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Space, territory, and a stupa in Eastern Nepal: Exploring Himalayan themes and traces of Bon

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Introduction

Recent research has adduced growing evidence for a distinct stratum of cultural practices that underlies various 'tribal' traditions in the Himalayan region and that also seems to be characteristic of various local versions of the Bon tradition. Bon literature is not uncommonly embedded in cultural patterns that are more specifically Himalayan than belonging to the greater South Asian heritage. Two aspects of this that have received attention in Ramble's (1997) study of a Bon guide to the sacred Kong-po mountain (rKong-po bon- ri) are the symbolism of wild boar hunting involved in marriage rituals and poison cults with their corresponding beliefs about poisoning. Another pattern of cultural organization that may help better understand the Bon tradition against its Himalayan background is spatial conceptualization.

The comparative analysis of indigenous conceptualizations of space, as manifested by both linguistic and nonlinguistic forms and practices, suggests that there are two basic traditions in the Himalayan region, often superimposed onto each other or blended together in various ways (Bickel and Gaenszle 1999). One type of space construction rests on the Indic *maṇḍala* tradition but ultimately reflects the ancient Indo-European equation of the cardinal directions with a bodily space defined by left and right and front and back (e.g. Skt. *uttara* 'north, left, up', *dakṣiṇa* 'south, right', *pūrva* 'east, in front, before', and *paśca* 'behind, later, western'; Old Irish *tuath* 'left, north, malign', *dess* 'right, south, convenient'; Hertz 1909, Brown 1983, Gaborieau 1993, Bickel 1994). The body-based notion of space brings with it an up/down trajectory as well as an inside/outside distinction (Bickel, in press-b) — notions that are also core aspects of the *maṇḍala*. An essential characteristic of the *maṇḍalaic* conceptualization is that the concept of space is in itself detached from the local environment, but can be projected onto the environment, indeed onto any environment. This is different from spatial concepts that dominate language and cultural practice in much of the Tibeto-Burman world of the Himalayas. Here, space is INTRINSICALLY linked to the local landscape, taking as its base the up and down of hills and mountains. Rituals, shamanic journeys, and mythology emphasize these directions and bring with them a strong

sense of local territories (Gaenszle 1994, Forbes 1998, Höfer 1999, Oppitz 1999, among others). Similarly, spatial language rests on constant attention to uphill and downhill trajectories, and is thus firmly anchored in local realities (Allen 1972, Rai 1988, Bickel 1997, Ebert 1999, among others). Notice that under this conceptualization, notions of UP and DOWN follow the actual inclinations of hills and mountains. They are fundamentally GEO-MORPHIC notions and are only secondarily applied to the vertical axis as defined by the canonical upright position of the human body. This is different from the body-based notions of 'up' and 'down' that underlie the *maṇḍala*ic conceptualization of space.

Another core ingredient of many Tibeto-Burman traditions is the emphasis on sacred landmarks at important geographical points, such as river confluences, selected hilltops, passes or specific mountains. Examples of this are the religious and political powers associated with mountain deities and other *yul lha*s in Tibet (cf. Karmay and Sagant 1987, Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996, Blondeau 1998, among others), but similar notions also prevail in the Nepalese Himalayas (cf. e.g. Sagant 1981 on the Limbu, or Höfer 1972, 1999 on the Tamang). Interestingly, such notions retain their significance in these areas when *maṇḍala*ic space is superimposed on local perceptions. The *maṇḍala* thereby loses some of its abstract geometric nature and becomes part of a territory, and vice-versa, the landscape gets detached from its raw reality and is regimented into an ideal order (Ramble 1995, 1997; Oppitz 1999). Typically, such territorial *maṇḍala*s are centered on sacred mountains, such as the Bon mountain of Kong-po.

In this essay, I want to focus on another such sacred landmark and the ways in which this landmark defines and structures space both as a territory and as a mental order. I will be concerned with a hill marked by a stupa in the foothills of the Himalayas in Eastern Nepal. The stupa is located on the Belhara (Nep. *Belahārā*[1]) hill (87° 18' E, 26° 57' N; ca. 1150m above sea-level), to the immediate west of Dhankuta (Nep. *Dhanakuṭā*) bazaar in the Kośī zone of Nepal. This area is geographically rather distant from Tibet, but there appears to be some testimony of shared Himalayan themes, and these themes may be of help in better understanding Bon traditions in their local contexts. Moreover, the stupa in Belhara is of particular interest to Bon studies because there is preliminary evidence that it is linked to other traditions involving stupas, especially those of Bon affiliation. However, there is no historical material that I know of, and any assessment of the significance of the stupa in a comparative perspective must be very tentative. At any rate, the stupa is unique in its local Nepalese context; I have indeed neither seen nor heard of anything similar in the region. There are of course numerous Buddhist stupas and Hindu temples, but the stupa I will be concerned with is neither Buddhist nor Hindu.

1. The stupa in Belhara

While the stupa is not literally placed on the highest peak of the Belhara hill, it marks what may be called the 'social top' — or 'center' — of the hill. The stupa is placed on the ridge at a place where the trails of the hill come together and where a small hamlet, with tea stalls, a school, and administrative offices, defines the traditional center of social activity on the Belhara hill. The stupa is enclosed in a concrete square building with a tin roof, which is said to have been added only about fifteen years ago, with funds from the Nepalese government. The enclosure of the stupa makes it difficult to photograph, but Plate 1 may give a sense of its structure (The picture was taken through a barred window; the dark shading of the stupa reflects the shadow of a window bar).

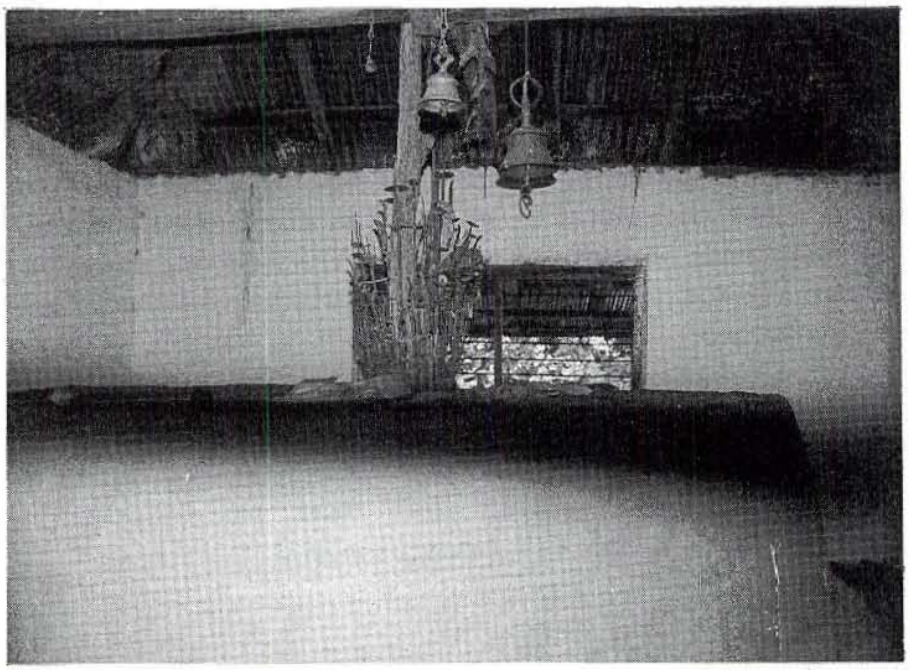

Plate 1 The Stupa in Belhara (photographed by B. Bickel, 1998)

The stupa is about 1.5m high, divided by a step in the middle, and has a diameter of about 2m. At its center is a wooden pole, which apparently takes up the same theme as what is called the *srog shing* 'life-tree' in Tibetan stupas. In Belhara this pole has a value comparable to the ritually important central pillar in local homes, which divides the house into a religiously 'pure' back part and a more public front side. On the stupa, the pole is surrounded by numerous tridents and umbrellas, decorated by small strips of white and red cloth (Belh. < Nep. *dhajo*). From the roof, bells hang down that the priest rings during rituals. On the platform, one usually finds incense and *dubo* grass (*Cynodon Dactylon*) left from rituals. All these elements, except the *dhajo*, are also present in the drawing reproduced in

Plate 2, but additionally the drawing includes the representation of two stones which are said to be inside the stupa. Consultants claim that these stones are engraved with depictions of Mura, the goddess or ancestral founder (Belh. *maŋ*) to whom the stupa is dedicated (see below). The drawing in Plate 2 was created by the priest associated with the stupa. It was intended as a model for the production of a stamp that was used to give away certificates to people who sponsored renovation work at the stupa.

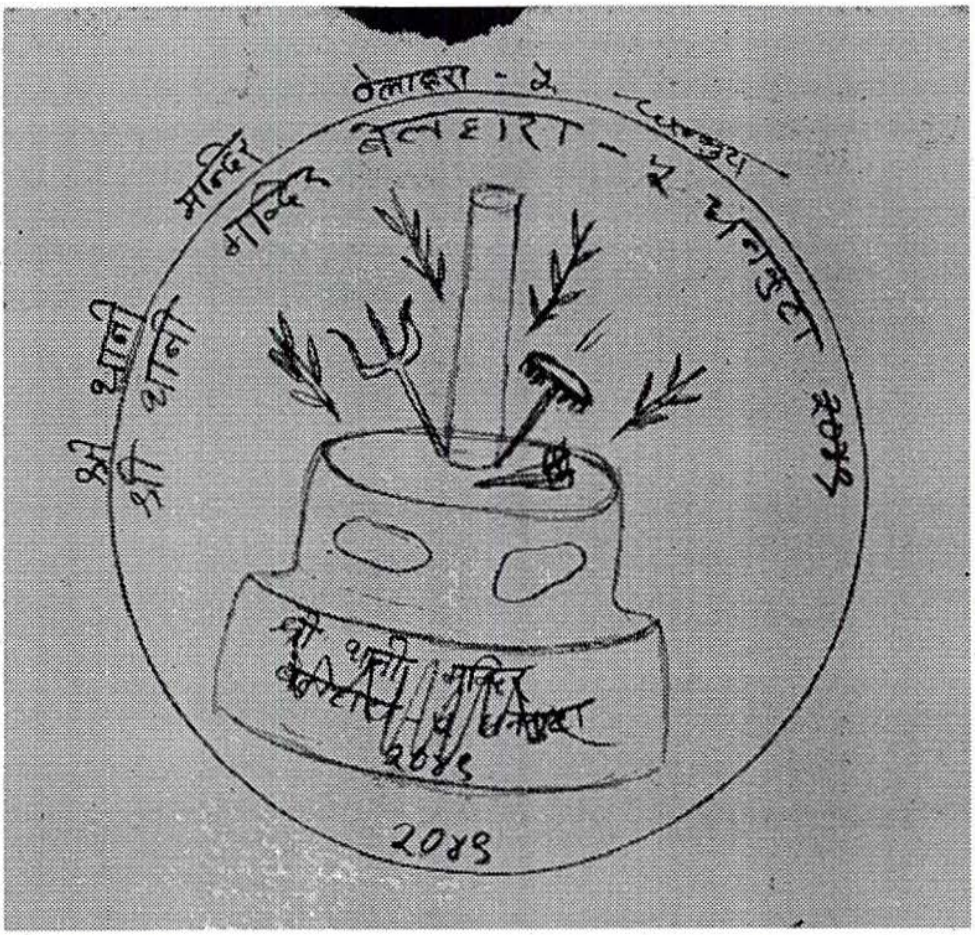

Plate 2 Sketch of the Stupa in Belhara (I. Rāī, 1993)

I am using the term 'stupa' here because of the shape and structure of the building. The building is different from a classical stupa, however, in that it does not contain to my knowledge any relics — unless one interprets the stones with their alleged engravings as local versions of such relics, and indeed effigies like this are a conventional part of stupa reliquaries. In native terms, the stupa is referred to as a 'temple', using the Nepali words *mandir* 'temple' or *thānī* 'place of worship' (cf. the caption in the drawing in Plate 2: *śri thānī mandir Belahārā - 5 Dhanakuṭā 2049*). This is reminiscent of what Denwood (1980) reports about Bon stupas. Drawing mostly on the *gZi brjid*, Denwood notes a certain terminological conflation of stupas (Tib. *mchod rten*) with temples and other places of worship

(*gsas khaṅg*, *mchod gnas* in Bonpo texts). Further, the literary evidence examined by Denwood suggests that the Bon sometimes loosen the original notion of the stupa as a reliquary, developing instead a more general notion of religious edifice. From this point of view, the native vocabulary used for the building in Belhara should not necessarily be taken at face value in interpreting the nature of this building in a comparative perspective. In any event, the building clearly appears to be a locally adapted form of a larger stupa tradition.

Another way in which the 'temple' in Belhara is reminiscent of a stupa is that it is regularly circumambulated in rituals of the Athpare, the indigenous Kiranti (Tibeto-Burman) population of the hill. Much to the surprise of Hindu and Buddhist visitors, Athpare circumambulation is, however, counterclockwise (Belh. *cuptaŋ-lamma* 'via the right side'). Counterclockwise circumambulations are performed even on auspicious occasions such as marriages. The marriage procession (which is by itself strongly influenced by the pan-Nepalese Hindu style) goes from the bride's home via the stupa to the groom's house. The bride's and groom's houses too are circumambulated in a counterclockwise direction. In various home-related *pūjās*, the central pillar of the house is also circumambulated, again counterclockwise. The same direction is observed in dances during the communal festival of Waraŋmet that takes place every year in the month of Kārtik and that is dedicated to the three most important deities of Belhara: Marga, Mura, and Bokrohaŋ (which I will discuss below). On this occasion, the youth form a large circle that slowly turns in counterclockwise direction, following the rhythm of drums. The counterclockwise direction is of course strongly reminiscent of the Bon practice, and it is tempting to see in this a link between the stupa in Belhara and the Bon tradition. However, we also have to reckon with the possibility that the directional choice in Belhara is an independent development, functioning as a mark of distinction (in Bourdieu's 1979 sense). In a similar vein, other details of ritual practice, such as the exact number of calabashes (Belh. *uhop*) used on a sacrificial altar, are an important vehicle for carrying marks of distinction between clans in Belhara. That the same logic applies to the direction of circumambulation is certainly possible. What makes this interpretation less likely, however, is the fact that in all neighboring communities, the counterclockwise direction is inauspicious. This is not only the case in Hindu and Buddhist practice but also reflects what is known about other Kiranti societies, e.g. the Kulung (McDougal 1979:65) or the Lohorung (Hardman n.d.:344f). Against this background, the counterclockwise direction is unlikely to reflect a choice of limited local significance. The directional choice rather seems to continue a tradition of wider scope, where it could develop its own auspicious meaning — a meaning that goes, as it does for the Bon, beyond simple distinctiveness or opposition.

Functionally, the Belhare building clearly serves as a temple. Squatting on the platform, a specialized priest performs various *pūjās* there, including sacrifices of pigeons and small chickens. Some of these *pūjās* are part of a ritual cycle, such as

planting and harvest *pūjās*. Others are performed 'on-demand', e.g. for marriages, for people who seek help against some illness or on behalf of travelers who pass through Belhara (an observation I will come back to later).

The symbolism found on and in the stupa reflects the fact that the stupa serves not only the Athpare but also others, including Indo-Aryan Hindus. The tridents and umbrellas are said to have been added for the benefit of the Hindus. The other symbolism, especially the stones with the alleged engravings of goddess Mura, reflects the stupa's main function which is firmly grounded in the indigenous Athpare tradition. Note that no one has ever actually seen the stones inside the stupa. This clearly sides with the rule that no one is ever allowed to see Mura (Belh. *hitma nnuiʔni* 'she must not be seen') and that Mura would never show us her face (*unabhak kapiuʔni* 'she does not give us her face'). Reference to these stones combines with an invocation of the ritually important *dubo*-grass in the collocation *dubo ḍhuṅgā* (< Nep.) that is often used in prayers, ritual speech, the *mundhum* ('myth, ritual codex'), and shamanic chants.

2. Territorial notions and the mythological context of the stupa

As mentioned before, the stupa in Belhara is located on the ridge of the hill, where it marks the social center of the hill, and thereby of the territory of its inhabitants. The indigenous population of this territory is a group of Athpares who entertain extensive relations with the Athpare from Dhankuta, but who form a socially and linguistically distinct group (cf. Dahal 1985). Following Hanßon (1991), I refer to the group in Belhara, and to their language, by the loconym *Belhare*, but I will continue to use the term Athpare when the distinction between the groups is not at issue. Evidence that the stupa has territorial significance comes from two sources. First, while non-Athpares (mostly Hindus and Buddhists) call the stupa simply *thānī* or *mandir* (cf. above), the Athpares commonly refer to it as *Jimthān*, an expression that includes the Nepali word *jimī* 'land, ground'. The other, more compelling evidence derives from the mythology that is associated with Mura, the goddess or ancestor to whom the stupa is dedicated.

Mura is the younger sister of Marga, the most venerated god of the Athpares in Dhankuta (cf. Dahal 1985:107). A popular and often narrated myth explains why Mura is in Belhara but Marga in Dhankuta (Bickel 1999):

> One day, Mura was going up north to the Himalayas. Midway, she meets her elder brother Marga who tells her that there is no need to go further north. Rather, she should go to Belhara and take hold of land there. Marga and Mura came back down to Sanne (a place on the northwestern fringe of Dhankuta), from where Marga sent his younger sister over to Belhara. In Belhara, everything belonged to Bokrohaŋ, also called *Cār-Killa Rājā-Rānī* 'Royal Fortress of Four Borders'.

> Bokrohaŋ, however, did not allow Mura to take hold of the land. And so Mura went back to her brother who sent her over again, telling her that she should only ask 'to make one step', and then do another one and yet another one. The Royal Fortress of Four Borders agreed to one step, but Mura went on to make two more steps, thereby snatching away three parts of the land. Mura thus became *Tin-Killa* 'the Fortress of Three Borders' and left for Bokrohaŋ, though still called *Cār-Killa* 'the Fortress of Four Borders', only one single part of the land.

The procedure of taking hold of land is referred to in the text by Belh. *ripma* 'to stand on, make a step on', a commonly used metaphor for taking possession. The metaphor is further developed by distinguishing between 'making one step' (Belh. *ek paila ripma*), thereby taking one part in possession, and 'making another step' (Belh. *arko ek paila ripma*), thereby taking possession of yet another part. The 'parts' are referred to as *killa*, a Nepali term which generally refers to a fortress or any 'place surrounded by a protecting fence in four [*sic!*] directions serving as a powerful guard' (Pokharel *et al.* 2040, *s.v.*). The term also occurs in set expressions like *cār killa khulāunu,* literally 'to open the boundaries', which denotes the act of registering land in the governmental land-register after a transaction (Yogendra P. Yādava, personal communication). Both elements of meaning, the fortress and the territorial boundary, seem to occur in the use of the expression in the text. At one and the same time, Cār-Killa is a symbol of the complete possession — in all four directions — and of the guardian of these possessions with royal (Belh. < Nep. *rājā-rānī* 'king and queen') power. Cār-Killa is moreover personified as *Bokrohaŋ,* the ancestral king/owner (Belh. *haŋ*), who is defeated by Mura. (Occasionally, however, Cār-Killa is also identified as the elder brother of Mura, which would suggest a triad Marga – Bokrohaŋ – Mura). The stupa devoted to Mura symbolizes this 'conquest' and people say that Mura 'keeps' or 'employs' (Belh. both *yuŋtu*) the Jimthān in order to protect the land. Mura thus appears as a territorial deity, and this fits with the fact that the Belhare often use *Tin-Killa* as an epithet of both the goddess and the stupa.

From this it appears that the stupa signals a territorial claim: with its mythological connotations the stupa 'engraves' cultural ideas into the landscape and as a building it establishes a distinctly Belhare 'point of relevance' (to borrow a term of Höfer's, 1999). The stupa is also a SACRED symbol: as a rule, only a Belhare who is faithful to a series of traditional demands on household purity (see Bickel 1999), is ever allowed to touch the stupa or even to enter the building that is erected around it[2]. The immediate surroundings of the stupa are also sacred. When a Chetri immigrant recently wanted to build a tea-stall on his own land near the stupa, the Belhare Athpares immediately expressed the fear that the stupa may become impure (Belh. < Nep. *juṭho*) and registered a violent protest. Eventually, the construction work was abandoned.

The territorial claim symbolized by Mura's stupa and the sacred place attached to it is strongly reminiscent of a *yul lha* in Bon and other Tibetan traditions (e.g. Karmay and Sagant 1987, Karmay 1996). First of all, the mythology of Mura recalls the common Tibetan theme of a territorial conquest that establishes a place as sacred and as the abode of a *yul lha* (or, for that matter, a *gzhi bdag*) (e.g. Ramble 1996). Also like a *yul lha*, Mura has an elaborate entourage (Belh. < Nep. *aghuvā-pachuvā*) of lesser deities localized in the jungle north and south of the stupa. Another aspect of Mura that is reminiscent of a *yul lha,* or at least some regional varieties of *yul lha*s, is that she is referred to in Belhare by a term that encompasses not only 'deity' but also 'ancestor' (*maŋ*). As an ancestor, Mura has family relations like humans and her genealogy forms a relevant point of orientation for structures of the current society — properties that are often also important for Tibetan *yul lha*s (Karmay 1996). Belhare society is divided into three groups of patrilineal descent lines (Belh. *kuria*) that each associate themselves with Mura, Marga or Bokrohaŋ, respectively, as their primordial ancestors (which are distinct from the more immediate clan-ancestors that define exogamous descent lines, Belh. *pacha*). The three groups are organized around dedicated 'god/ancestor-houses', Belh. *maŋ-khim*: Mura is associated with a single *maŋ-khim* that dominates about thirty *kuria*s. Bokrohaŋ's group is divided among four *maŋ-khim*s, each with 5 – 10 *kuria*s. Marga, finally, has only one *maŋ-khim* in Belhara which also functions as its own *kuria* (but Marga has more *maŋ-khim*s in Dhankuta).

While a close relationship between ancestral and territorial notions is a general theme of Kiranti societies, these notions are not usually linked in these societies, as they are in Belhara, to places that are PERMANENTLY sacred and marked as such by stupas or other religious buildings (cf. Ramble 1996, Forbes 1998). This seems to be more a Tibetan theme, and may be taken as another indication of a specific relationship between Belhare and Tibetan traditions.

3. Relations of the Belhare stupa to other places

The Belhare stupa is deeply anchored in the Athpare tradition. This does not prevent it from being of service, as noted before, to people of other religious or social affiliation, e.g. Hindus, Kirantis of non-Athpare affiliation, Tamangs, Magars, etc. This is particularly important in connection with the popular Chintaṅ devī temple located a three to four hour walk west of Belhara. The *pūjārī* of this temple is a Kiranti ('Rai'), but the temple, which is built around a sacred tree, is attended by people of varied ethnic and religious backgrounds. Before traveling to the Chintaṅ devī temple from Dhankuta, the rule is that one passes through Belhara and sacrifices a pair of pigeons at the Jimthān stupa. The sacrifice itself is performed by the Athpare *pūjārī* on behalf of the visitor. During rituals, the priest

faces north, i.e., in the direction of the Himalayan mountain range. This direction is generally referred to as 'upward, uphill' (Belh. *tulleŋ*), which is a generally auspicious direction (cf. below). However, as the *pūjārī* reminded me, it is at the same time the direction of the first part of the trail leading to Chintaṅ.

The connection of the Belhare stupa to the Chintaṅ temple brings us to the wider context of the stupa and its mythological links to other religious places in the region. Through the myth referred to above, the stupa is linked to Marga and his temple in Dhankuta, which is centered on a small rectangular platform decorated with small tridents, umbrellas and bells. There is another important place to which the Athpare, especially the Athpares from Belhara, relate themselves through mythological constructions, and this is Tibet. In a myth of origin, the first three humans are said to be a Brahmin (Belh. < Nep. *bāhun*), a Blacksmith (*kāmī*) and a Tibetan (*bhoṭe*), living on an earth that was only water and rock.

> They were fed by a cow who was their mother. When the cow had died, they divided her body into three and gave one part to the Brahmin, one to the Blacksmith and one to the Tibetan. The Brahmin and the Blacksmith, however, tricked the Tibetan into eating his share: hiding their own shares, they told the Tibetan that they had already eaten and that he should go ahead and eat his share. Realizing that he had been tricked into committing a great sin, the Tibetan got angry and threw the cow's gut onto the Brahmin, on whose chest it got firmly stuck. Onto the Blacksmith he threw the cow's skin and it too would not go off again. They went to ask a *munī* for help, and this *munī* declared the gut as the Brahmin's sacred thread (Belh. < Nep. *janaī*) and told the Blacksmith to make bellows from the skin and to begin his business with it. The Tibetan, however, was sent to the Himalayas and was ordered to found a monastery (Belh. < Nep. *gumbā* < Tib. *dgon pa*) from which he was to create many branches (and in one version of the myth, all the castes of mankind). Some of these branches were the Rai, including the Athpare, who brought with them a yak tail (which is still used for fanning incense when a shaman is possessed by Mura).

The first episode in this myth recalls the pan-Himalayan theme of a 'creative dismemberment' (MacDonald 1980), whereby the parts of an animal body are linked to social groups and symbolize their distinction (cf. Sagant 1981, Karmay and Sagant 1987, Diemberger and Hazod 1997, Oppitz 1997, etc.). The second episode, in which the Tibetan is tricked into a sin, has parallels in Tamang (see MacDonald 1980, citing Höfer in personal communication) and Mewahang Rai (Martin Gaenszle, personal communication) mythology. What is of particular interest in our current context, however, is the last episode, where the Athpare associate themselves with a Tibetan monastic tradition. Three explanations suggest themselves, but it would be premature to attempt a choice between them.

First, the myth could be a post-hoc rationalization of the stupa as an artifact that has more counterparts in Tibet than in the lower foothills of Eastern Nepal. The Jimthān would then appear as a product of Tibetan origin, but this origin would be a secondary attribution without historical motivation. Such an explanation of the myth would fit with the fact that the location of the monastery is extremely vague: it is simply in the *Himāl*. The myth is remarkably more precise in details that are independent of geography. For instance, the Tibetan is said to put bamboo poles in the four directions (Belh. < Nep. *cārai sur liṅgo*) at the monastery. Such a construction, decorated with red and white *dhajo*s, is exactly what one finds next to the Belhara stupa at a place where the priest performs additional prayers after the ones on the stupa itself.

Second, the myth could indeed reflect an actual historical link, attesting to original ethnic unity, population shift or missionary activities (or any combination of these). The Belhare had regular commercial relationships with Tibetans, who were the main suppliers of salt in the region before the Tarai belt was cleared of malaria in the 1960's and 1970's. If there is a historical connection between the Athpares and Tibet, it is likely to be with non-Buddhist Tibetan traditions. As shown by Allen (1980), there is evidence from comparative mythology in Eastern Nepal that "Tibetan influence has spread further south than Tibetan Buddhism" (Allen 1980: 6). In the case of Belhara, this Tibetan influence is most likely to specifically reflect Bon heritage, since this would explain the counterclockwise direction in circumambulations. Possible support for such an assumption comes from the name of the stupa's goddess/ancestor, *Mura*. It is plausible (but not certain) that this corresponds to *dMu-ra* or *Mu-ra*, a name of Lord gShen-rab(s) in the Zhang-zhung of the *mDzod phug* and other Bon-po texts (Dan Martin and Henk Blezer, personal communication). Also note that the first syllable of this name, *dMu*, is the name of gShen-rab's lineage (see Dondrup Lhagyal, this volume). This onomastic construction would fit with the fact noted above that the Belhare *maŋ* too is a lineage ancestor. If the similarity between Belh. *Mura* and Zh. *(d)Mu-ra* is indeed non-accidental, the Belhare stupa would reflect an original Bon foundation, which was heavily overlaid, however, by local traditions in the course of time. Pointing against such an onomastic interpretation is the fact that in Belhare the word *mura* also denotes 'grandmother', a title which could easily be given to an ancestral deity. However, consultants do not all agree in equating the goddess's name with the word for 'grandmother', and it possible that the words were conflated later and only partially.

A third explanation is based on the observation that there is a general tendency among Nepalese groups to claim various relationships with important religious sites in the region. Indeed, Tibet, or more specifically Lhasa, frequently occurs in local mythologies in one way or another. In various Kiranti mythologies, for instance, one of the ancestors travels to Tibet, marries a Tibetan girl and then comes back south again and settles at the current location. This is contrasted with

the rest of the group, which is said to have come from Khāśī (or *Kãsi*), i.e. from Banares (Gaenszle 1991:126f, Forbes 1998). In a similar vein, the Athpare also claim, apart from Tibet, an affiliation with Khāśī: Goddess Mura is said to originate ultimately from there and to have traveled to Belhara and Dhankuta via the Sapta Kośī gorge and, more importantly, via the famous Hindu temples of Bāraha Kṣetra near the Sapta Kośī confluence. The choice of precisely these locations is no doubt governed by their religious importance, but this is not to say of course that the Tibetan and Indian regions as such are irrelevant in historical terms.

The mythological itinerary of Mura is reflected by a *cautār* 'resting place' dedicated to her on the way up from the Tamur river (one of the tributaries of the Sapta Kośī) to Belhara. Also, when Mura expresses herself through a shaman (on which see below), she starts with a big sigh, which is compared by consultants to the sigh one makes after having climbed up a steep hill. Although an in-depth analysis of these chants is pending, it seems that this detail reflects the mythological itinerary up from the Gangetic plains to Belhara. On the other hand, a shaman possessed by Mura also produces sounds which are perceived as being in Tibetan and as coming from Tibetan deities/ancestors (Belh. *Bhote maŋchi*) that accompany Mura.

This last scenario would again fit with the Tibetan link. This link would not be necessarily historical, however. It would first and foremost reflect the perceived religious and economic relevance of Tibet and would place Belhara in a network of important places. Another place in this network is Dolakha (Nep. *Dolakhā*), which is sometimes mentioned (especially by Athpares from Dhankuta) as the place of Athpare origin. Dolakha is a Newar town east of Kathmandu and is particularly famous for its Bhīmsen temple. Interestingly, the Bhīmsen temple in Dolakha is regarded by the Eastern Tamang as a territorial deity (Tam. *sibda*, Tib. *gzhi bdag*) (Tautscher 1998). This could point to a specific relationship to Mura or Marga, but sofar I have not come across independent evidence for such a connection.

Dolakha is sometimes referred to as *Nepāla Dolakhā*. This integrates the place in the wider region of the Kathmandu Valley, which is traditionally called *Nepāl* (a term that acquired its current, wider sense only during the last few decades). The Kathmandu Valley has an additional significance for the Athpare insofar as they claim that in former times they would travel there as pilgrims, a practice which apparently has been discontinued.

4. Politics of the stupa

Let us now turn to more recent issues involving the stupa. Earlier we noted that the stupa has a certain territorial significance. This also transpires in modern politics and this combination of religious and political dimensions of the local

geography again reflects a Himalayan, and especially Bon theme (e.g. Karmay and Sagant 1987, Karmay 1996). In recent years some Belhares have started to challenge the authority of the current priest at the Jimthān. They object to his way of caring for the stupa and performing the rituals, and in general accuse him of violating traditional rules. A second series of similar objections is aimed at the *maŋ-khim* that is associated to Mura and where Mura is expected to be able to possess a (female) shaman (Belh. *maŋtaŋma*). Many people claim that Mura has not expressed herself through a shaman there for more than 70 years, although the *pūjārī* of the *maŋ-khim* claims the opposite. This conflict became acute some five years ago when a *maŋtāŋma* in Sāṇṭāṅg, a hamlet near Dhankuta, started to be possessed by Mura. Mura expressed herself in Belhare rather than in the language of the Athpare of Dhankuta that is spoken in Sāṇṭāṅg, and this authenticated her identity. Mura's appearance in Sāṇṭāṅg would suggest, as many Belhare people now believe, that the *maŋ* left her place in Belhara and went back to her paternal home in Dhankuta (Belh. < Nep. *māitī*), just as a wife would return to her *māitī* if she is treated badly at home. The conflicts surrounding Mura and the perceived danger of impurity led a group of Belhare traditionalists to erect a new stupa in 1997. A photograph of the new stupa is reproduced in Plate 3. Unlike the old one, the new stupa is not protected by an entire building but only by a thatched roof.

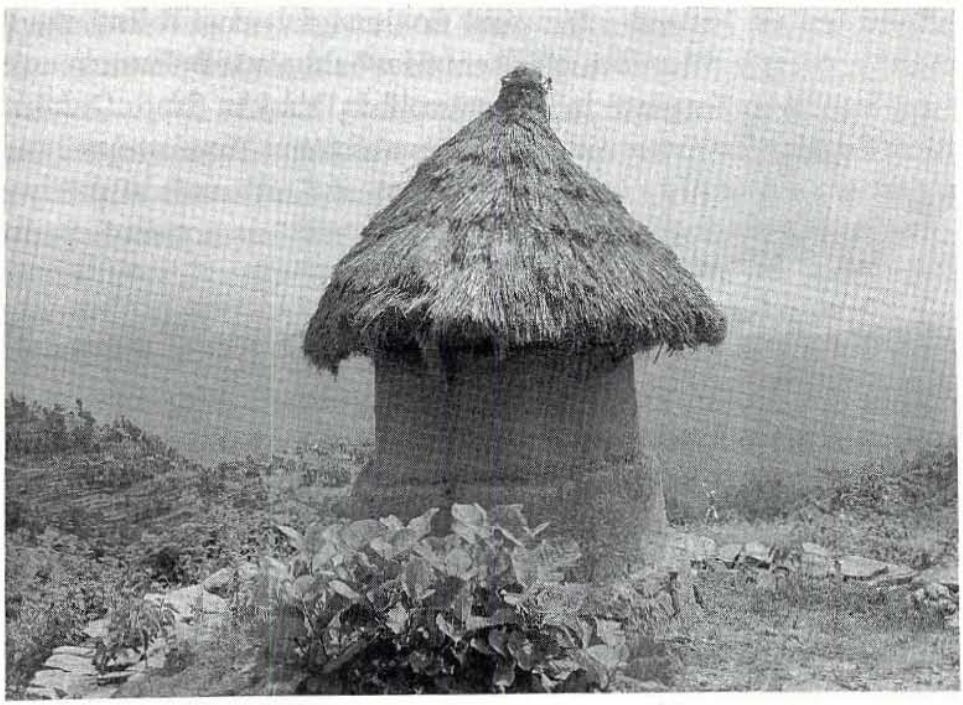

Plate 3 The New Stupa (Photographed by B. Bickel, 1998)

The new stupa is located two thirds of the way up on the western hillside. The choice of this location seems to be anything but arbitrary: the western hill-side is turned away from the Dharan (Nep. *Dharān*) – Dhankuta road and therefore seems

to be better protected from urban influence. Moreover, the old place on the hilltop is more and more occupied by non-Athpare immigrants (mostly Hindu Indo-Aryans), and this sometimes results, as mentioned earlier, in problems of purity. Another reason for the choice of location is that it is near Mura's *cautār* 'resting place' referred to before. From this point of view, the place is already sacred and 'belongs' to Mura.

Re-erecting the Belhare stupa at a new place does not break with tradition and is not unheard of. Indeed, just about 150m south of the Jimthān on the ridge are the ruins of an earlier stupa. People assert that this stupa is no longer 'active' because its last priest died without children. (Jimthān priesthood follows a patrilineal rule of descent.) In contrast to the move from the old to the current Jimthān location, however, the more recent erection of a new stupa entails a radical shift. It is as if this shift symbolizes the fact that the hilltop is no longer the center of the BELHARE world, but rather the center of a multiethnic community in which the Belhare become less and less dominant. Indeed, in the small village on the Belhara ridge, the indigenous Belhare population is no longer the majority.

5. The stupa in its spatial context: issues of language and conceptualizaton

From the preceding it becomes clear that the specific location of the stupas in Belhara is highly significant in both religious and political ways. There is yet another way in which the location of the stupas is important, and this is the type of spatial conceptualization that underlies the form of many cultural practices as well as of language use in Belhare society (Bickel 1997, 1999). The location of the old stupa on the hilltop, and the location of the new one downhill, emphasizes the same UPHILL – DOWNHILL trajectory that is fundamental for a plethora of cultural practices from weaving to house-building. Weaving mats, for instance, needs to be done in an uphill way — the downhill way is reserved for mats that will be used for a dead person. When building a house, the hearth needs to be placed in an uphill corner. 'Uphill' can either mean pointing to the local Belhara hilltop or, in a more global sense, to the Himalayan mountain ridge. In language, reference to objects and places is usually framed in terms of the same UPHILL – DOWNHILL trajectory. There is a complex grammatical system, extensively discussed in Bickel (1997 and in press-a), that allows one to differentiate between these trajectories in numerous parts of speech from demonstratives to case desinences and verbal derivations. Even an expression as semantically light as an interjection that draws attention to a place is necessarily specific as to whether the place is 'up' (*tu!*), 'down' (*mu!*) or neither, i.e., 'across, on the same level' (*yu!*).

While in English and other languages, we use the terms for 'left' and 'right' or 'front' and 'back', e.g. when referring to locations on a small scale in front of us,

Belhare speakers prefer terms that make an UP – DOWN – ACROSS distinction. Distinguishing a glass on a table from another glass, for example, one is more likely to use a term like *tona* 'the uphill one' or *mona* 'the downhill one' in Belhare, rather than, say, *cuptaŋŋetna* 'the one to the right' or *pheŋsaŋŋetna* 'the one to the left'. The terms *tona* and *mona* refer to places on trajectories that ultimately lead up and down, respectively, on the hill or the Himalayan range as a whole. The terms can also refer to the vertical axis but this is by no means their most common or 'core' meaning. In this regard the Belhare system again contrasts with the English and similar system, which are based on the body. The Belhare system does not rely on the experience of the body coordinates, including the vertical axis, but rather on the practical experience of the local hill and the regional topography.

Notice that this is by no means a 'natural' consequence of living in a hilly environment; it is a profoundly CULTURAL choice. The Swiss Alps are equally mountainous as the habitat of the Belhare, yet spatial conceptualization in Swiss German is firmly rooted in the body model. Indeed, the body model is even projected onto the environment, and valleys for instance, are assigned a front (where the valley opens up) and a back (where the source of streams in the valley is); 'up' and 'down' are not usually applied, as they are in Belhare, to this distinction, but are reserved for steep terraces dividing the valley and for the valley's side slopes. In line with having a front and a back, valleys also have a left and a right side as well as an inside and an outside (see Bickel, in press-b). This conceptualization is utterly odd from a Belhare point of view. The Swiss German model reflects an entirely distinct way of conceptualizing space, more reminiscent of the ancient Indo-European conception mentioned in the introduction. The Belhare type of spatial conceptualization, by contrast, fits into a general pattern that is characteristic of numerous Tibeto-Burman societies, especially those in the Himalayas.

This brings us back to where we started. There appears to be a style of spatial conceptualization that attests to a specifically Himalayan tradition. Spatial thought in this tradition is strictly tied to local territories and terrains and is often structured by sacred places. All these properties are also characteristic of spatial conceptualization in Belhare. The single most important sacred place in Belhara is marked by a stupa, or from a diachronic perspective, by a sequence of such stupas. This place structures the territory of the Belhare by providing its center. At the same time, its location emphasizes, recalls and enlivens the UPHILL - DOWNHILL trajectories that are characteristic of numerous cultural practices and fundamental for referential language.

Conclusions

Walking around on the Belhare hill is as much a cultural as a physical experience. Mura's stupa on the hilltop, the *cautār* on which Mura is said to have rested when climbing up from the South, the *maŋ-khim*s associated with Mura, Bokrohaŋ, and Marga, Mura's entourage of lesser deities north and south of her stupa – all these places are part of this experience. They are Athpare points of relevance and engrave religious and cultural ideas into the landscape. In line with this, these points serve as prominent landmarks when Athpares give directions in everyday conversation[3]. This contrasts with linguistic practice among non-Athpares who are less likely to use these locations as landmarks.

The stupa in Belhara and its deity are permanent symbols of the Athpare territory. In this regard, they are more similar, as we saw, to what one finds in Tibet's sacred geography than to what is common practice among the Kiranti family of ethnic groups to which the Athpare belong linguistically. The fact that the stupa is circumambulated counterclockwise, that its associated deity/ancestor, Mura, appears to recall gShen-rab's Zhang-zhung name dMu-ra, and that the Athpare are mythologically related to a monastic tradition in Tibet raises the question whether these similarities attest to a more specific relationship between the Belhare stupa and Bon. Is the stupa a Bon foundation that was overlaid by local traditions? Or does the stupa and its cultural context reflect a common theme that underlies both the Bon and the Belhare tradition? Or is the link to Tibet a secondary attribution that has nothing to do with actual history? Given our present state of knowledge of the history of Eastern Nepal, we must leave the answer to these questions to future research.

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Notes

1) The spelling *-hārā* is uncommon in Nepalese toponyms, but reflects a folk etymology that links the name to Nep. *hārnu* 'to lose, be defeated'. This alludes to the lost of the territory that plays a role in the local mythology reported below.
2) This is a pattern that is replicated through all the houses that contain the tutelary deities of a family: non-Athpares (Belh. *maʔi-chum* 'people's group'), or Athpares that have violated the rules of purity, are prohibited from entering these houses unless a specific purification ritual has been performed.

3) This follows a widespread if not universal pattern of language use; cf. Schegloff's (1972) classic study of English.

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