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The Voices from Chitwan: Some Examples of the Tharus' Oral Tradition

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The oral tradition of scriptless communities helps us to understand much about their history, livelihood strategies, evaluation of the natural environment and last but not least, their culture. The following stories were collected during my fieldwork in Chitwan on knowledge, evaluation and utilization of the natural environment in Chitwan (Müller-Böker 1999). They illustrate the notions Tharus have about important aspects of their life.

History

The oral tradition and various religious rituals of the Tharus elucidate the history of Chitwan, about which little is known. It seems that up to the middle of the 20th century Chitwan was a peripheral territory whose inhabitants were so marginal both politically and economically that they were not explicitly mentioned in historical sources. The historical sources only say that before the unification of Nepal, in the pre-Gorkhali period, Chitwan belonged first to the territory of Palpa, a prominent kingdom in the group of the Chaubisi Raj, the "Twenty-four Kingdoms" (D.R. Regmi 1961:27). Palpa, which during the reign of Mukunda Sen I (1518-1553) is reputed to have been a still notable power (Stiller 1973:36f.), was divided up among his sons in 1553. The further course of history brought repeated territorial changes (Hamilton 1971 [1819]:131ff.; Stiller 1973:38f.). Chitwan fell to the principality of Tanahun, and later, at the end of the 18th century, parts of it, according to M.C. Regmi (1978:3), belonged to the kingdom of Makwanpur.

The song about Mukunda Sen (sung and narrated by Budhi Ram Mahato)

King Mukunda Sen worried about possible attacks against his kingdom by other kings. Bhoti Chaudhari, Ratan Bahidar and Bharat Kaptan – these three men, on the orders of the king, wrote letters to their countrymen in the entire kingdom. When the

people heard of this, so many of them set off that the country looked like it was fully covered in clouds. They bore weapons, spears and rifles. When the king saw this he grew terrified that they might kill him. But then the king marched together with his people to fight against the other kings. The marching of all these many men appeared like the fog in the month of Magh that darkens the whole ground. And the king marched with his own people to fight against the other kings.

The following stanzas tell that Mukunda Sen reached Kathmandu after engaging in battles with various kings. From Kathmandu he headed on to Chitwan. Along the way he spent one night each in Thankot and Bhimphe; then he reached Bharatpur and bade his army disperse.¹

This song, while telling of how King Mukunda Sen and his people fought against other kings, makes plain reference to the Sen kings. Sen kings are also revered by the Tharus as local tutelary deities. Various shrines are dedicated to them,² and they are invoked along with other gods in the village *baram puja*.³ The following story describes their integration into the locale:

The story about the four sons of Mukunda Sen (narrated by Adhi Ram Mahato)

The four sons of Mukunda Sen came to the Tharus and saw what great spiritual abilities they possessed. They reported this to their parents and expressed the wish to acquire spiritual abilities for themselves.

¹Kathmandu Valley (but not Palpa) chronicles mention Mukunda Sen, as the ruler of Palpa, attacking Patan with a large army of Magars (D.R. Regmi, 1961:27).

²Mukunda Sen Raj: in Belawa; Chitra Sen Raj: in Chitrasari along the river (Budhi Rapti); Jaspal and Budh Sen Raj: in Mohana on irrigated and dry fields; Gumpal Sen: in Baghmara.

³*Baram* = tutelary deity of a Tharu village, *puja* = ritual worship. The Tharu vocabulary items appear, in contrast to Nepali ones, in *italic* print.

Their parents said, 'Go into the forests and live there.' Thus they went to Chitwan and made their way to various places. They lived till their death in Chitwan, in those places where until now their shrines are found. Even today they protect their locality and are revered by the Tharus.

As may be inferred from their oral tradition, the Tharus settled in Chitwan during the period of the Sen kings – in a region with extensive forested areas that were ideal for *banbas*, the ascetic retreats.

Forest, Goddess and Spirits

It is especially the forest that is populated, in the minds of the Tharus, with spirits or deities. The *ban bayar*, the forest spirits, roam about in the woods "like yogis" and rest on or under a tree. The only reason they are dangerous to humans is because they cannot be seen; one may bump into them by accident and upset their path (*bah*). *Ban bayar*s cannot be induced to help people. On the other hand, *Ban Dewi*, the *gurau*'s mistress, who also lives in the forest, protects humans.

The story of Ban Dewi (narrated by Budhi Ram Mahato)

The *gurau*'s mistress is *Ban Dewi*, the forest goddess created from the earth. One day a Tharu man came upon her – she who lives in the forest on fruits and berries. Since a son had been denied him, he had left his village in order to live in solitude in the forest. *Ban Dewi* invited him to stay with her. He worshipped her and served her. Because she was very happy at this, she wanted to fulfil his deepest wish: he wished one of his own seed, who would be very learned. He obtained a son. For twelve years *Ban Dewi* taught him tantra, mantras and medicine; she instructed him in the knowledge of a *gurau*. When he had learned everything, she called upon him to go to the village and serve the people. He was the first *gurau*.

Also in the forest of the Churiya Range along with *Ban Dewi* lives *Chhita Mai*, the goddess who came from the water:

The story of Chhita Mai (narrated by Somla Mahato)

Once, long ago, when the Tharus were fishing, all of the nets were full of fish. One man, though, had only a large stone in his net. He threw this stone in anger onto the shore. But the *mahato* of Patlahara had had a dream during the night that he should do

puja to a certain stone, because that stone was a goddess. The next morning he went to the stone that the fisher had thrown onto the shore and worshipped it. Thereupon *Chhita Mai* appeared in the form of a woman. From that time on she has protected the humans and the villagers' animals and has been happy.

The Tharus' direct economic dependence on the natural resources has left its mark on their sense of the environment. Their perception and evaluation of the natural surroundings have always had a clear practical side to them. The following story recounted by a Tharu to characterize his people reveals what other aspects their relationship with the environment has.

The story of forest and wealth (narrated by Somla Mahato)

A long time ago God summoned all men to Him to give them wealth. All the castes, such as the Pahariyas, the Newars and also the Tharus, took to the road leading to God in order to receive wealth from Him. After walking for a long time, they entered into a lovely forested area (*kathaban*). They all continued on, except for the Tharus, who dallied in the forest, on the lookout for nice wood, and so forgot to pursue their way towards God. After a while the other people returned with wealth, and the Tharus returned from the forest.

Even today Tharus say of themselves, in distinction to the new settlers, that they are a forest people. The forest presents itself to them as a familiar environment, whose rich biological stock they know, and know how to use, very expertly. They not only know a plethora of plants and are familiar with the behavior of animals, but in addition their sense of "going into the forest" is as something positive, something one likes to do.

If one talks with Tharus about the forest, one senses their special, close ties to it. It would be, however, too simple to characterize this relationship as entirely "positive." Respect and something close to fear of the forest is always seeping through. This is one reason why Tharus, in contrast to the Pahariyas, only enter the forest in large groups. By themselves, they concede, they would be afraid. This fear is directed only superficially to the dangerous rhinoceroses, tigers and bears. It is the presence of the gods and spirits that disquiets the Tharus, and at the same time lures them; and it is because of their presence that they feel induced "not to do anything bad in the forest". If Nepal's high mountain dwellers associate the snowy mountains with

the sphere of the gods, for the Tharus the forest, as the place where their shamans originated and where their gods and spirits live, is a territory filled with religious meaning. They piece together their cultural-religious identity from the forest.

Traditional Technology

At the same time the Tharus' livelihood strategies are oriented towards utilization of their natural environment. The traditional technology of the Tharus makes perfect use of the available natural resources of the forests and fields of tall grass. The Tharu house consists exclusively of natural building materials, and almost all household articles are made from natural products. In spite of the problem in obtaining natural products nowadays, the subsistence technology harbors a potential that retains culturally specific traits. Part of the inventory of a Tharu farm operation is the watch-tower, *mach* (Nep. *machan*, figure 1).

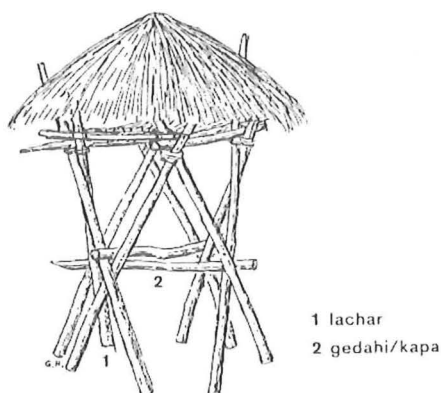


Figure 1. Watchtower

The following story provides an imaginative explanation of the flexible constructional principle underlying a *mach*:

The story about the Watch-Tower (mach) (narrated by Budhi Ram Mahato)

During the Golden Age (*satjug*) a farmer went to his watch-tower (*mach*) to sleep. As usual, he first knocked his stick against the *gedahi* (one of the crosspieces) in order to awaken the *mach*. Then he climbed up into the blind and went to sleep. One day a tiger came and wanted to kill the farmer. The *lachar*, the eight brothers of the *mach*, thought: 'The tiger is going to eat our master!' The tiger wanted

to jump up into the *mach*, but the latter ducked; when the tiger jumped at a spot lower down the *mach*, the latter stretched itself. This went on a number of times, until the *mach* managed to trap the neck of the tiger in a fork in one of the pieces of wood and to kill it. The next morning the farmer woke up and spotted the dead tiger, and said, 'Oh, the tiger is dead. If I hadn't awakened the *mach*, the tiger would surely have killed me.' Since this time, every farmer, before climbing up into the *mach*, strikes the *gedahi* with a stick in order to awaken the *mach* so that it will protect him and his fields from the wild animals.

Fishing

Tharus appear to feel themselves in their own element in water. One hears repeatedly, not only from the Tharus themselves but also from members of other groups in Nepal, that Tharu men and women are very good swimmers and divers, and are able to catch fish by hand. Persons with great spiritual abilities, it is said in Chitwan, are even capable of fishing fried fish from the river! Fishing enjoys a corresponding status among the Tharus, and is regarded as a pleasant pastime. "If we don't feel like working in the fields, we go fishing," it is often said. And fish, whether grilled or made into a curry, is eaten with great delight.

The History of Fish (and Women) (narrated by Somla Mahato)

A long time ago a barber (hajam) was going about his work during *jitiya parab* (women's festival). As he was going from house to house to cut the nails of women, he suddenly saw a strikingly beautiful woman named Chanawa. She and her husband Lori Amir were new to the village. When the hajam caught sight of Chanawa, he lost consciousness. Then he ate soil seven times, pissed seven times and shat seven times. When he came to, he got the idea to go to the king of the village, Raja Mahore, in order to tell him of Chanawa's beauty, and to suggest that he might kill the woman's husband and then take Chanawa as a wife. When the king heard the plan he said that the woman's husband was very strong. The hajam proposed to the king that he should write a letter to the king of Maranpur (Murder City) for Lori to deliver. In this letter the king would write that Lori was to be killed in Maranpur. The king was pleased with this proposal, and he wrote the letter: 'Head of Lori, sword of Maranpur'. Lori was summoned, and the letter handed to him with the instruction to take it to the king of

Maranpur. Lori did not see through the king's plan; he thought that he simply had to deliver an important letter. Lori was unable to read and write, but his wife Chanawa could. The woman asked permission from her husband to read the letter. When she had read the words, she understood that her husband was to be killed in Maranpur. She proceeded to alter the letter by switching the words head and sword: 'Head of Maranpur, sword of Lori'. She advised her husband to return to the village of King Mahore and ask him for a horse to convey him more quickly to Maranpur, the way being long. Lori went to the king and asked for a horse. When the hajam heard this, he got a new idea of how Lori could be killed without being sent to Maranpur.

A horse named Mangal had been stuck for 12 years in the swamp of Pokhara Sagar (ocean). It was a very wild horse, one that only let its master ride it. The horse had belonged to Lori's grandfather, which Lori, however, did not know. The hajam now suggested that the king charge Lori with retrieving this horse from the ocean. The horse would kill Lori as soon as he approached it. The king, therefore, directed Lori to fetch the horse Mangal. When Lori approached the horse, it became very happy, for it smelled that the grandson of his own master had come. The horse neighed with delight! The hajam heard the neighing and thought that now Lori would be killed. But Lori freed the horse from the sagar and took it first to Pokhari Tal (lake), the horse being very dirty. In the feet of the horse were living many worms and maggots which caused the horse much pain. Lori began to remove the worms. The worms swam about in the water, not knowing what was happening to them. Then they went up to God and complained of their fate. God decided: You will become fish of various types and sizes, according to your present size. Humans will eat you during Kalijug (the current age). There have been fish since that time!"

In spite of the ethnic diversity in the densely populated Chitwan of today, the Tharus have been able to preserve their ethnic identity and to live socially cut off in their own village world. Although socio-economic differences within the group are marked, there is no social stratification in the sense of a caste system. Tharus may term themselves Hindus, but their "small tradition" is firmly anchored in their daily life.

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