

of these oral traditions, which may throw light on a possible difference between how oral texts are conceived by people and how they are actually executed. On the other hand, instead of looking for the “traditional” or “authentic” version of these oral traditions, one has also to consider how the concept of “tradition” or “authenticity” may be historically transformed and even ideologically used.

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While found only in written forms in Central Nepal, genealogies (*vaṃśāvalī*) are transmitted in both oral and written forms in the Western parts of the country. I will argue that a key to understanding genealogy is to consider its social dimension. It is revealed by the conditions of their production in the case of written texts, and by observing the bardic performance of which genealogies form a prelude, in the case of oral ones.

Genealogies from Western Nepal were first published in the 1960s, but till the present day, these texts have been reproduced in the local language and none or only very few comments about their local uses and the conditions under which they were recorded or found are provided. We are thus left with a raw material, without any idea about who ordered these genealogies, for what purpose, on what occasions, by whom were they composed, augmented and read or recited, how were they transmitted, and even more, what they mean.

### The uses of written genealogies

In fact, the people who own or know these texts have also few comments to make on them and do not seem puzzled by their obscure contents. This suggests that their value does not lie exclusively -or even mainly- in their

## Drawing a Genealogy of Western Nepal’s Genealogies

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narrative meaning. However, practical aims appear in the contents of some written genealogies. It suggests that they were used as proof of status to be presented to the authorities during the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, after unification of this remote territory by the Gorkhali army. The end of the genealogy of the Deuba (dated 1845)<sup>1</sup>, for instance, reveals this goal:

“(…) *Mānu Deuvā* arrived at *Upallātāprā* and lived there. *Mānu Kumāl* was also living there then. As *Mānu Kumāl* had no son, he was without an heir. When he was aged 60, he told *Mānu Deuvā*: ‘I have no son, having received my heritage, would you accept to support my house and to live with me?’ To this request from *Mānu Kumāl*, he answered: ‘well, I agree, I will support your house’, (...) and from that day on he became *Kumāl*. (...) We the *Kumāl*, have worn the holy thread since ancient times. We are warranted (*sadar*) with not being a “drunkard caste”, *matwālī jāt*. In the past during a 9-year examination period, our caste was warranted with being *Deuvā* since long before [but] we have supported the house of a *Kumāl* without offspring, and having lived on his properties, we were called *Kumāl*. Our caste, as always, is *Deuvā*, that is for sure.”

If proof of the pedigree and heresy of status may have been a frequent motivation for producing genealogies, this purpose is in fact seldom explicit. More numerous are the genealogies describing in detail land properties of different branches of a lineage, suggesting that they may have been used to legitimate property rights. This is further ascertained by frequent allusions to very remote generations in written claims on landed property, such as reference to a gift of land made by King Malai Bam four centuries later.<sup>2</sup> Usually only one or two generations of past kings’ names are recalled in this type of claim,

but they are sometimes shaped as a genealogy parallel to a royal genealogy. Thus a text written at the time of the king of Dullu, Bhakta *Bahādur Śāha*, in 1871 recalls (and documents) the history of the Raskoti kings when retracing the ancestors of three ironsmiths, *luhār*, in order to reclaim the privileges they had received in the past.

If we consider the royal genealogies, a political goal is an obvious aspect of their composition and inscription, as can be shown in the case of the imperial Malla dynasty.<sup>3</sup>

However, a great number of genealogies are not self-explanatory, and shall thus be understood in the very context of their enunciation, when the text is recited.

### The genealogies between literacy and orality

Apparently, the genealogies were already transmitted in both written and oral forms during the Malla period (XII-XIVth centuries). Thus, in the genealogy of the kings of Acham, King *Aśok* Malla is said to have provided his grandson with a “fictive” lunar clan genealogy after having it recited and written it down himself. Other elements reinforce the probability that the kings themselves would write or recite their genealogies. Thus the *Jumalā nareś vaṃśāvalī*, genealogy of the kings of Jumla (Naraharinath IP: 111-113), uses the first person twice, for the evocation of King *Jvālāndhari's* and King *Jitāri's* reigns.

“(...) the minister of *Lāsā* arrived at *Sijā Lāmā Thādā* to pay us tribute, [we] told [him]: ‘Do not bring me as a tribute anything other than horses, silver, embroidered fabrics and gold.’ We also killed the Tibetan King *Āmāpālā* and have been respected for 364 years. As we had no son, the one named Bairimal, of the *Mathurā* forest, having helped us a lot, we told him: ‘I give you my kingdom, your name is now *Sijāpati*. (...)’ Having given the kingdom to this *Sijāpati*, we, King *Jālyālandhari*, went to practise austerities in the jungle hermitage of *Badrināth*. The son of Bhairi Malla [was] Kesari Malla. His son was *Prithī* Malla 1. His son *Ujir* Malla 1. His son *Māhāri* Malla 1. His son *Vimārī* Malla 1. His son *Jitārī* Malla 1. Under our reign, *Jitārī* Malla, *Chicī lāmā* [of] Mugu entered our service. During the month of *asoj*, while we were playing at *caupiḍā* with the *lāmā*, when we were winning, the *lāmā* laughed and we asked him: ‘Why do you laugh, O *lāmā*, when we win?’ (...)”

This very lively evocation of the dead kings, who directly address the reader or listener, may have corresponded to something more than a mere figure of style, since it recalls a real invocation of the great kings of the past. It actualises this past and turns the *vaṃśāvalī* into real journeys back in time. It also suggests that this component might be present when the style is less explicit. Indeed the simple evocation of a dead individual's proper name (or any spirit's name) is conceived as an invocation. It evokes the widespread worship of past kings in Far Western Nepal and Kumaon, who still possess their descendants and speak through their mouth. Though they are considered as a very personal matter, strictly bounded to a particular patriline, in today's practices, genealogies are learned and

recited by specialist orators of low status: the bards or *huḍke Damāi*. From the most immediate form of communication between the living and dead members of the patriline in the form of a genealogy using the first person, a relation mediated by a low-caste specialist was thus privileged and we will try to understand the logic of this triangular link.

### Bard as identity keeper

The *huḍke* sing the genealogies of their patrons before the performance of heroic ballads and this séance is called *baḍhāi*, “praise”. When oral, genealogies are thus explicitly conceived as eulogies, panegyrics, and as such, they mark identity and status. Their strong iconic and emblematic feature may explain that they have partly lost their meaning in the course of time, and have taken - or remained in - a cryptic form. It may also explain that local users do not perceive the situation as annoying. On the other hand, as living texts, they play a central role in the functioning of local society, and cannot really be understood outside their context of performance, which provides their most important meaning. It is probably more sociological than historical.

The bards are employed by high-caste families, especially Thakuri, during weddings, and sometimes also during funerals. The bard is a glib talker who not only flatters the audience but also makes them laugh by belittling himself or making fun of his assistants. He makes them laugh by caricaturing the social order, pleasing the “*rājā*” who then shows his generosity. The role of the bard is undoubtedly to please the Kshatriya patrons, but beyond this immediate pleasure, he is also viewed by the latter as the guardian of their history and identity. This dimension is crucial. While history has often been presented as a mere tool of domination for the elite within the context of Nepal, oral history in Western Nepal appears to be much more complex.

As revealed by their genealogical knowledge, the bards seem to be attached to one clan in particular. Other families can call them for weddings, but they do not sing their genealogy, only epics. Given this fact, we could expect each bard's corpus of epics to be specific and to be connected with the history of his attached high-caste family, in the same manner as their genealogical knowledge. Apparently this is not the case and some texts are known from Garhwal up to Western Nepal, such as the epic (*bhārat*) of Rani Rawat. As in most of the epics, heroism is mixed here with cunning and violence.

In “Rani Rawat”, as in many other epics, the mediation of the bard, and his knowledge of cunning, brings victory to the Kshatriya hero while facing the enemy whom his father could not defeat. Thus, Sobha, the orphan son of King Ranai Rawat, who was killed by Meluva Rana, meets Pesio, the *huḍke* bard of his father who is of the opinion that this boy looks like his dead master. He asks him where he is going, with golden clothes and a sword in his hand. The boy tells him about his plan to kill his father's murderer, but the bard warns him that he will be killed and that he should rather hide in a basket and that he himself would carry to Meluva. When the bard gives

the basket to King Meluva, the boy jumps out of it and kills him.

This story contains the leitmotiv which may help to interpret the meaning of the genealogical knowledge: the patriline may be broken, especially when the father dies without offspring. In the Western Nepal epics however, the breaking of the line is never complete. First, the funeral rites of the dead hero are postponed by the capture of his head by an enemy, which prevents the funeral rites from taking place. Secondly, the hero has a son, who usually takes birth after his death. The son is then considered as a negative being, the one “who ate his father”, since the latter met death when he was entering life. To recover a normal, prestigious position, the son needs to substitute himself for his father and to accomplish in what he failed, that is, to kill his father’s enemy, an action which forms a *sine qua non* condition to bring back the father’s captured head. This substitution is fully developed and the child needs his father’s horse, dogs, clothes and sword, to succeed. His first difficulty is thus to be recognised as his father’s son, when his father cannot attest to it, in order to get his paraphernalia. Obviously, in contrast with the high-status individuals who scorn the orphan, as the son of a widow, or son of a bitch, his late father’s servicemen remain faithful even after their patron’s death. They are the ones who attest the boy’s descent by their sense of observation (“this boy looks like my master”) and by their intimate knowledge of their patron’s psychology (“this boys reacts or behaves like my dead patron”). Thus the integrity, identity and prestige of the Kshatriya lines are maintained by the bard and the other service men, rather than by their kinsmen or matrimonial allies. The family bard is also presented as the one who enables his master’s victory by teaching him the tricks of war. Interestingly enough, these tricks are often related to the hero’s identity as well. The bard hides the Kshatriya hero’s identity from his enemy when putting him in a basket, when dressing him up as a bard, or by throwing pepper in the enemies’ eyes. Thus, on the one hand, the bard restores the hero’s lost identity by recognising his descent through physiology or psychology and empowers him by giving him the ancestral weapons and attire. All this is kept secret and forms the cunning nature of the bard. It enables the scorned hero to recover his dead father’s severed head, perform his death ritual and thus restore the patriline as well as his own social position as its member.

Narrated as a prelude to this type of narrative, genealogy in Western Nepal is thus understandable only when placed in its traditional context of enunciation. Sung principally during the establishment of alliances, genealogy forms a kind of prelude to epics, whose contents highlight the whole of the performance of praise and the relation between the bard and his patron. In addition to the contents of the epics, the rituals of the Thakuri wedding reinforce the crucial position which is conferred on the bard by and for his royal patron. Indeed, the *āsikā*, a short form of genealogy, is first sung by the bard at the auspicious time called *lagan*, which is marked in this region by the first cut of scissors made by the

Damai on the fabrics which will be used for the wedding. It should be noted that the bards (or *huḍke*) belong to the Damai caste (tailors and musicians). Then, the bard opens the groom’s wedding procession and sings along the way. Mid-way, it is the family bard from the bride’s side who comes to meet and lead the allies, and when the procession reaches the bride’s courtyard, the groom’s bard once again sings his patron’s *āsikā*. After the wedding rituals, the bride’s family bard again accompanies the bride and groom in the procession up to the mid-way point, and when they reach the groom’s house, his *huḍke* sings the longer genealogy, *vaṃśāvalī*, and then resumes the epics.

The bard is thus a mediator, an intermediary between the different Kshatriya clans as well as their representative. Bound closely to one of them, he accompanies his patron, sings his praise, and most importantly his prestigious pedigree at the difficult times of the meeting with other Thakuris, with whom he is, by definition, in competition, at times of war in the past, during matrimonial alliances today.

The bardic séance may be viewed as ego-boosting therapy, during which the bard evokes the ancestors’ names and brave deeds of his patrons, which flatter their Ego so much that they pay for that. They even pay extra money when personally praised for their beauty, their majesty or their lofty function. The genealogy is part of this séance, since to be born into a prestigious and ancient family is certainly one of the most important features of the Kshatriya identity. In many ways, the bard seems to act as a psychoanalyst for the Kshatriyas, he knows who they are and the art of asserting it. But he also seems to be playing with their vulnerable patrons, who are never sure enough about who they are, and how great they are, in the same way that they portray themselves in a grotesque and miserable way to remind them how poor they remain in spite of their ancient loyal services. To pay is part of the Kshatriya’s grandeur, which is again conferred on them by the bard beggar.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The Nepali text is published in P.P. Nepal Yatri (1978: 300).
- <sup>2</sup> A claim on pasture rights dated 1870 recalls that they were received at the time of Malai Bam, 14<sup>th</sup> century (Naraharinath 1956: 346-49).
- <sup>3</sup> See M. Lecomte-Tilouine ed., forthcoming: *Bards and mediums in the Himalayan kingdoms*. (This collective volume explores the bardic and mediumic practices of the Central Himalayas. It is illustrated by several videos included in a DVD Rom).❖