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## Stories and heroes as witnesses of Nepalese society

*Histoires et héros comme témoins de la société népalaise*

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# Stories and heroes as witnesses of Nepalese society

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## Introduction

- 1 The investigative methodology specific to field disciplines provides access to material in which narratives, defined as ways of telling a story whose facts are generally woven into a framework that sheds light on local representations and perceptions, often play a central role. In Nepal, myths, tales, poetry, songs but also discourses and anecdotes are all narrated stories which contribute to the construction of ideas and values, convictions that circulate in daily life and are transmitted through space and time. These narratives can be written or spoken, they can concern contemporary or ancient times, be real or imaginary; what they have in common is that just as they allow the construction of group values, they express what people have a right to expect, what is desirable. Narratives are set in time and what is written or said is the subject of a choice made by the narrator. It is from this choice – from what is or is not transmitted – that valued elements of a culture emerge and it is this social understanding of ‘narratives’ that runs through the series of articles making up this issue.
- 2 The values illustrated in these stories may take the form of beliefs defended individually and/or collectively. By their significant and structuring nature, through their transmission in society, they contribute to the construction of social identities. Most of the time, outstanding heroic figures, whether past or present, by virtue of their stature, reputation and characteristics, embody these values (courage, solidarity, dedication, confidence, love, integrity, strength etc). Whereas in the past the making of heroes (heroisation) applied to gods and extraordinary characters, it now seems to be spreading to all sections of the Nepalese population among which the construction of a strong ‘self’ is becoming increasingly important.

- 3 In this special issue, we question how today's heroic narratives transmit certain values and how these stories impact on the contemporary Nepalese world. In doing so, we explore various stories, their narratives forms, their nature and the reasons for their permanence or impermanence.
- 4 The articles featured here bring together a group of anthropologists who take up the case of Nepalese heroic figures and analyse their place and genesis. Their research shows us how these narratives both bear witness to and impact on societies.

## Narratives as powerful stories

- 5 Among the narratives defined above, we distinguish two levels. First, the metanarratives<sup>1</sup> defined by Lyotard (1979) as grand narratives forming the basis of beliefs in a common project (Marxism, liberalism, nationalism etc.) and for which literature (Nep *sāhitya*)<sup>2</sup> as a whole is a privileged witness and instrumental in cultural transmission. In Nepal, great national history constructed from chronicles (Nep *vamsāvali*) can be considered as a metanarrative, as can more recently be the heroisation of the Gurkhas (Hutt 1989, Onta 1996b). Secondly, at a secondary level, there is a multitude of individual narrated stories: the stories of common people, the substance of ethnography. Since the 1980s postmodern anthropological theories have called into question the notions of subject, truth and rationality inherent in the production of these narratives (Ghasarian 1998). The crisis of the grand narratives, a corollary of this questioning, has led anthropologists to focus more than before on the situated plurality of narratives, the heterogeneity of discourses, their forms and their legitimacy. Following the movement set up by Ranajit Guha in 1982 in India with the Subaltern Studies series, Nepalese and non-Nepalese authors challenged in novel ways the national narrative while including the oppressed, peasants and Indigenous<sup>3</sup> tribes as heroes.<sup>4</sup> From the metanarratives of the liberation of the oppressed to the situated narratives of individual exploits characteristic of the postmodern condition, we navigate the paradoxes of a country undergoing transformation. To do this, we also have to look at what makes a good story for those who deliver it, both in terms of the content and the form of the narrative.
- 6 Stories can be powerful and have an impact on people. But how? Which stories prove to be powerful? Who recounts them? Is it through the written word or, to be more precise, through the pen as proposed by Huri Gharti Magar (2004),<sup>5</sup> through the spoken word, or through an image as a witness of the truth of the story? Or is the combination of these different media the most effective because all the senses are stimulated?
- 7 Writing, for a long time the preserve of Brahmins in Nepal, gradually spread to the different strata of the Nepalese population during the second half of the twentieth century, as literacy developed in the country. Since then, books have shaped the minds of a whole generation of Nepalese people who now read and write on a massive scale (Chalmers 2002). However, this country is first and foremost a land of oral literature, where the voice still plays a large part in the transmission of great popular stories (Bordes 2005). Finally, objects, artefacts, fixed images and moving images<sup>6</sup> are also vehicles for writing stories ('storytelling'), whether on television or on the internet: they mobilise other senses, such as sight and hearing. For example, the visual embodiment of narratives accentuates an effect of truth (Anderson 1983), which

contributes to their effectiveness, an 'absence of forgetfulness' in the terminology of Vassiliki-Piyi Christopoulou (2014: 36).

- 8 Nevertheless, the form of any story, its medium, is not enough to explain its evocative force. First and foremost, the structure is important, the order in which the ideas flow and the way in which they echo real-life situations. The narratives studied here manage to arouse attention thanks to their illustrative/descriptive power and, perhaps even more so, to their poetic power when they express what language alone is no longer capable of expressing. And lastly, of course, there is what is conveyed directly, that is the content (topics, values, visions), the way it draws on certain cultural references and those that directly inspire these stories: outstanding figures, sometimes described as heroes.

## Heroes as key figures

- 9 Narratives often feature characters whose exploits are recounted, read about and passed on. These figures save the world, put an end to injustice, resist adversity, triumph over the dangers of wilderness and overcome death. Sometimes these characters acquire the status of 'hero' through their strength, courage, values, intelligence or powers. But who are they? Who contributes to making heroes? And in what way? What are the political and cultural issues of such heroisation? The narrative, through a series of choices, focuses attention on high points: in this sense, it is a machine for making heroes.
- 10 The term 'hero', from the ancient Greek *herôs* ('half-god' or 'military leader'), can be, according to the context, translated by the Nepali terms *bahādur*, *nāyak*, *bhar* (Gaborieau 1974) or even *paik/paikelo* (Winkler 1984) when the English term 'hero' is not used directly, as it often is by younger people. In Nepal, there are numerous heroes: Tenzing Norgay, Pasang Lhamu Sherpa and Nirmal Puja have climbed the highest peaks; Anuradha Koirala or Prachanda have led important political battles; Laksmiprasad Devkota and Parijat were defining writers; Biraj Bhatta, Rajesh Hamal and Reema Bishwokarma famous actors... Such heroes can divide or unite groups of people, shed tears of admiration or compassion, but they leave no one indifferent.
- 11 The process of heroisation takes place on different scales and is also a question of the degree of recognition (by a family, a village, a country or the world). It is also a dynamic process: human groups can agree or disagree on the status of a hero, and this fluctuates over time.
- 12 Though the study of heroes was more often the object of psychological and psychoanalytical research between the 1980s and 2000s (Rank et al 1991), it has not been overlooked in anthropology. By meeting so-called heroes directly or by studying them through those who designated them as such, some anthropologists have postulated that the societal change from a more collective to individualistic mode has directly impacted on narratives: the heroic model that invited collective identification has become much more 'mediatised' or 'trivialised' (Centlivres et al 1998). Normalised, it became part of each individual landscape at the same time as it was atomised into numerous figures of identification. As a result, the study of heroes is running out of steam.

- 13 Nevertheless, in Nepal, as mentioned above, studies dealing in one way or another with heroes have a solid basis. At the end of the 1990s, several authors took up and once again addressed these questions by delving into the past historiography (Devy 1998), by analysing the heroes who served as a model<sup>7</sup> for the nation (Onta 1996a, Gellner 2013) or by studying the People's War (Lecomte-Tilouine 2013) which lasted from 1996 to 2006, with its charismatic leaders and the ethnic revival that had started before that. Today, the federal democratic political system in place and global hyper-modernity give free rein to new expressions of the hero figure and related narratives.
- 14 This special issue does not claim to address all the questions surrounding Nepalese heroes or to deal only with the most recent ones. For example, the under-representation of heroines, the complexity of the process of heroisation and its failure (anti-heroes), the growing cult of social networks and the instrumentalisation of certain heroic public figures, all in the context of various crises, seem to us to be important lines of research that need to be further explored. In fact, the originality of our endeavour here is to offer, via a very diverse set of articles (in location and/or object of study), an update on our current knowledge related to Nepalese narratives and on the diversity of heroic figures of contemporary Nepal.

## In this issue

- 15 Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, in her contribution 'Handling the gun and the pen: Nepal's Maoist narratives of the war in context', examines the narratives of Maoist armed attacks by the actors themselves during the People's War in Nepal (1996–2006) and its aftermath. It sets out to situate the Maoist literary genre within the specific trajectory of Nepali literature. The author questions the link between actor-writers and the structure of narrative within a movement that is itself presented as a book, through an analysis of narratives published in Maoist newspapers during the conflict.
- 16 In her article 'Analogies and antinomies in Tamang stories and heroic deeds', Brigitte Steinmann presents the Tamang paradox of being both religious victims and the heroes of their founding myths. After presenting the various Tamang religious specialists and their means and modes of transmitting stories, the author introduces us to a very special cosmogony, a tripartite world that draws on the repertoires of several worlds (Buddhist, Hindu, Tamang). In doing so, she shows the various important heroic figures of the Tamang world, focusing on the intermediary figure, the *tamba*, who seems to act as a bridge between these different worlds.
- 17 In 'From hunting to photography', Théophile Johnson takes the reader to the high mountains of Manang district in Nepal. He examines the ritual and historical dynamics of the environment, including the relationship between animals, slaughter and death. In his article, the author's personal circumstances and detailed observations are used to understand the practices of the characters of his long-term ethnography and their narratives about religious conceptions of nature. He introduces us to recent alternative techniques to replace the ban on hunting, such as naturalistic photography, and to the way long religious conversions that replaced old divinities and the influence of new narratives carried by the Buddhist figure Milarepa shape the relationship between man, animals, the invisible and the environment.

- 18 The article by Pierre Dérioz, Philippe Bachimon and Pratil Kumar Upadhyaya, entitled ‘Self-staging on the Himalayan trails: online storytelling videos as a medium for young Nepalese people to discover trekking’, touches on an aspect that is still little studied but omnipresent in Nepal, that of storytelling via social networks. These presentations by the people who produce the content and those who accompany them are the main incentive for practising tourism in Nepal: trekking in the Himalayas. This article, based on a method of interviews and viewing/analysing online videos, shows how narratives and their forms are fundamental and act as a medium for young Nepalese people to discover mountain hiking before, during and after their experience. As decisive invitations to travel and to converse (through comments/exchanges), these online publications speak of relationships with spaces, practical, emotional and representative expectations, and they present trekking as an unforgettable and achievable experience, as an adventure within anyone’s reach, in a country that caters for it and which young Nepalese trekkers are proud of.
- 19 Still on the subject of social networks, conservation areas and getting back to animals, Nolwen Vouiller ends this special issue with her article, ‘We give our blood: from tiger victim to conservation hero’. The ethnographer immerses the reader in the narrative of a tiger attack victim who became ‘conservation hero’ according to various people and media (foreigners and locals). Since 2019, Nolwen Vouiller has been trying to understand how the communities who live side by side with such endangered but dangerous wildlife around Bardiya National Park, experience this proximity and organise themselves before, during and after these life-changing encounters. The analysis demonstrates how individual and collective experiences, ritual and ecological issues, the status of victim or hero, suffering and artistic creation or even ‘anger’ and ‘love’ are intertwined in the often little-known forest context of south-west Nepal. This article lends to the understanding of the ‘human-wildlife conflicts’ that are developing around the world, sometimes described as ‘wars’, which reveal original forms of sacrifices and heroisations.

#### *Acknowledgements*

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## NOTES

1. The metanarrative, also called the grand narrative by Jean François Lyotard, is a postmodern philosophical concept. It refers to history as a science based on reason and truth, which claims to offer a global and coherent explanation of historical, social and

cultural events. These metanarratives legitimise power structures by giving them coherence. They contribute to the construction of a homogeneous vision of the world by individuals.

2. See Kumar Pradhan's work on Nepalese literature (1984).

3. For example, Lakhani Thapa Magar (1835–1877), an indigenous revolutionary, was belatedly (2000) recognised as one of the country's martyrs (see Lecomte-Tilouine 2003).

4. Authors including (Gurung 1994, Onta 1996b, Caguthi et al 2010, Hutt 2012, Lecomte-Tilouine 2013 etc).

5. Quoted by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine in this issue.

6. As in the film *Uma* (2013) directed by Tsering Rhitar Sherpa, about a young Maoist's life. In March 2024, researcher Nirjala Adhikari described the influence of this fictional heroine in a paper entitled 'Blending of both masculinity and femininity: Female hero in Tsering Rhitar Sherpa's *Uma*', given at Martin Cautari (Kathmandu).

7. For example, Bhanubhakta Acharya, the great poet was one of them.

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Florent Grazide is a doctoral student, lecturer at the University of Bordeaux and at several institutes for training social workers in south-west France, and is affiliated with the PASSAGES research unit (CNRS UMR 5319). He studied Nepali at INALCO (Paris) and is currently conducting research in Nepal on local politics, ethnicity, ethnohistory, youth and cultural transmission among Tamangs.

### NOLWEN VOUELLER

Nolwen Vouiller has a state diploma in psychomotricity (Santé Sorbonne Université, Paris) as well as a master's degree in anthropology (University Catholique of Louvain, Belgium). She is affiliated with the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS, Paris) and Liege University (ULiege, Belgium) that funds her work. Her research examines human-animal encounters in Bardiyá National Park, Nepal, focusing on emotional and bodily responses. As a singer and musician, she also integrates artistic methods into her work, particularly for data collection and restitution. She is a member of the Multispecies Ethnography and Artistic Methods (MEAM) Network among other institutions or associations.