- 24 Bhadai managed to make the animal retreat which, according to him, then 'hid in the grass'. However, the tiger attacked and the protagonist defended himself: his survival is a form of chance victory. Like Homer's experience with lions in the Greek world, in these encounters 'men are never in the position of attackers' and, when the latter prove successful, this is (more or less) 'by chance' (Schnapp-Gourbeillon 1981: 43–45). The encounter is not simply a matter of life and death for Bhadai: that day he physically experienced the tiger's presence and the danger it represents. What is at stake are questions of identity and recognition of the animal's agentivity, as well as the awareness of the complex nature of cohabitation.
- 25 Baptiste Morizot, in his book *On the Animal Trail* (2017), qualified comparable events with wolves as 'man-to-man' encounters. The tiger, a kind of alter ego, may even be a kind of double; for Bhadai, an 'animal [that] shows the virtues of the hero to whom he refers' (Schnapp-Gourbeillon 1981: 10–11).<sup>16</sup> In fact, I sometimes asked people involved in conservation work in Bardiya what animal they would like to be or which animal they identified with. It was not rare for me to receive the answer 'the tiger': its behaviour fascinates, its strength impresses and its beauty captivates. The tiger today, like the lion, is 'so wild and so divine at the same time that no one can escape its haunting presence' (ibid: 10). The tiger, which is even on the 500-rupee banknotes, not only contributes to promoting what the country has to offer, but can also be a symbol that certain individuals seek to embody for its qualities. The identity of the tiger is thus intertwined with that of Ban Devi or Durga, and with that of the human being and of Nepal. Whatever the case, it is in these precise moments of eye-to-eye confrontation that the tiger exists more than ever as an individual.
- 26 One element to consider in this recognition of identity is inevitably the face and especially the gaze. This is apparent in other accounts of face-to-face encounters with wild animals: Nastassja Martin (2019) was reportedly attacked for staring into a bear's eyes in Siberia, Val Plumwood described the 'beautiful, gold-flecked eyes of the crocodile' (2012:10), stressing that the exchange of looks is a critical moment. Bhadai, though not mentioning the tiger's eyes, lost one of his own. In Bardiya, I am told never to turn my back on big cats because maintaining eye contact might be the key to survival. What if the tiger had wanted to erase that look he couldn't stand, the one that made Bhadai a similar being? Did he see humans as fellow creatures, prey or predators? Was the tiger driven by a supernatural power or just by its emotions? Bhadai switches from one to the other, mentioning the tiger's dwindling prey and the size of its territory, then the meagre number of rituals that are performed, his own anger and the number of people present that fatal day. While it's unclear what animals experience during these encounters, for humans, it represents a shift in the balance of power. Val Plumwood (2012) felt like prey,<sup>17</sup> Baptiste Morizot perceived an alter ego and Nastassja Martin decided to fight.<sup>18</sup>
- 27 Whatever case, Bhadai emerged from this encounter on the brink of death, scared out of his wits. And 'more than the body', he had 'trouble' with his 'mind' (*dimāg*): the experience came to him in dreams and when he was in the forest, just like other people after attacks in Bardiya or elsewhere (Martin 2019: 58), and perhaps also led to problems in his relationship with others.<sup>19</sup> This surpassing of oneself always invokes heroisation, yet it would seem that some of those who did not survive 'hand-to-hand' combat with the animal in Bardiya have still been erected to the status of hero. They were perhaps martyrs instead, regarded as sacrifices made for the sake of conservation

and/or for deities such as Durga or Ben Devi: the debt of years of hunting animals, the price of safeguarding them today. Though Bhadai didn't die that day and the attack was perhaps no more than a coincidence, he subsequently chose to 'give his blood' to conservation; and it is indeed the English term 'sacrifice' Susela used to describe his commitment. Perhaps the term '*bali dān*', referring to 'the act of offering one's own life' in a war context (Lecomte-Tilouine 2021: 32–38), by combining *dān*, the offering (of blood), and *bal* which refers to muscular strength and 'courage' (ibid), is particularly appropriate, though not used as such by the people I met.

- 28 As the anthropologist Jean-Pierre Albert has written, heroes act as 'exceptional beings [who] are capable of taking charge of the collective destiny, at the price of sacrifices that are out of all proportion to the demands of ordinary morality' (Albert 1999: 16). Linking sacrifice and heroism in this way leads to a discussion about communities and groups. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, in her ethnography *Sacrifice and violence* (2020), precisely identifies the importance of the 'one against all' and 'all against one' motives, as well as the positive effects that sacrifices are expected to have on communities (ibid: 25–26). The following section shows the importance of the various groups around Bhadai's short- and long-term survival.

### The group that leaves then saves

'For a long time, nobody came...I asked for help and people ran away. I cut a piece of clothing and I bandaged my eye. People came afterwards and took me...There were many people and the tiger had no way of escaping...If there had been a space to run through, he wouldn't have attacked me' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

- 29 Bhadai's narrative is ambivalent: he feels anger towards a group of 100 people who were too numerous and who prioritised their own lives over his cries for help, leaving him in agonising loneliness. However, he admits that a smaller group of 10 to 12 people eventually came back to save him and that this experience led him to a better life. After the accident, those around him showed concern about him but also made him anxious.
- <sup>20</sup> During our interview, Bhadai was proud to mention the diversity of his visitors: film actors, directors, students from Kathmandu and Pokhara, neighbours and even foreign researchers, including myself. His story is well known locally and it has featured in Nepalese blogs, foreign newspaper articles and films, and has reached the ears of Leonardo DiCaprio in America (fig 2).

Fig 2: Post by a Nepali journalist on Global Voices

## The Nepalese Tiger Conservationist Who Lost an Eye and Gained Leonardo DiCaprio's Sunglasses



Written by  
Sanjib Chaudhary

Read this post in [Malagasy](#), [বাংলা](#), [Español](#)

Posted 17 December 2015 11:15 GMT



Conservation hero Bhadai Tharu donning the sunglasses presented to him by Hollywood star Leonardo DiCaprio.  
Image courtesy Facebook page of the Tharu Community

Article by a Tharu journalist for the international media outlet Global Voices, which presents Bhadai as a hero, describing his attack, his songs, publications about him and Leonardo DiCaprio's visit.

Source: 'The Nepalese Tiger Conservationist Who Lost an Eye and Gained Leonardo DiCaprio's Sunglasses' Sanjib Chaudhary [GlobalVoices], 17 December 2015, <https://globalvoices.org/2015/12/17/the-nepalese-tiger-conservationist-who-lost-an-eye-and-gained-leonardo-dicaprios-sunglasses/> (accessed 20 January 2023).

- 30 As community forest chairman, Bhadai created links between people before his accident and, as a committed conservationist, he continues to unite them. The shift from hunter to wildlife protector contributes to his position as hero that has been attributed to him by the media<sup>21</sup> and some local people. This is a complex role: Bhadai alternates between standing alone in the face of everything, as if performing a 'self-sacrifice' to end violence, and rallying the group against a few, which sometimes leads to violence (Lecomte-Tilouine 2020: 25). He went from being alone against the tiger and poachers to leading important meetings, and to even attracting international attention. Bhadai's success, however, has produced mixed reactions in Bardiya. Ram, translating the interview with me, pauses for a moment and smiles: 'I've heard his story so many times. Sometimes I get shivers, I've even cried. Sometimes I burst out laughing, I can't believe it, it can't be true. His story changes, but real stories never change'. Like sacrifices that make people 'laugh and cry' (Lecomte-Tilouine 2022: 12), Bhadai's situation leaves no one indifferent. While some may envy his position, others probably recognise that his journey, symbolising resilience, has set a standard for surviving such attacks, as the only path forward.
- 31 Another issue troubling the community is Bhadai's damaged body. In our discussion, Bhadai explains that, in Nepali culture, meeting someone with a missing eye is considered bad luck,<sup>22</sup> which is why he always wears sunglasses. This 'symbol', which denotes and connotes a certain reality (De Beaune 2022: 38), holds particular

importance in Bardiya and across Nepal where sunglasses are often seen more as a fashion accessory than a protective item. People often wear them indoors, in the rain, or for photographs. When Leonardo DiCaprio met Bhadai in 2010 and heard his story, he was moved and gave him his sunglasses. Since then, Bhadai has treasured this item in a small box in his room, symbolising a gift from a celebrity who recognised his heroism. The glasses also reflect the societal tendency to adopt style while concealing something resembling a disability.<sup>23</sup> When Bhadai removes the sunglasses, it's only briefly, often for an interview, making his story intensely real and shocking, evoking respect, admiration, compassion,<sup>24</sup> and perhaps discomfort – a reminder of his survival and a lifelong change.

- 32 When I arrived in Bardiya for the first time in 2019, I discovered that no one should be left alone, especially in the forest, and that loneliness was synonymous with danger. In contrast to certain situations surrounding attacks in other countries and contexts,<sup>25</sup> the importance of other people is central to the experiences of wildlife victims in Bardiya, both before, during and after the event. The human protagonists involved in the encounters may or may not be aware of the presence of the animals, are protected or not at the time, and then tell their story, which will be valued or not. The following section addresses the 'aftermath': how Bhadai has rebuilt his life, made sense of his experience and the importance of this shift from 'anger' to 'love' for the tiger. This will show the type of sacrifice made by Bhadai, what he means by 'giving his blood'.

## After the battle: saving tigers and becoming a heroic symbol

### From revenge to love: the choice to 'give [more] blood'

'After the accident I was always thinking about killing the tiger. When I felt pain, I was always angry (*ris*)...[H]e took my eye, I couldn't see the world...I recovered and I began to think that I had to respect the animal...I went there to disturb the animal, that's why he attacked me...I really respect and love (*māyā*) the tiger... We [conservationists] give our blood and our sweat (*pasinā*) for it...He gave me one life; now I am not joking anymore about the jungle and its animals' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

- 33 As Bhadai explained, when he was a teenager in the 1980s, people stole wood and killed deer for meat: although the Tharus 'know' the forest and the animals, this does not mean that they take care of them in the sense of current 'conservation' endeavours (see above). Attitudes have gradually changed since Nepal has been considered to be undergoing an 'ecological crisis' (Liechty 2017), with only 25% of its land area covered by forest (Fox et al 2019). The National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1973 was passed, transforming hunting into its illegal equivalent (poaching): animals should not be killed, they should be protected (fig 3). As part of this movement, Bhadai helped establish the *Gauri Mahila Community Forest User Group* in 1998 and became its chairman in the 2000s. In his many interviews,<sup>26</sup> he talks of his sense of achievement regarding the increase in forest cover, which had reached 45% in Nepal by 2016 (ibid), and which goes hand in hand with the presence of animals. For Bhadai, the problem stems from the fact that humans believed that the forest was theirs, when in fact it is primarily the tiger's.<sup>27</sup> This new relationship with the living world, although initially imposed, has

now been fully embraced by the guides in Bardiya (Vouiller 2022a, 2023) and by a whole section of the young generation who hears this discourse at school.

Fig 3: Bhadai Tharu's appearance in a BBC documentary



#### How Nepal is saving its tigers - BBC World Service Documentaries



BBC World Service ✓  
896 k abonnés

S'abonner

👍 81 k



➦ Partager



Documentary from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on Bardiya tigers, in which Bhadai Tharu appears several times. He tells his story, takes off his glasses and sings. Some of the many comments below the video use the terms 'hero' and 'superman' to refer to Bhadai and 'sacrifice' for the local population more generally.

Source: Kim K, and Parajuli R. 2022. 'How Nepal is saving its tigers'. *BBC World Service YouTube*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pGfxcZZNfE> (accessed 8 September 2022).

- 34 Bhadai has found the strength to forgive the tiger which almost cost him his life, identifying in this part of the narrative human presence as the real problem, rather than the tiger's lack of prey or divine causes. He is convinced that conservation of the jungle and its animals are serious issues, not something to be 'joked about'; the forest belongs to them and humans must act as protectors, showing 'love' and 'respect', even to the point of willingly sacrificing themselves for conservation. Having survived, Bhadai finally accepted the attack, showing no anger but symbolically giving blood and sweat, patrolling for poachers, going out to raise awareness in villages and helping to restore forest cover. Today, he urges Nepal and the rest of the world to follow his example.
- 35 I postulate that, beyond the picture painted by the media, Badhai's transformation, which even challenges widespread use of the term 'wildlife victims' in Bardiya, reflects not just a personal choice or one made for the tiger, but a deeper adaptation to survival, shaped by pressure and motivations from international conservation bodies.

### Being a conservation hero, 'the strongest and bravest man in the world'

Leonardo DiCaprio came with his mum and journalists, many bodyguards...I am really lucky to have met him for 20 minutes...He said: 'you are the strongest and

bravest man in the world. Very few people are like that. If a tiger comes and eats a goat, everyone tries to kill it. The tiger took an eye from you and you still love him: that's amazing. This tiger is not only for Nepal, this is all our property and you save the tiger's life, that's a very good thing. You are a really brave man'...If the tiger hadn't attacked me, she [me the anthropologist] would never have come to record an interview...I met many important people (*ṭhulo mānche*) thanks to that. We all save wildlife, the world acknowledges us [conservation actors]. (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021)

- 36 Whereas, before the 1970s, killing tigers could be seen as performing a service to the population, a 'sport' (Boulnois 1976: 67), a 'noble' activity undertaken by the then monarchy. This is no more the case. The tiger is no longer officially seen as a pest or a royal Indian symbol to be slaughtered for the British (Jalais 2008), but as an asset to be protected, a heritage to be preserved for the whole world. Since the 2000s there have been cases (mostly in India) where the government has authorised the killing of a tiger that was recognised as a man-eater/man-killer. The man who succeeds in killing the animal is recognised as a 'local hero' who has put an end to 'the reign of terror' (Mathur 2018: 161). Otherwise, and this is often the case in Nepal and Bardiya, the hero is no longer the one who kills the tiger but the one who survives without taking revenge.
- 37 Leonardo DiCaprio, who is already admired the world over, came to Bhadai Tharu, more than 500 kilometres from Kathmandu, to see tigers and told Bhadai that he was 'the strongest and bravest man in the world'. It's easy to imagine how repeated visits from *ṭhulo mānche*, which boost Bhadai's self-esteem, shape his self-image and that of those who dream of receiving such attention. During our encounter, Bhadai used the term '*bahādur*' to describe what Leonardo DiCaprio said to him that day (translated by Susela as 'hero' or 'brave'). The famous actor portrayed Bhadai as exceptional ('very few people are like that'), underlining his rare mental and physical strength ('the tiger took an eye from you and you still love him'). He also emphasised Bhadai's global importance, saying that the tiger belongs not just to Nepal, but to the whole world. The actor's visit and his online posts (fig 4) reveal some of the power that foreign representations have over the way the tiger and the people who live near it are treated, as also demonstrated in India in the Sundarbans (Jalais 2008).

Fig 4: Leonardo DiCaprio's post on X about the number of tigers in Nepal



Post dated 29 July 2022 in which actor Leonardo DiCaprio congratulates Nepal on its success in increasing the number of tigers. The post generated several thousand positive reactions.

Source: LDC's Twitter account

- 38 One of the protagonist's strengths lies in his overcoming his anger (*ris*), an emotion he also read in the tiger's behaviour, and of Ban Devi who is therefore at the source of the attack. By transforming anger into 'love', by distancing his *dimāg*'s suffering and his wounds behind Leonardo DiCaprio's glasses, Bhadai seems, like many heroes, to be 'the author of a voluntary self-sacrifice' (Albert 1999: 20). An effective auto-sacrifice, since his life has taken on a whole new meaning. One wonders what would happen if Bhadai, more than 20 years on, was no longer visited by all these people, and how he will be able to retain his hero status now that the number of victims of attacks is on the rise. It is clear that this central character has something particularly special, something that regenerates itself and goes beyond any rhetoric: he sings.

### Songs as a medium and the world as a stage

'[After the accident] I wrote lots of songs about conservation for awareness programmes, about how we can act. I went to every village and I told them to work with me, and poachers told me that the tiger took my eye and that I shouldn't act in favour of it. I don't care about poachers. Many young people follow me for my music...Before I only talked about culture, music, but since the accident I only talk about conservation...Whatever happens, I will only sing about conservation...I want people to feel from inside that they have to work for it. I never show my pain, I always convince people...I am a celebrity now' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

- 39 Towards the end of our interview, Bhadai agreed to sing part of a song that I recorded (fig 5). I let myself be lulled by his voice, which tells the story of a tigress from India who falls in love with a Nepalese tiger, but also of the corridors that have to remain

'green' if the animal's freedom is to be ensured. Susela looks at me with undisguised excitement: 'when he is singing, I feel the energy from inside, it helps for conservation. Everybody loves it!'

Fig 5: Khata corridor's song

<i>Inḍiyāko bāghinī nepālmā āune</i>	The female Indian tiger comes to Nepal
<i>Nepālko bāghsāga māyāprīti lāune</i>	She falls in love with the Nepali tiger
<i>Unīharuko māyāprīti kahile nachuṭyāū hai</i>	Never break their love
<i>Banjantu hīḍne bāṭomā bādḥā napuryāū hai</i>	Don't walk and harm the roads of wild animals in green forest

Source: song performed by Bhadai Tharu on 16 November 2021 in Khata corridor (western Nepal). Recorded and translated by the author.

- 40 Bhadai's dozen or so songs circulate in the villages he visits or on the internet, after someone has recorded him.<sup>28</sup> These performances are not 'hero legends' (Oakley et al 1935, Gaborieau 1974) but stories told by a hero, or about non-human heroes, which establish his heroic status. These broadcasts are part of 'the "media phenomenon" [which] contributes to the globalisation of references, the pluralisation of figures of greatness...and installs opinion in an accelerated temporal regime' (Albert 1999: 27). It is in a Nepal undergoing massive socio-economic transformations, where digital tools and their uses are forever changing (Dérioz et al, this issue), that Bhadai shares his values. His songs and texts are not part of an artistic divinatory system, contrary to what has been studied by Africanists (Pemberton 2000), but are forward-looking: they are wishes and teachings for the world.
- 41 Bhadai is not singing about his accident but about his love for animals and the forest. Bhadai takes young people with him, starting with his children.<sup>29</sup> He insists: 'I never show my pain, I always convince people'. This idea of enduring suffering and being a model recalls the 'successful men' described by Matthew Maycock for whom 'being able to keep going all day though any pain was an important part of making a living as well as being successful. To get tired or show pain was to reveal weakness that would in turn lead to lower levels of success, both financially and in terms of their status amongst fellow [companions]' (Maycock 2012: 111).<sup>30</sup>
- 42 Bhadai looks to the future and now preaches the right word. He is 'a superman, capable of redeeming his years of mediocrity' (Eco 1993: 131) by treating poachers, of whom he was one, as enemies. His 'capacity to involve us', his 'ability to be a term of reference for behaviour and feelings that belong to everyone' (ibid: 136), all justify his heroic status.
- 43 It is indeed song (*git*)<sup>31</sup> that Bhadai sings: it is short, with a set text and can potentially be performed by men or women. This is what differentiates it from a ballad (*gāthā*). As Marc Gaborieau who has worked on these subjects in western Nepal (1974) explains, the latter is longer, composed by an unknown author, without an original text, and necessarily accompanied by an instrument, for financial or other reasons.<sup>32</sup> The author also addresses the issues of caste and ethnic groups dealt with in these 'sung stories'. Songs and music, traditionally performed in Nepal by untouchables and seen as impure

activities (Lecomte-Tilouine, this issue), are fundamental to Tharu identity, both ritually and as a means of combating social exploitation (Dalzell 2015, Dangaura 2022). Singing, for Bhadai, does indeed seem to be both an activist undertaking in favour of animals, and a means of valorising the ethnic group to which he belongs, which has been very stigmatised and isolated. While recounting a past of 'skilled hunters' (Krauskopff 1989: 35), Bhadai highlights the Tharus' positive reputation in relation to the forest, animals and deities (Müller-Böker 1999). Although he has no knowledge of English or the social media on which his image circulates, he embodies a kind of success and openness to the world.

- 44 The fact that Bhadai is no longer 'joking about the jungle and its animals', while concealing his suffering, starkly contrasts with his gentle melodies and humour. However, this is in keeping with the idea of a 'logic of spectacle, [which] leads to a beyond, a transcendence' (Saumade 2023: 382). In Bardiya, encounters with tigers, which sometimes turn into actual attacks, profoundly affect the protagonists and often generate different types of creations (writings, photographs or songs). Some poems, sometimes epic, appear to be the culmination of a heroic journey, giving form to what has been experienced and elevating it to another sphere: they thus have an effect on society and perpetuate the exceptionality of the hero.

## Conclusion

'In human life, an experience can teach you a lesson, people have to have accidents to learn. People had many attitudes before the accident, after it was gone...When I have an experience, I like to share it with everyone: *yo anubhav bhitra lukāera rākhne hoina* (do not keep this experience/feeling inside)' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

- 45 This human-wildlife conflict, which is responsible for over a hundred deaths every year in Nepal and produces heroes, echoes the Greek concept of *kairos* or the etymology of crisis (*krisis*). It represents a pivotal moment when everything can change, for better or for worse, both in human-animal encounters and at societal level. It's a 'moment of truth', as Val Plumwood (2012: 11) puts it, 'an experience [that] can teach you a lesson', such as for Bhadai, with a 'before' and an 'after'.
- 46 Becoming a 'conservation hero' required that Bhadai integrate a wretched past as member of an oppressed ethnic group, a foretold and inevitable event, a fight with a dangerous yet protected animal, a link with the divine, and the abandon then help of others. He bore his pain quietly, transformed it into love and achieved global admiration, glowing in the success of his songs. There is no doubt that Bhadai fully embodies the Greek equivalent of the mythical triumph of Eros over Thanatos (Steinmann, this issue). His *kairos* has given rise to a new life, better than the previous one: he has gone from (guilty) victim to singing hero, embodying a model for turning drama into strength.
- 47 Analysing Bhadai's experience through the before/during/after prism, as I did with other researchers (Dériz, Lecomte-Tilouine, this issue), as well as choosing a monographic approach, should not conceal the fact that Bhadai's narrative is part of a larger group and a longer timeframe. This *chronos* includes the cosmology of the people studied (here the Deshauri Tharus), their relational systems and the history of Nepal, particularly its socio-economic transformation determined by international influence.

The pressure experienced by Nepal from inside and outside since 1970–80 (Grossman-Thompson et al 2013) pertains, to a certain extent, to people's guilt towards Ban Devi and animals for past actions. This reflects the idea that 'humanity discharges to the supernatural powers a *debt* constantly reopened by its indescribable imperfections' (Albert 1999: 21) highlighting how ecological and ritual spheres become intertwined. One may wonder whether the term *bali dān* is appropriate for such a situation, if this self-sacrifice really puts an end to violence and whether human blood could be protected by resuming the blood sacrifices to deities that Nepal has never entirely abandoned (Lecomte-Tilouine 2021).

- 48 The situation in Bardiya is unique, as Bhadai seems to have sacrificed himself, not for humans as heroes usually do, but for animals and the people who promote conservation. By refusing vengeance and giving 'his life', he shed both real and symbolic blood for a cause now supported by a growing majority. However, though hero recognition requires shared values, it doesn't mean 'universally accepted' (Albert 1999: 27). Bhadai's story in Bardiya isn't admired by all, and it raises the question as to whether his story truly benefits the people currently suffering there. Rather than being seen as the saviour of animals and humans, he may represent the legitimisation of the violence experienced by the latter, enforcing survival behaviour and serving as a 'pedagogical tool' or a 'way of telling the story' (Eco 1993: 152) on behalf of the government. What is actually at stake is who is whose hero, which may in fact mean being someone else's anti-hero. Perhaps Bhadai's story will one day be part of heroic songs and legends, or perhaps it will lose value from being retold too many times, especially among those living close to animals. Alternatively, could the uniqueness of each encounter of this type ensure potential heroisation and inspire artistic creations?
- 49 In Bardiya, people who have been attacked and do not survive are often elevated to martyr status, while survivors may remain anonymous and neglected. I have met many women in the latter category, highlighting their underrepresentation in the heroic narrative, as noticed in other cultural settings (Eriksen 1999, Covington 1989). Though some have fought back, few have achieved fame, and many lack Bhadai's charisma or financial stability; they are 'missed, discussed or erased heroes' (Centlivres et al 1999: 2), haunted by nightmares and a fear of the forest. However, the fact that the experience of these people under attack is not valued or made visible doesn't necessarily mean that a life has been destroyed. Exploring these different experiences could uncover protective or restorative factors related to post-traumatic stress in South Asia and beyond.
- 50 Various factors (ecological, financial, emotional, physical, ritual or social)<sup>33</sup> influence attacks and subsequent reactions. Although similarities can be found among different human-animal encounters, each remains unique, suggesting that a 'paradigm of the encounter' (Servais 2022: 133) is more appropriate than the blanket term of 'conflict'. Bhadai's story, which Ram jokingly called a 'fairy tale' when translating the interviews, deals with serious and urgent issues, including philosophical ones. This narrative, shaped by global influences, prompts reflection on human-animal coexistence: how animals are identified (as alter egos, predators, deities, or property);<sup>34</sup> the definition of 'conservation' and 'wildlife victim'; the intertwining of ecology and rituals, the role of luck in encounters and the notion of 'accident'; and the resulting reparations or relationship with death.

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## NOTES

1. Bhadai Tharu, at the time of our interview, and Susela, later on, told me to use their real names.
2. The term 'Tharu' refers to an ethnic group indigenous to the Terai which lives on the border between India and Nepal, traditionally close to rivers and rainforests. See the works of Gisèle Krauskopff (1989), Arjun Guneratne (2002), Victoria Marie Dalzell (2015), Mohan Daugaura (2022) and Amy Johnson (2022).
3. 'The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species' *IUCN red list*, 2024, <https://www.iucnredlist.org> (accessed 10 October 2024).
4. The twelve other countries are Russia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam.
5. '[T]he term *kamaiyā* has been given two sets of meanings. One of these has a positive connotation according to which the term *kamaiyā* denotes any one who works hard...The entry of the element of bonded labour and slavery as features had turned the person who worked very hard into some sort of "a commodity" to be owned, bought and sold, and exploited to the extent possible' (Chhetri 2005: 32).
6. Note that the 'progressive writings' (Lecomte-Tilouine, this issue) of the combatants in the people's war may be similar to certain artistic creations by victims of animal attacks, with a common lexical field (revenge, anger, courage, sacrifice, feelings of grief, death, blood etc), even though the situation remains fundamentally different. In Bardiya, 'HWC' is sometimes translated by the Nepali term *dvandva* (war).
7. I refer here, for example, to Backward Society Education (BASE) and the London-based Anti-Slavery International.
8. The official liberation of the *kamaiyā* also raises questions, as it ultimately left highly skilled people dependent on agriculture, unemployed and without enough land to cultivate, and forced to work abroad or in degrading jobs (Chhetri 2005).
9. 'An eye for conservation' *Bhawana Upadhyay [Voice of Tharus]*, 14 January 2011, <https://tharuculture.blogspot.com/2011/01/eye-for-conservation.html> (accessed 10 March 2024).
10. This conservationist lost his eye in a tiger attack – but he's still fighting to protect the king of the jungle, *Rebecca Cairns [CNN World]*, 15 November 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/13/asia/bhadai-tharu-tiger-nepal-conservation-hnk-spc-intl/index.html> (accessed 28 February 2024).
11. The subject of dreams was so important that it was the subject of a book by the same researcher (Martin 2022).
12. Oniromancy 'makes dreams play a leading role in the acquisition of an informed point of view on what is going to happen, or is likely to happen.' (Laugrand et al 2018: 10).
13. The notion of crisis in the context of the HWC in Bardiya is explored in more depth in another article (Vouiller 2022b).
14. Although the National Park and Wildlife Protection Act of 1973 authorises self-defence, the people attacked in Bardiya defend themselves physically like Bhadai, but never go as far as killing the animal: killing an animal leads to too many legal procedures and proving that it was not a case of poaching is often too complex.

Moreover, only the military are armed; villagers have at best a knife for when they go into the community forests and guides take a stick with them into the park.

15. The subject of the tiger in South Asia and its passing through different statuses is fully addressed in a recent paper: Vouiller, 2022, 'From the "Attila of the jungle" to the "big cat" of the zoo: a study of a century of representations and reactions around Bengal tigers (North India and south-west Nepal)', AJEI – Association Jeunes Études Indiennes, 21 October 2022.

16. The theme of the 'double' in relation to heroes, though fascinating, cannot be explored in depth here. For more information, refer to the compilation of anthropological articles in *La Fabrique des héros* (Centlivres et al 1999) or to Salvatore D'Onofrio's structural analysis in *Le sauvage et son double* (2011).

17. 'Yet, as I looked into the eye of the crocodile, I realised that my planning for this journey upriver had given insufficient attention to this important aspect of human life, to my own vulnerability as an edible, animal being' (Plumwood 2012: 10).

18. For more information, see the article 'Animaux: face à face' by Roméo Bondon (2020).

19. The Nepali term *dimāg* refers to the 'brain-mind', the organ of socialisation and social control. Complete dysfunction of it leads to madness (*pāgal*), the equivalent of psychosis, in which case there is a loss of social honour (*ijjat*) (Kohrt et al 2008).

20. 'Everyone says that when a tiger attacks nobody can survive...Sometimes I thought that I would die because people came to tell me that in my house.' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

21. 'An eye for conservation' *Bhawana Upadhyay [Voice of Tharus]*, 14 January 2011, <https://tharuculture.blogspot.com/2011/01/eye-for-conservation.html> (accessed 10 March 2024).

22. 'People say that if they see someone without an eye, they will have bad luck all day, that's why I always wear glasses. Without glasses, I don't go walking' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

23. Although I had several discussions on the subject of disability in Bardiya, which proved fascinating, I cannot go any further here. I refer the reader to the literature on stigmatisation and mind-body relations in Nepal (Kohrt et al 2008).

24. 'A tiger ripped out my eye and nearly killed me – now I am fighting to keep the beasts alive', *Mirror*, 27 July 2013, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/tiger-ripped-out-eye-nearly-2093700> (accessed 20 January 2023).

25. Note that Nastassja Martin (2019) was rescued by several people but Val Plumwood (2012) was left alone to crawl for several hours. In all three cases, including Bhadai Tharu, the encounters took place in a natural environment and during a certain face-to-face encounter with a predator, yet the group did not play the same role at all, no doubt because the attacks took place in societies that are more or less communitarian or individualistic.

26. 'Wildlife corridor wins conservation award' WWF, 2021, [https://tigers.panda.org/news\\_and\\_stories/stories/wildlife\\_corridor\\_wins\\_conservation\\_award/](https://tigers.panda.org/news_and_stories/stories/wildlife_corridor_wins_conservation_award/) (accessed 12 January 2024).

27. Ethirajan, A and Henschke R. 2022. 'Nepal: Return of the tigers brings both joy and fear' *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62264158?>

fbclid=IwAR2iT3deAe8I47nvATM\_qw6-cq0xTKSgMH41PNvd7L-RgSnj6r5Ptg8kuuU (accessed 29 July 2022).

28. Kim, K and Parajuli R. 2022 'How Nepal is saving its tigers'. *BBC World Service YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pGfxcZZNfE> (accessed 8 September 2022). Bist H R. 2012. 'Khata Biological corridor, Bhadai Tharu and conservation song'. *YouTube*, 6 July 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rImIK-rnycs> (accessed 10 September 2022). Basel R. 2018. 'Bhadai Tharu: Tiger attack survivor conservation hero who devoted his life for wildlife singing song'. *Youtube*, 19 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GKsHtX2rG8> (accessed 5 September 2023).

29. 'About songs I taught my son, I started conservation from my home...I wrote the music and he sang. He is good also at his studies, whereas I am not...We did one song together for Bardiya National Park.' (Bhadai Tharu, 16 November 2021).

30. Although, in Bhadai's case, it's not a question of 'masculinity' linked to sexuality and success with women.

31. Bhadai sometimes plays the *madal* (a drum made from a cylindrical piece of wood with two skins stretched over it at both ends) to accompany these songs.

32. The author prefers to speak of 'récits chantés', 'where the song serves only to support the text and vary its flow' (Gaborieau 1974: 316), and divides the oral literature he studies into 'narratives of divinities' (or religious ballads) and 'narratives of heroes' (heroic ballads).

33. These factors were developed during a recent conference that led to the current issue: Vouiller, 2023, 'Turning bad luck into a new opportunity: narratives of people attacked by animals in Bardiya National Park, south-west Nepal', 'Narratives, convictions, heroes' workshop, Réseau Chercheurs Népal, Institut National des Langues et Civilisation Orientales (RCN, Inalco, Paris), 9 June 2023.

34. The identificatory schema is a 'means of specifying the properties of the existing' by establishing 'analogies and contrasts between the appearance, behaviour and properties', whereas the relational schema is a 'means of specifying the general form of the links', its 'relational correlate', which can be, for example, predation, competition or protection (Descola 2005: 164-459).

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## ABSTRACTS

On 6 January 2004, at the end of the Maoist rebellion, Bhadai Tharu was attacked by a tiger in the Khata Corridor Forest, south-west Nepal, on the border with India; he had been elected chairperson of this forest six months earlier. Due to this 'sudden encounter' (*jamkā-bhet*), in which he lost an eye, his life changed completely, apparently for the better. Regarded as a 'conservation hero' by various media, foreigners and locals, and receiving visits from legendary actors such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Rajesh Hamal, Bhadai Tharu has rapidly become someone whom anyone interested in narratives of animal attacks around Bardiya National Park has to meet. With his lively stories and songs that leave a strong impression on those who listen to him, Bhadai embodies the resilience and the unconditional 'love' that we have towards wildlife. Based

on the interview I conducted with him in November 2021, on what has been published about him in several media sources and on what some informants have to say about his story, I analyse a process of heroisation and the choice of 'giving blood' to conservation endeavours. This narrative echoes many other encounters that have occurred in Bardiya since 2019 and might be the case of many more to come.

Le 6 janvier 2004, à la fin de la rébellion maoïste, Bhadaï Tharu a été attaqué par un tigre dans la forêt de Khata Corridor, au sud-ouest du Népal, à la frontière avec l'Inde ; il avait été élu président de cette forêt six mois plus tôt. Cette « rencontre soudaine » (jamkā-bhet), au cours de laquelle il a perdu un œil, a complètement changé sa vie, apparemment pour le meilleur. Considéré comme un « héros de la conservation » par divers médias, étrangers et locaux, et recevant la visite d'acteurs légendaires tels Leonardo DiCaprio et Rajesh Hamal, Bhadaï Tharu est rapidement devenu quelqu'un que toute personne intéressée par les récits d'attaques d'animaux dans le parc national de Bardiya se doit de rencontrer. Avec ses histoires vivantes et ses chansons qui laissent une forte impression sur ceux qui l'écoutent, Bhadaï incarne la résilience et l'« amour » inconditionnel que nous avons envers les animaux sauvages. Sur la base de l'entretien que j'ai réalisé avec lui en novembre 2021, de ce qui a été publié à son sujet dans plusieurs sources médiatiques et de ce que certains informateurs ont à dire sur son histoire, j'analyse un processus d'héroïsation et le choix de « donner son sang » à des efforts de conservation. Ce récit fait écho à de nombreuses autres rencontres qui ont eu lieu à Bardiya depuis 2019 et pourrait être le cas de beaucoup d'autres à venir.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** conflits homme-nature, Népal du Sud Ouest, tigre, rencontre, récit

**Keywords:** Human-wildlife conflict, south-west Nepal, tiger, encounter, narratives

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