

Nepalese Chiefs and Gods

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Sacred Village Rocks and Groves

What Nepalese village or plot of land does not have a sacred tree or grove? The altar devoted to the earth gods is often the only collective shrine in a locality. Usually it is a natural site on the outskirts of the village, combining rocks and trees, and sometimes wooden shapes instead of rocks. It can also be associated with a cavity or hole in the earth. Thus among the Tamang of West Nepal: "The site of worship, which is known by the Nepalese term *bhumithan*, is located on a sharp incline overhanging the village; it is set up in a small sheltered area in the rock and divided into two areas by a raised flat stone."¹ Furthermore, we might add B. Pignède's description of the sanctuary as one finds it among the Gurung on the southern side of the Annapurna: "Three walls of rock hold up a little roof of flagstones, the facade being open to the outside. The wall at the back is cut by a large tree that covers the whole area with its shade, with the tree and rock forming a single mass ... Three raised rocks, the top of which is crudely rounded, are placed on a kind of tier. In the left corner is a little stone statue of a four-footed animal ... Finally, on the outside, in front of the sanctuary's open facade, a wooden post is set up ... The ensemble of the sanctuary includes a mixture of Indo-Nepalese and local elements."²

Likewise in central Nepal, in the nearby Magar country, J. Kawakita³ notes that the different shrines devoted to Bhume are always situated under large trees. Elsewhere, the village sanctuaries sometimes look different. Among the Tharu in the Dang valley, for example, in the plain bordering southern Nepal, the village divinities are worshipped in several sites in which rocks are placed alongside effigies or wooden posts. A board shaped

vaguely like a human marks the space devoted to the most important of them, the goddess Daharcandi, who controls all the dark powers prowling through the village territory, with large wooden nails and rocks at her side. The sanctuary of the earth gods, known as *bhuiyar*, is often no more than a mound of earth. In the western Dang, a single village sanctuary contains all the divinities of the place, and the *bhuiyar* gods are specifically represented by clay animal figurines erected in a hut on piles, whose northern post is devoted to the village chief.⁴ This geography of the earth gods of the Tharu villages of Dang thus offers an interesting configuration, since here one finds, clearly distinguished from each other, the local goddess, a well-known figure from the popular Hindu religion and the local gods linked to the chief's district.⁵

These sacred sites combining earth, rock, and tree have certain ties to the sanctuary of the Chinese earth god. In fact, according to E. Chavannes,⁶ the Chinese sanctuary requires a mound of earth and a tree, originally a sacred wood, thereby concentrating "all the creative and nurturing virtues of the earth." Later, the tree became a simple "signal," with the earth god being represented by a stone tablet, according to the idea, expressed by the famous Sinologist, that "rock is the hardest element in the domain of things dominated by the earth." With their standing rocks, some Nepalese altars likewise recall the megalithic sanctuaries of the tribal populations of central and northeast India. Thus, in each Nepalese locality, the sites welcoming the earth gods resemble one another: each is a "god-site" in which rocks and trees link the forces of the underworld to the heavens through archetypal natural supports, whose omnipresence in the Asia of the monsoons may be interpreted an indication of an ancient "earth cult."

Many-faced Deities

What deities are we talking about? Can they be defined, situated in the protean pantheon of Nepal? A recent anthology has demonstrated how vain it is to attempt to classify the gods of Southern Asia,⁷ not only because they change identity and essential characteristics according to the context, but especially because ritual

plays a key role in the shaping of their growing number. Thus among the Tharu of Dang, with the exception of rare heroical figures, the divinity is not really pinpointed, named, and imagined until the moment of the sacrificial act. Furthermore, as soon as one approaches a local divinity, the variability of forms and identities must be taken for granted.

There is, however, a general Nepalese term, *bhume* (from *bhui*, or "soil," "earth") that tends to unify all these powers linked to the earth. *Bhume*, *Bhumi*, and similar forms (*bhuiyar*, *bhanar*, *bhagar*, *bhumiya*...) are used throughout Nepal and in the southern borders of the Himalaya as well as in Northern and Central India. Among the Kirant populations, the least Hinduized of eastern Nepal, *bhume* accompanies the vernacular Tibetan/Burmese terms often restricted to a single ritual vocabulary – such as *bayaHap* among the Thulung Rai – or where the meaning differs, such as *ca:ri*, "the power of the territory," among the Mewahang Rai. Among the Tamang or the Gurung of central Nepal, influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, *bhume* sits alongside terms of Tibetan origin (*syibda ne:da* or *syihbda* in Tamang; *sildo nado* in Gurung, derived from the Tibetan *gzih bdag gnas bdag* or *sa bdag*, "master of the earth").

The general usage of the term *bhume* in the hills and plains of Nepal is an interesting phenomenon. With the originally Tibetan denominative, it in fact spread in such a way that very few equivalent vernacular terms coexist, or else they refer, as among the Mewahang Rai, to different concepts. In the case of the Magar described by Kawakita, *Bhume* brings together, by a "Hindu baptism," gods of troubling variability and elasticity, whose only point in common is that they are linked to sites of "power." In so doing, he includes them in a geography that stretches beyond the boundaries of the village, all the while modifying their nature.

Bhume is not ruler of all the earth: he has friends, such as *Bhairav*, *Ksetrapal*, or even *Mahadev-Shiva*, who rule, often in a more violent fashion, over the telluric forces of the underworld.⁸ Designating the earth, *Bhume* thus encompasses an idea both larger and more imprecise than the soil, but the god of the cultivated area that interests us here cannot, in most cases, be confused with an earth goddess. Hence the Tharu make a clear distinction between the earth, *dharti*, and the village gods of the soil, *bhuiyar*.

While the former comes from a quasi-metaphysical notion or a principle of respect and does not involve sacrifices, the latter are specific entities, tied to a definite place, who represent local authority and are worshipped in a village sanctuary of the same name. In short, a certain haziness maintains a balance that situates these gods somewhere between the tutelary divinities of the locality on the one hand, and the gods of the earth, conceived of as a mastered, inhabited, and exploited place, producing alimentary wealth, a place that has at times become the terrain of a political tutelage, on the other.

The minorities that live on the southern outskirts of the Himalayas, in the hills and in the deep valleys of the Terai, experienced the Hindu and Buddhist influences differently. Over the course of the last few centuries, the Indo-Nepalese, bearers of a more or less orthodox Hindu tradition, settled in the country to the west and east. With the unification of modern Nepal by a Hindu prince from the little principality of Gorkha at the end of the eighteenth century, this domination was solidly established both politically and socially. More diffused and less known were, on the other hand, northern Tibetan influence in the form of Lamaist Buddhism and that of the small states and chiefdoms influenced by this faith.

In villages with a majority of Indo-Nepalese population settled at a late date, there may still be natural sites, such as water holes, sources or cavities peopled by various divine forces, often a local goddess recalling popular Hindu tradition, but generally one does not find a collective *bhumethan* sanctuary. Elsewhere, in central Nepal, where Magar and Indo-Nepalese have long intermingled, the latter worship Bhume on a village level, paying tribute, in ambiguous fashion, to a Magar founding god.⁹ More often, in fact, the Indo-Nepalese propitiate Bhume individually as a simple protective deity of the fields. We should note that in the Hindu milieu of the high castes, allegiances usually manifest themselves outside the village community, and the relationship between the territory and the earth appears to be different.

In the completely Tibetanized cultural regions of northern Nepal, the village sanctuaries are devoted to the traditional Tibetan god of the land, Yul Lha, who sometimes contains an

aspect of the more ancient earth spirit (*sa bdag*), subjugated and transformed by a master of the Buddhist faith. The foundation of Lubra, a village practicing the Bon religion in the Tibetanized elevated valley of Mustang, is thus attributed to Trashi Gyaltzen, who subjugated two demons. These demons entrusted him with the earth upon which the village was built, then reappeared in the shape of poisonous snakes whom the Trashi Gyaltzen mastered and made his servants.¹⁰

Although similar to the gods of the soil of other communities heavily influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, such as the Tamang or the Gurung, the gods of Lubra present a different configuration. They have only survived as transformed, now demonic figures subjugated and absorbed by a more important god of the land. Even if they are named during certain rites involving the community, they do not have a place of worship of their own, giving way in the village to the temple marking the triumph of the Buddhist master and his faith. In the Tamang or Gurung regions, on the other hand, the "master of the soil" retains a central position in the collective cults of fertility and the protection of the village soil. It appears that it is in the villages in which the first inhabitants were tribal minorities that the sanctuaries of a god of the soil play an important role. However, we must not conclude that this god-site, paradoxically endowed with a Hindu name, is the last vestige of a past age, merely given a new name. The configurations are more complex. Thus, in the east of Nepal, in the Kirant country colonized at a late date by the Indo-Nepalese, and among the populations in which the Buddhist influence is almost non-existent, the village sanctuaries of the *bhumethan* type either do not exist or are much less important than in central Nepal. One finds, on the other hand, sacred sites with raised stones, associated with the territory of one of the founding clans (proto-clans).

Hence the cult of Bhume today instils the forces of the land into different socio-political areas. At one end of the spectrum, among the Hindus of the high castes, Bhume is a protective earth goddess in the most general sense, while the soil as a tutelary or social space is not part of this connotation. At the other end, as among the Kirant, he appears in sketchy form alongside concepts linked to the territories of proto-clans or ancestors, and one can still sense

his different nature. Between the two poles, various configurations seem to overlap and even to reinforce each other, especially in those areas where the village appears as a quite well-defined social and spatial unit. This is the case among the Tharu or the Hinduized Magar of the west of the country or, in a different fashion, among the Tamang and the Gurung influenced doubly by Buddhism and Hinduism. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, the vast process of registering the country's land has contributed to the creation of this Nepalese Bhume with many faces. Linked to this process is the genesis of the village as a unit bound by social and political ties and land use, a unit more or less significant according to the region and the history of the land.

Earth-God Cults, Agrarian and Forest Rites

The existing descriptions of the cults of the earth gods emphasize the prosperity and the fecundity they bring to the outskirts of the village community. I would like to examine another aspect of these cults, namely how this prosperity finds its source in the forest areas around the village.

In the village of Dangsing in the Gurung country, a particular priest, the *khlibri*, celebrates the cult of the god of the soil five times a year in order to protect the village.¹¹ The ritual punctuates the calendar of agricultural activities, but it is particularly practiced in the months of June and July, just before the coming of the monsoon rains. It entails a ritual pheasant hunt. This hunt, which can last many days, is favorable to the coming of the rains and the pheasant obtained by this means is sacrificed along with a fish, the latter characterizing other offerings as well.

In the Tharu country, and more precisely among the Dang, two annual rites take place in the village sanctuary. The first during the dry season, is tied to the fallow lands, to the fear of fire and the mastering of the spirits of the dead who threaten the health of both man and livestock. As for the second, which corresponds to the sowing of the rice in August, it is meant to ensure the protection of the rice plants and involves the powers linked to the forest and to water. These forest forces are incarnated in wild beasts (the

bamboo rat and the tiger), while those of the water take the shape of snakes (*nag*) and frogs. Although the custom has declined today, the men must leave for the forest in order to hunt the bamboo rat, which is absolutely necessary to the sacrifice. The villagers insist upon the difficulty of the undertaking, for it takes several days to close in on the animal. During the ritual, which takes place during the night, the priest mediating the relation with the soil conceals himself beneath a cloth and buries side by side, behind the main effigies of the sanctuary, the body of the rat and an egg, symbol of the fecundity of the "tiger that suckles." As in the Gurung country, the forces of the forest and the water are closely tied to the prosperity of the fields. Elsewhere, the Tharu ritual in August, the more spectacular of the two, marks a strong time of the year; people recite the song of the origins of agriculture, the drums are "opened," and their benediction sets off the cycle of dances. Finally, a possessed person dances on fire. This annual ritual is the repetition, on a smaller scale, of the ritual of village claustration enacted for the founding or symbolical refounding of a village, during which the forest resumes possession of the inhabited site.

This configuration, which links the prosperity of the village to the surrounding forests and associates the ritual hunt with agrarian cycle, is still more obvious in certain tribal communities in north-eastern India. Thus, among the Bondo of Orissa, the veneration of the earth goddess in the rock sanctuary of the village sets off, in April, two weeks of ritual hunting that correspond to the setting on fire of the fallow lands and has as its goal, as do the other regular village rites, the favoring of the fecundity of the earth. In this context, the success or failure of the hunt indicates the quality of the harvest.¹² On the day of the offering to the earth goddess, the principal officiant is cloistered in the village, and all the villagers must camp out in the forest.

In the rites devoted to the Nepalese land gods, this opening of the village to the powers of the surrounding land is only rarely expressed in the form of a ritual hunt or village cloistering. Nonetheless other information confirms the close and rather general link between Bhume and untamed forces, aquatic as well as sylvan. Bhume is often split into Syame Bhume or Sime Bhume,

the first term designating muddy or damp earth. Hence, among the Magar of the North, who speak the Kham language, every year in February and March, during the first ritualized passing of the swing-plough, the rite of *halsar* is addressed to the earth god Bhume. This god is then evoked in the form of a snake, which the astrologer officiant brings to the center of the designated field. The ritual inaugurates the agricultural season and “opens” the fields.¹³ But it is also to Sime Bhume (“god of dry and humid earth”) that the hunters address themselves in order to obtain success, and he is given part of the entrails of the hunted animal (in the company of the spirits of the hunter, the forest, the dead, and the god of the summits, Braha). Lastly, a final sacrifice exclusively to Sime Bhume closes the hunting season. A similar association between Bhume, Sime, the snake divinities and forest divinities (more exactly of the hunt, like Sikari) is found among the southern Magar of the Gulmi district who speak Nepalese. According to M. Lecomte-Tilouine, who emphasizes the essentially forest nature of Bhume,¹⁴ at the time of the cult of Bhume the custom is to release a chicken into the forest. Among the Tamang of the West, the god of the soil is also worshipped during the rituals propitious to the success of a hunt. Hunting and farming are both part of the same cycle of exchange between the untamed world and village life.

Of course, in his Nepalese identity as Bhume, the god of the soil is first and foremost an owner and protector of cultivated lands. In the Hindu milieu of the high castes, as – it would appear – in the villages of northern and central India, his figure tends even to diminish to that of a beneficent divinity of fields cultivated by a domestic unit. However, this deity has a much more ambivalent character in Nepal, and for many writers, as we have seen, it is essentially linked to the untamed world. Certain rites even bring up a more extreme concept: a village must be opened up to the forest in order to assure prosperity, in some ways and at least symbolically, to deny its existence and return to the time of its origins. In the case of the Gurung or Tharu rituals presented above, the god of the soil transcends the opposition between the cultivated site and the forest. He is situated between two of its borders, regulating the relationship between the two worlds.

The god of the soil can then become an autochthonian god, imagined or real, referring back to the imagined time of a first foundation. By symbolically reinstating the time that preceded the genesis of a social group, the opening up of the village to the forest makes this mediating god the guarantor of the community he redefines. He is, furthermore, particularly pure, as is indicated by the isolation and sacralization of the officiants, of a single sanctuary or the whole village. In this respect, he holds power over the course of community life and is contacted in crucial moments of the calendar year in which the future of the community is concerned. The socio-political organization of the community is therefore at stake in his cult.

Earth Gods and Village Chiefs

The cult of the gods of the soil have customarily been treated as the expression of a more or less archaic religious tradition, an approach often linked to the question of the double category of priests. Alongside the shaman who works with unexpected disturbances, the "tribal priest" is in charge of the regular cults, such as those addressed to the earth god. In all the communities of Nepal where his function is certified, this priest in fact maintains a close relationship with the divinity. He assures him of worship, and this is in fact one of his main functions.¹⁵ There are, however, villages in which there is no "tribal chief." To the west of Nepal, among the Magar, and among the Kham-speaking population of the North where the shaman infiltrates the entire religious field, as well as among people from the more Hinduized South, the "tribal priest" has been replaced by non-specialists as officiant of the cults of the soil, in particular the chief of the community or the eldest of the founding or dominant clan, who can be also be the chief. M. Lecomte-Tilouine has well demonstrated the political and social implications of the chief's role in the Magar cults of Bhume.¹⁶

When he is not the officiant of the rite, the chief is in any case concerned with a cult that affects the community as a whole. In most of the Nepalese communities, he is closely associated with the priest because he collects the funds necessary for the cult, or

seconds the officiant, or, more notably, because he maintains certain ritual prerogatives as a descendant of the founding clan. Furthermore, in places where the duties differ, the "tribal priest" and the chief can be one and the same person, combining the leadership of the community and the communication with the earth god. This is, for example, the case among the Tamang, where the configuration varies significantly for our purposes. Thus A. Höfer notes that "the chief *mukhiya* ... is in charge of the cult of *syibda ne:da* through his function. The *mukhiya* is either a descendant of the first inhabitants of the village, or he belongs to the most important local clan segment ... In a more general fashion, as the person responsible for the cult, he is also called *lambu* ('tribal priest')." ¹⁷

More concisely, according to B. Steinmann, among the Tamang of the East the duty of the "tribal priest" has not been certified; rather the village chief takes charge of these cults. He automatically has the title of religious mediator between humans and the divinities of the soil and earth. Duties as mediator and as chief seem here to be merge into the function of the *tamba*, a sort of bard, village chief, and master of ceremonies who is the counterpart of the "tribal priest" and chief among the Tamang of the West. As B. Steinmann notes, the guarantee of his religious power comes not from an initiation, but from an ancient contract between the divinities of the soil and man. ¹⁸

It is therefore as representatives of the gods of the soil and mediators between these gods and the community that the chief and "tribal priest" are identified among the Tamang. Similar things are found in an entirely different context, among the Tharu in the valley on the Dang. There, the priests, through hereditary right, have the privilege to officiate over the fixed sanctuary (village or domestic) where the god of the soil rules, and they are distinguished from the non-hereditary officiants, "the masters of the forest," who deal with errant untamed forces. Among the hereditary priests, there are those who, on the one hand, "hold the country together" (*desbandhiya*) by taking charge of a "kingdom" made up of several villages, and, on the other hand, those who officiate on behalf of individual houses. In both cases, they are considered to be the descendants of gods who are both the ancestors of the priest clans and masters of their earth. The northernmost post of

the hut that houses these gods is furthermore devoted to the village chief who, with his close ancestors, "the new gods of the soil," and the earth god, makes up the category of gods known as *bhuiyar*. The terminology and the spatial arrangement create a clear association among these three poles: the god of the soil, the master of a "kingdom," the earth priest and the chief. They confirm the major role of the link to the soil (either founded or acquired) in this configuration.

We should not be surprised to learn that the Tharu priest of the soil until recently belonged to the same clan as the chief of the region, when he wasn't the chief himself. These regional chiefs, or *caudhari*, were the delegates of the ancient Hindu king of Dang-Salyan, then the autocracy of the Rana ministers who controlled the central power from 1845 to 1951. The priests of the soil west of Dang are said to have received their ritual privilege directly from the king of Dang-Salyan, a vassal of the king of Nepal and his Rana ministers until 1961. This privilege was largely responsible for the political and economical prosperity of the clans that held juridical and ritual authority over the earth. This being the case, the pairing of chief and priest of the soil varies a great deal from east to west, and from north to south in the country of the Dangara Tharu, according to local political contexts. The existence of the very centralized function of the priest of the soil, as well as that of the strong man as master of a region, was in this case engendered by the royal delegation of rights to the earth. It was also created, through force, by the modification of the ancient structures of local power, about which we unfortunately know practically nothing. In any case, these facts underline the importance that the delegation of the king's authority has over the land in the current forms of the cult of the earth god and the social units it governs.

A God of Land Registration

As soon as one speaks of the chief and political authority, the question of the area of authority immediately comes into play. Ethnography often leads one to imagine that the village, with its

sanctuary and its chief, forms a well-defined unit whose worshipping of earth gods assures its permanence. While such an impression is justified for the Tharu of Dang or in the northern Tibetanized regions that we have left outside of purview of this study, the focusing on the village, especially in the middle country, ignores other, more significant units. M. Gaborieau has well demonstrated that in the hills of central and eastern Nepal, unlike in India, the notion of the village (*gau*) is misleading and reductive, especially when referring to the time before the administrative and political establishment of the village panchayats in 1962. On this subject he writes: "The word *gau* never applies to a single well-defined type of territorial unit only ... The smallest territorial unit in Nepal is the area of jurisdiction, the *taluk*, of a chief from the founding lineage recognized by the royal authority and called *talukdar* in the administrative nomenclatures, but known more often as *mukhiya*, *subba*, or *dware*, depending on the place and ethnic group. This basic unit can be more or less large – from a few houses to a few dozen houses – and its size varies according to administrative factors (form of land tenure) and especially to factors tied to the social structure of ethnic groups who exercise power there."¹⁹

I would like to emphasize in particular the different forms of land tenure and the role they play in the definition of the areas of authority of the local chiefs. Moreover, the approach based on land tenure allows us to avoid the dilemma of the following issues: are these territories or more specifically social groups? These units of land are in fact centered around a group of farmers, the earth being measured according to the wealth thus produced.

In particular, the different types of land tenure have involved various forms of the delegation of royal power. In fact, the administrative land registration and the political centralization that accompanies it did not take place all at once after the unification of Nepal by the dynasty of the Shah at the end of the eighteenth century. For not only do the political and social substrata vary according to ethnic milieu, as M. Gaborieau points out; they also vary because the west and central Nepal had already experienced an "initial centralization" of government power among the little Hindu principalities of which the westernmost date from the four-

teenth century, at the latest. This cadastral registration, principally of land, influenced the genesis of "villages" and the status of their chiefs, now the intermediaries between the former local structures and the central government. The superimposition of central power over these little-understood political and territorial structures is at the heart of the transformations of the hypothetical ancient gods of the soil (and of power) into gods of the soil of a delegated chief, into gods of the type of Bhume henceforth celebrated on regular dates on the agrarian calendar. Added to this is the recent impact of the division into Panchayats, which we shall not go into here, but which not only radically modified the local representation of the chiefs elected thereafter, but redesigned a new village unit.²⁰

The ethnographers working in the Kirant country, to the east of Nepal, thus noted the lack of importance of the concept of the village before the founding of the Panchayats. Among the Kulunge Rai, there is not one chief with authority over the whole village, but a series of chiefs, from each of the local clans. No one of them has real authority and means of coercion over the others. The number of these clan chiefs even multiplied after the populations of east Nepal were brought under the system of the Panchayats. In these regions, the habitat is dispersed and the "village" often stretches over the whole side of a mountain, although this use of space is not the only cause. In fact, in the Tamang countries further to the west, the habitat is just as dispersed, but the village seems to form a better defined geographic and ritual entity, marked by cults of gods of the soil.²¹

In the case of the Limbu of the Kirant country, the neighbors of the Rai to the west, the fragmentation of power and the non-existence of the village as a social and territorial unit must be considered in relation to the *kipat* land system peculiar to this region. As it was instituted after the conquest, this tenure represents a syncretism between local customs and the law of the Shah kings.²² At the end of the eighteenth century, the Shah king of Gorakha, the unifier of Nepal, allowed the Limbu kings, henceforth called *subba*, to manage their ancestral lands, on condition of paying a tax to the central government. This land system allowed for the maintenance of power over the soil of the ancient clan chiefs but also

engendered a competition. This in turn caused the land prerogatives of the local chiefs to be divided up. These local units never became part of a village with set boundaries, or rather, "the village" of the 1960s found itself with several chiefs.

In other words, in the particular case of the Limbu, one notes that the cult of Bhume does not in fact seem to play a role on the village level. Ph. Sagant mentions the marginal propitiation of Bhume in the form of oaths, linked to the Gurkha domination, in which the earth is to some extent called as witness.²³ On the other hand, the original territory of the clan is always valorized and centered on a fortress associated with the god of the land, on the one hand, and on an ensemble of erected stones tied to the founding incest of the group. Once a year, these founders are evoked during the annual ritual of the divinity Mangenna, who is attached to the power of the ancient clan chiefs. If ever there was an earth god in the land of the Limbu, it would be Mangenna, the god of the territory of the original clan, and especially of Nahangma, who guarantees the power of the head of the household and "allows access to a parcel of the ancestors' land to the head of the household."

The absence of a structured village cult to Bhume should be linked to the maintenance of these earlier forms of power and ancient territorial and social units, in this case the clan territories, through the transitory land system of *kipat*. The Limbu are among the only minorities to have retained this relative autonomy, symbol, and support of their identity. The Indo-Nepalese migrants who settled in the region were, furthermore, under another land regime, the *raikar*, which is predominant in the hilly regions of Nepal. In this form of land tenure, the king is the nominal owner of the earth, which he gives directly to his subjects to farm, with the intermediaries responsible for the collection of land tax on the non-irrigated lands being the *talukdar* chiefs or *mukhiya* named to the administrative districts outlined by the central government. Thus the Rai, neighbors to the west of the Limbu, did not succeed in maintaining the same autonomy of land, since a large part of this region had been in *raikar* control from a more distant time. The agrarian cult of the village god Bhume has been verified there, though it has none of the political dimension found in the Tharu or Magar countries to the west of Nepal. Among the Thu-

lung Rai this cult appears without great force, the "tribal priest" officiating to a very weak following.²⁴ Among the Kulung Rai, the agrarian rites seem to involve much vaster units than the "village," uniting all the heads of households and bringing the ancestors into play.²⁵

We should note that behind the notion of prosperity attached to the Nepalese Bhume is sometimes found, such as among the Mewahang Rai of the valley of the Honku, the idea of *ca:ri*, of "territorial force" related to a cult devoted to the rocks of the ancestors of the proto-clans. According to M. Gaenzle, this force is controlled by the "knowledge" the legitimate proprietors of the territory acquire either through dreams or through the close link of communication that ownership of the soil and political power imply. The author furthermore notes that the cult has undergone an evolution linked to the disintegration of the political unit and the division of the posts of the local functionaries.²⁶ In other communities in the hilly regions of Nepal, one finds traces of comparable things obliterated by the existence of a single sanctuary to the village god Bhume. Thus among the Gurung, the term *to* designates both the territory "of the village" and its guardian deity, as well as "the lands of a certain number of houses," and "the quarter of a straggling village,"²⁷ suggesting a possible link with the territorial unit of a part of the clan. It would appear then that the Indo-Nepalese god Bhume only identifies a power within the framework of different types of delegations of the royal authority over the land, where the village and its chief have managed to expand, without opposing other types of local power, such as the heads of clans, segments of clans, or households.

Let us shift our focus to the center and west of Nepal, where centralized authority was imposed under different historical conditions and where *raikar* land tenure was implanted long ago. The weak sense of the notion of the village and the division of local power are also present there, to varying degrees depending on the region. According to M. Gaborieau, in the Tanahon district of central Nepal (peopled with Indo-Nepalese, Magar, and Gurung) many district chiefs (*taluk*), tied to ancient segments of founding clans, share the power in the same locality. However, the author emphasizes vaster units: the cantons, *thum*. These have at their

head a "great chief," or *mahamukhiya*, in direct communication with the central power and to which the district chiefs or *mukhiya* are subordinate. These cantons are the result of an administrative parcelling of the land following the unification of Nepal and were in effect until 1962. M. Gaborieau stresses their political and ritual unity. Of particular interest to us is the fact that one of the cults that embodied this unity was the worship of Bhayar (alias Bhume), which took place in the canton's sole sanctuary. The "great chief" was responsible for the cult, independently of any directive from the centralized power, and all the heads of households were supposed to participate in this.²⁸ Such cantonal cults of Bhume have been noted in other regions near central Nepal.

The link between Bhume and the administrative and land registration appears clear in this case, since this cult is associated with a district defined by the central government and whose seat is no longer a clan territory. The "great chief's" authority over the soil is directly delegated by that of the king. Certainly, as a *mukhiya* chief himself, he can be the descendant of a segment of the founding clan, but the seat of his power, the canton, transcends these ancient divisions. Moreover, it appears that in matters concerning the legitimation of power, the Dasai festival, concretizing that of the Hindu sovereign, takes precedence. M. Gaborieau thus sees the cantonal ritual of Bhume as a cult of prosperity without political dimension, in contrast to the Dasai festival. The Dasai ritual also took place in the center of the *thum*, and it was the *mahamukhiya* who executed it. Even if certain *mukhiya* chiefs are the descendants of the founding fathers, and in contrast to what happened under the *kipat* land system, they have to some extent lost their ancestral link to the soil; they became more the holders of an administrative function than the chosen masters of the soil god embodying the founding father. In the region studied by M. Gaborieau, in this respect it is very significant that the Gurung population, settled at the most ancient date, no longer has any *mukhiya* post.

We have yet to explore the origin of the division into cantons, which might help us better to understand the evolution of the structures of political power and the status of the god Bhume within this structuring. Indeed it is unlikely that these cantons

were created out of nothing. As well-defined administrative and ritual units, they reflect a more ancient state of centralization in central Nepal. This region had in fact been under Hindu rule since the fifteenth century. Thus in the district of Gulmi located to the west of the district of Tanahon and peopled with equal numbers of Magar and Indo-Nepalese, the Gurka State reused the ancient local divisions into six small principalities for the new administrative divisions.²⁹

In central Nepal, the cantonal cult of Bhume was thus henceforth part of a continuity, reflecting an earlier, more successful process of political centralization. In other words, a "first centralization" would have influenced the formation and composition of the territorial divisions into cantons and villages. To speak of a "first centralization" is to recall facts of which, unfortunately, there are few historical traces; the Hindu princes of central Nepal indeed supplanted the local chiefs, probably "Magar" or "Gurung," who are known today as the "old kings" of the "Magar country."³⁰ The question, however, remains as to the nature of the territorial units these pseudo-kings – most certainly clan chiefs rather than kings according to Hindu criteria – might have governed. It appears in any case that a certain territorial continuity was maintained. The present-day villages of the Gulmi region would date back to the time of the "old kings."

Thus the village of Argha, in Gulmi, is the center of a canton, but it is also a *kot*, an ancient royal fortress housing the tutelary goddess of the Hindu dynasty who reigned there before the unification of Nepal. This was the site where, each year, the power of the king was regenerated (in the person of the symbolic heir of the local dynasty) during the great festival of Dasai. As remarkable as it may seem, Bhume was also worshipped there. The association we noted earlier between Bhume and the Hindu goddess of power on the level of the cantonal cults of the district of Tanahon is taken even further here, indicating a more ancient and widespread process of centralization.

And what of other regions in which the delegation of power took place differently? Let us take the case of the Tharu from the Dang valley, a Terai valley that had been under the lordship of a Hindu king since at least the fourteenth century. The ecology is

totally different from that of the hill country; a deadly marsh climate and the great quantity of forest limited the settling of the area until the 1950s. As early as the fourteenth century, the non-resident Brahmins and the Nath Yogi, close Shivaite ascetics closely identified with the royal power, received enormous donations of land there under two forms of tenure: the *birta*, profiting individuals usually of the Brahmin cast, and the *guthi*, endowments for the cult of a god, in this case the god of the Nath. As opposed to the *raikar*, these two types of land tenure have in common that the king completely transfers his rights to the beneficiaries. I cannot go into the complex story of the ancient Dang kingdom, pinched between the powers from the hills and those from the Gange plains, but after the conquest of part of the valley it remained a vassal kingdom of the Shah. In this system (*rajya*), which was abolished in 1961, the vassal profited directly from the taxes on the lands in his kingdom, just like the holders of *birta* and *guthi*. All these properties were very important: each domain was counted by "villages," the largest including more than a dozen. These three types of land tenure created veritable small states within a state in Dang.

Unlike what one finds in the *kipat* land regime, a strong centralization and a reinforcement of local powers developed. Each Tharu village in Dang formed, until recently, a compact unit or *mauja*, bringing together the households making use of a *birta*, *guthi*, or *rajya* land. Only a part of the harvest went to the Tharu peasants, and the land was managed by intermediaries, the village chiefs, the *mahaton*. These chiefs answered to the *caudhari*, who were in charge of a grouping of several villages called a "kingdom," and retained, as we have seen, a ritual authority over this same soil. These regional Tharu chiefs were the delegates of land holders who did not live in the domains. They controlled the distribution of the lands to the peasants, collected the taxes, managed the statute labor system, guaranteed local justice while profiting from a rise in fines and, after the institution of the Hindu code of the Rana in 1854, even regulated the appurtenance belonging to the Tharu "caste." They vouchsafed the prosperity of their "kingdom" and some even built fortresses. The regional sanctuaries of the *caudhari* chiefs have disappeared today, but a sign of this ancient system remains today in each village. The god of the soil,

formerly the god of the region, is today worshipped strictly on the level of villages of the same *parganna*, under the auspices of the village chief and the regional priest, with the latter belonging imperatively to the main clan of the earth god in question. As opposed to the Limbu *subba*, the Tharu regional chiefs were veritable small kings, managing a vast amount of land. In particular, these land entities and the power of the great Tharu chiefs that upheld them was much more the product of the delegation of royal power than the survival, as in the Kirant or Magar countries, of ancient clan territories. It is in fact likely that at an ancient date the Tharu, quasi-nomadic clearers of marsh forests, did not form a territorial unit or stable clan. The centralized cult of the god of the soil is linked to the particular land tenure system that developed in the Dang valley and which engendered well-circumscribed territories, bringing together compact villages. Unlike those in the east and west of Nepal, the Tharu village is neither the territory of the founder nor a conglomerate of territories of segments of clans, but a unit exploiting a domain of land.

Other facts relative to the centralization of the cult of the god of the soil are found elsewhere and confirm the link between Bhume and the administrative and land registration of Nepal. In the Kirant country, among the Thulung Rai, N. J. Allen³¹ has noted that the institution of the "tribal priest," which we saw to be closely associated with the cult of the god of the soil and the chiefdom, was originally tied to that of the small princes who governed before the conquest during the 1770s. He notes, moreover, that the village of Mukli, considered the first permanent Thulung village, has on its grounds the two most ancient sanctuaries of the god of the soil Bhume that appear to have retained pre-eminence, where the "tribal priest" officiates, though the rite is on the path to extinction and draws only small crowds. Furthermore, the founding myth of these sanctuaries and thus of the gods of the soil suggests a link between certain villages and an ancient political hegemony. These facts do not, however, allow us to say whether the areas in question were the territories of chiefs of clans, cantons, *thum*, or other princely divisions.

For the Tamang of the East, B. Steinmann³² also traces a filiation between the ancient *talukdar*, responsible for the collection of taxes

of an area within a canton, and the local chiefs today, masters of ceremony in charge of a village god of the soil. B. Pignède mentions the existence of regional sanctuaries tied to ancient structures of local power preexisting the imprint of the Hindu dynasty of the Shah, and later that of the Rana. For the Thulung Rai, was it a question of clan territories of the ancient Kirant clans, as it is among their Limbu or Mewahang neighbors? In this case, the cult of Bhume would have subsumed the cults of the ancient gods of the soil, in a completely different territorial and land-tenure structure. For the north in the Gurung and Tamang countries, what we encounter in the Ghale principalities is a “first centralization,” strongly marked by a Tibetan influence and preceding the imprint of the Hindu Shah kings. In short, it is not impossible that the regional cults of Bhume are less ancient than certain authors suggest: in the Tharu area, the regional sanctuaries are clearly associated with a late date (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) during which the chiefs of this group received orders from higher powers.

Be that as it may, all the examples we have cited emphasize a phenomenon of centralization: the cults to the village gods of the soil today derive from cults that took place on a much larger scale (canton, small principality or local chieftom), thereby reflecting the administrative registration of a Nepal in the process of unification. All this took place during a period of transition, which saw the passing of units of local power of varying nature to districts governed by a chief who had received the delegation of an authority over the land from a king whose power and districts under his protection were subsequently modified. A chief who held complete power granted by the local gods were replaced by a master of principally land-related authority, delegated by the king of kings. In fact, even if certain *mahamukhiya* have retained limited judiciary prerogatives, or even, like the *subba* of the Kirant country, the right to maintain an army, the essentials of power of the local chiefs, particularly to the west and central Nepal, was reduced to the management of a domain of land of which they had been given charge.

The facts concerning the centralized nature of the function of the “tribal priest” go back, moreover, to the controversial question of the double category of priests. In the above-mentioned exam-

ples, the “tribal priests” seem to have considered their role reinforced around the poles of local power that formed at the time of the unification of Nepal. Did they consolidate their position even while the chiefs they served submitted themselves to an administrative power? Elsewhere, as among the most Hinduized and most anciently integrated Magar, for example, the chiefs, on the contrary, continued to interact directly with the god of the soil.

Political Power, Land Ownership, and the Gods of the Soil

If the cult of the village god of the soil Bhume has a political side, it expresses an overlordsip enacted by the delegation of a single aspect of royal sovereignty: ownership of land. This delegation modified the relationship between the former chiefs and the soil or a territory and took on various forms depending on the systems of land tenure put into effect. These influenced the formation of the human “landscape,” the composition of the “villages” or cantons, depending on the degree of development of the models of the Hindu sovereignty already in place.

Thus, in the Kirant country, one still sees the ancient territorial organization of the founding clans in part aborted by the implantation of the god Bhume: the existence of a “double power” bears witness to this situation. Conversely, among the Tharu to the west of Nepal, the chiefs forged their power by integrating a control that registered an originally “empty” land.³³ The god of the soil reigning at the center of the domains of land and the villages that composed them illustrate the result of this process. As for the Magar, they seem to have maintained a link to the land of their founding ancestors, but the land was re-registered according to the order of the first small Hindu kings with whom they closely collaborated. Bhume triumphed here as a village god, guarantor of its political and territorial unity although subjugated to a foreign power. But in the fortresses of the former principalities that were the poles of this “first centralization,” and in the cantons that replaced them, Bhume lost all political aura, giving way to the Hindu warrior goddess.

This more or less successful administrative registration reflects a distinct regional history in which the east and west appear particularly in contrast to each other, in a nuanced echo of the more or less ancient movement toward colonization by the Indo-Nepalese founders of the Nation-state of Nepal. In the Gurung and Tamang countries, the situation is even more complex, with traces of the royal authority inspired by the Tibetan model and an implantation of monasteries that appears to have favored the development of a more solid social village unit. With the exception of the Tharu from the plains, the clan or the segment of the clan attached to a territory no doubt preceded the divisions into the "kingdoms," cantons and "villages," which still define the attributions of Bhume today. The complexity of the terminologies still in use suggests, however, a greatly varied regional substratum.

The god Bhume now appears to us more as an administrative god guaranteeing the authority over a registered territory by an external authority than as a god of power. If Bhume bears witness to a former religion of chiefs, it is of chiefs who now have lost the essence of their power over the soil, both forest and untamed areas, in favor of a simple function of managing the land ownership of the "king of kings." The beneficent character of the completely Hinduized god Bhume, favoring the fecundity of the earth more than the power of the soil (a polysemy implicit in the word itself), can be read as a total "pacification" of the untamed forces that once guaranteed the power of the former clan chiefs. This was based on the political and physical division of a territory thereby colonized and sapped of its strength, in favor of the royal Hindu forms of sovereignty.

Notes

1. A. Höfer, "Notes sur le culte du terroir chez les Tamang du Népal," in: J.M.C. Thomas and L. Bernot (eds.), *Langues et techniques, nature et société II: approche ethnologique, approche naturaliste*, Paris, 1971, p. 147.
2. B. Pignède, *Les Gurung. Une population himalayenne du Népal*, Paris-The Hague, 1966, p. 300.
3. J. Kawakita, *The Hills Magars and Their Neighbours*, Tokyo, 1974, p. 343.

4. G. Krauskopff, "Naissance d'un village tharu, à propos des rites de claustration villageois," in: *L'Ethnographie*, Vol. 83, No. 100/1 (1987), pp. 131-58; also in: idem, *Maîtres et possédés, les rites et l'ordre social chez les Tharu (Népal)*, Paris, 1989, pp. 110-17.
5. The Tharu live in the plains bordering India – a region more directly influenced by the popular Hinduism of Northern India. In comparative perspective, it should be noted that among the Reddis of India (see C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, *The Reddis of the Bison Hills*, London 1945) Bhume, who does not have a sanctuary and is clearly identified with the protecting mother earth helping to secure good harvests, stands completely apart from the village goddesses, such as Gangamma Devi and Mutielamma, who by contrast are represented on the outskirts of certain villages through rocks or wooden posts.
6. E. Chavannes, *Le T'ai Chan. Essai de monographie d'un culte chinois* (Annales du Musée Guimet 28), Paris, 1910, pp. 471, 477.
7. V. Bouillier and G. Toffin (eds.), "Classer les dieux? Des panthéons en Asie du Sud," in: *Purusartha*, 15 (1993).
8. See V. Bouillier, "Mahadev himalayen," in: *ibid.*, p. 178.
9. M. Lecomte-Tilouine, "About Bhume. A Misunderstanding in the Himalayas," in: G. Toffin (ed.), *Nepal. Past and Present*, Paris, 1993.
10. Ch. Ramble, "The Founding of a Tibetan Village: The Popular Transformation of History," in: *Kailash*, Vol. X, No. 1 (1983), pp. 279f.
11. B. Pignède (note 2 above), p. 308.
12. V. Elwin, *Bondo Highlanders*, Bombay, 1950, p. 182.
13. M. Oppitz, "The Wild Boar and the Plough. Origin Stories of the Northern Magar," in: *Kailash*, Vol. X, No. 1 (1983), pp. 187-226.
14. M. Lecomte-Tilouine, *Les dieux du pouvoir. Les Magar et l'hindouisme au Népal central*, Paris, 1993.
15. As has been well demonstrated by M. Höfer (note 1 above), p. 147.
16. M. Lecomte-Tilouine (note 14 above), pp. 95-99. See also A. de Sales, *Je suis né de vos jeux de tambours. La religion chamanique des Magar du Nord*, Nanterre, 1991.
17. M. Höfer, *Tamang Ritual Texts I. Preliminary Studies in the Folk Religion of an Ethnic Minority in Nepal*, Wiesbaden, 1981, pp. 26, 36.
18. B. Steinmann, *Les Tamang du Népal; usages et religion, religion de l'usage*, Paris, 1987, p. 172.
19. M. Gaborieau, "Introduction," in: idem (ed.), *Caste, lignage, territoire et pouvoir en Asie du Sud*, *L'Homme*, Vol. 18, No. 1/2 (1978), p. 23.
20. The system of the Panchayats represented a radical reversal from the principle of universal suffrage to elect the *panchayat*, the village committee, and its head, the *pradhan panc*. Previously, the chiefs had been nominated by the central government. The village units were redrawn and divided into wards. With the exception of a brief democratic period, the system of the Panchayats followed the autocratic regime of the Rana and was abolished in the "revolution" of 1990 that resulted in the return to political parties and to the election of a parliament on the basis of the universal suffrage.
21. See M. Höfer (note 17 above), p. 10.
22. Ph. Sagant, "Le pouvoir des chefs limbu au Népal oriental," in: *L'Homme*, Vol. 18, No. 1/2 (1978), pp. 69-107.

23. However, harvest cults and in order to “satisfy the earth” (*yoba-tama*) are being held twice per year under the guidance of *subba* (in fact corresponding to a group of houses belonging to a segment of the clan): they reunite the men of the clan and are performed by the “tribal high priest” on temporary altars. They involve an atonement of the forest spirits to “enclose the land” and among the Sansari to keep out epidemics. During sowing time, they allow the “power of the grain” to assure abundance. I thank Ph. Sagant for giving me this information.
24. N.J. Allen, “The Thulung of the Bhume Sites and Some Indo-Tibetan Comparisons,” in: C. von Fürer-Haimendorf (ed.), *Asia Highland Societies in Anthropological Perspective*, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 168-82.
25. C. MacDougall, *The Kulunge Rai. A Study in Kinship and Marriage Exchange*, Khatmandu, 1979, p. 33.
26. M. Gaenzle, “Ancestral Types: Mythology and the Classification of ‘Deities’ among the Mewahang Rai,” in: V. Bouillier and G. Toffin (eds.) (note 7 above), pp. 197-218.
27. B. Pignède (note 2 above), p. 45.
28. M. Gaborieau (note 19 above), pp. 37-67.
29. Ph. Ramirez, *Patrons et clients. Etudes des relations politiques sur le site d’un ancien royaume indo-népalais, Argha (Népal central)*, PhD. thesis, University of Paris X, 1993, p. 265.
30. The Kali Gandaki basin where the “Twenty-Four” Hindu kingdoms existed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is also known as “Magar country” (*magarant*) or in certain documents as *magar visaya*, occasionally also as *bara magarant* (“the twelve magar countries”). Our knowledge is poor as to how the succession among local chiefs and Hindu chiefs worked: marriage alliances or political alliances; military conquest or elevation of the head of a clan to the position of “Hindu king.” It is possible to think of a variety of scenarios.
31. N. J. Allen (note 24 above) pp. 169-72.
32. B. Steinmann (note 18 above), p. 90.
33. This is the Tharu term for identifying land not owned by anyone.