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Glimpses from a Margin: Images of Caste and Ethnicity in Nepal's Middle Hills

Calla Jacobson
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Sprawled and clustered across some of the steepest cultivated slopes in the world, ranging in altitude from just over five thousand feet at the bottom of the village to just under seven thousand feet at its highest homes, Charigaon lies two to three day's walk from the nearest road and a further eight-hour bus ride north and east of Nepal's capital city, Kathmandu. The village has no electricity or phones; villagers speak of it as a faraway place, a place in a corner, a place without development. They practice subsistence farming—their lives, they say, are made up of work and trouble, *kaam* and *dukha*—but all are additionally, to some degree, involved in a cash economy.

The village's six hundred residents are primarily Tamang and Sherpa, with Sherpa making up a slight but recognized majority. The remainder consists of a cluster of low-caste Hindu, Kami—occupationally blacksmith—families, and a few individual households from other caste or ethnic groups. This paper approaches issues of caste and ethnicity in Nepal through discourses of the Sherpa and Tamang residents of Charigaon. It is not meant as a comprehensive look at what ethnicity means in Nepal, or even within this village, but rather as an ethnographic exploration of some of the ways that Charigaonle, villagers of Charigaon, understand caste and ethnic difference—particularly their differences from high-caste Hindus.¹ As one way of providing a rich sense of the ambivalence and indeterminacy, the gaps and flex, in Charigaonle articulations of their social universe, I discuss two stories told in the village about the history and origins of social difference and ethnic identity.

Although Nepal is officially a Hindu nation and Bahun and Chetri (high caste Hindus, the Brahmana and Kshatriya

¹ Focusing on the contrasts between the Tamang and Sherpa of Charigaon and high-caste Hindus leaves out other differences that are important in Charigaonle lives. Chief among these are differences from low-caste Hindus, from each other, from foreigners, and—as villagers “without development”—from urban folk, those “with development.”

of the four classical *varna* of Hinduism) make up the majority of its population, caste in Nepal is a hybrid order. A hundred years after the Shaha (Chetri) king Prithwi Narayan Shah, conquered the Kathmandu valley and began the political unification of Nepal, all of Nepal's non-Hindu (or non-orthodox) “tribal” or “ethnic” groups² were legislated into the Hindu caste system by the state (see Hofer 1979). Groups of Tibetan origin—including Sherpa, Tamang, and others—were all placed within the lowest ranks of the “pure castes” in a category called *matwali* (“liquor-drinking”),³ just above “untouchable.” In a sense, these groups literally took the place of the Vaishya and Shudra (middle- and low-ranking) *varna* which are otherwise all but nonexistent in Nepal. In the Nepalese case, then, caste is “an incorporative model for ethnicity” (Levine 1987:72); groups like Sherpa and Tamang that we might think of as ethnic groups are also caste groups. This overlap—and the inadequacy of simple distinctions between caste and ethnicity—is underscored by the use of the word *jaat* in Nepali to describe both caste and ethnic groupings.⁴

² These are groups that have been referred to in scholarly and public discourses as tribes, races, ethnic groups, non-caste ethnic groups, and indigenous peoples.

³ The category of *matwali* itself was split; under the name “Bhote,” Tamang, Sherpa, Tibetans, Rai, Limbu, and others were ranked as “enslaveable” *matwali* while other groups such as Magar and Gurung were categorized as “unenslaveable” *matwali*. In his study of the Muluki Ain, Andras Hofer (1979) notes how closely “pressed together” all of these groups were within the hierarchy “in clear contrast to the Newar and Parbatiya castes with their rather discontinuous distribution between the highest and lowest status positions in the hierarchy” (141).

⁴ *Jaat* in Nepal, as elsewhere in South Asia, is a word whose meanings are quite inadequately translated by our term “caste.” “Jaat” means, most generally, “species” or “kind” and refers to all manner of non-random groupings (cf. Mariott and Inden, 1977:230). The term is used widely throughout Nepal and may refer to caste, subcaste, ethnic group, tribe, clan and so forth. It is used to describe both larger categories such as Bahun and Chetri and numerous subcategories. In Nepal, its primary meanings are

Caste ranking was imposed both on groups with their own, prior, internal caste or caste-like systems, including Newar, and on those with relatively egalitarian internal social organization, including Tamang and Sherpa. This paper explores some of the implications, from Charigaonle perspectives, that arise from their egalitarian orientation within the larger polity (see also Holmberg 1989, March 1987, Ortner 1989). In Charigaon, the dominant metaphor for discussing hierarchy is that of “bigness” and “smallness.” Charigaonle resent those who “act big” and make others “feel small;” their egalitarian orientation encompasses many areas, but this paper concentrates on issues of commensality and sociability.

His Majesty’s Government of Nepal has a broad general policy—sometimes explicit, sometimes not—of “Nepalization,” a national effort that closely combines the rhetoric of development with an ideal of social unity. This “unity” is organized specifically, if not always explicitly, around the values and practices of caste Hinduism (cf. Pigg 1992; see also the 1990 Constitution of Nepal). If official rhetorics are at least ambivalently inclusive, social realities within Nepal still very much exclude groups like Tamang and Sherpa from economic and political spheres of power.

Official efforts and rhetoric around issues of national diversity are both echoed and challenged by a myriad of unofficial urban discourses, among them those of burgeoning ethnic organizations in the nation’s capital. Ethnic culture organizations have become more active and visible in the past decade. They operate in large part in Kathmandu, though many have strong ties to areas outside the valley. Although their aims are political and economic as well as cultural, one of their main visible functions is to present “culture programs”: extravaganzas of ethnic song, dance, and comedy, not wholly dissimilar to the song and dance programs presented for tourists at the major hotels in Kathmandu. These programs provide a rich source of contemporary, primarily urban, self-aware, politically motivated, presentations of what constitutes ethnic identity. None of the villagers I worked with in Charigaon have, as far as I know, any direct connections to the ethnic organizations that operate in Kathmandu, but such organizations form part of the national context within which villagers operate.

Within this national context, the Sherpa and Tamang of Charigaon continually construct their own versions of the social universe. Although they have a strong sense of

often extended to describe common identity based on such disparate phenomena as chosen occupation (taxi drivers, bureaucrats), kinship positions (stepmothers), gender (*aaimaiko* jaat—“women’s caste”), age (small babies), nationality (American) and animal species (leeches, dogs).

cultural difference and its importance, Charigaonle Sherpa and Tamang articulate their notions of identity and difference more around everyday forms of social interaction than around public markers of ethnicity such as language, religion, or dress. In Charigaon, jaat, caste or ethnicity, is only one of a number of resources for talking about identity. Charigaonle identify sometimes with each other as villagers or as Sherpa-Tamang, sometimes with other Sherpa or Tamang of Nepal. They identify as poor people, as those who do physical productive labor on the land, as those who carry loads, as those who suffer. They identify sometimes in terms of caste hierarchies and in recognition of their own historical incorporation into the caste system, but they often contest these hierarchies as well.

Tamang and Sherpa, as jaat, can be described as “more like one another than either is like any other ethnic or caste group of Nepal” (March 1979:144). Both groups have historical, religious, and linguistic connections with Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism; they also have similar styles of social interaction. Although Charigaonle recognize that there are significant differences between Tamang and Sherpa, they also admit great overlap between and mutual participation in their practices within the village. Moreover, the Sherpa and Tamang of Charigaon often feel and express identification with each other as “we Sherpa-Tamang,” as “we Tamang-Sherpa,” or as “we Charigaonle” more strongly than they do with those outside the village who share a nominal identity as “Sherpa” or as “Tamang.”⁵

If they identify most strongly *with* each other, the Sherpa and Tamang of Charigaon see themselves to be most significantly *different from* high caste Hindus: *Bahun and Chetri*. From the perspective of the Sherpa and Tamang of Charigaon, the crucial distinctions between themselves and Hindus center less on contrasts in language, formal religion, or nominal caste or ethnicity than on the importance of contrasting social and interactional styles.

The following myth demonstrates the complexity of Charigaonle Tamang and Sherpa ambivalence towards caste and towards high-caste groups. It articulates areas of concern relating to hospitality, the sharing of food, the rupture of appropriate sociability, and the origins and meanings of—selected aspects of—social difference. The narrative’s version of caste-based difference and its foundation moves at an almost dizzying pace between critique and compliance.⁶

⁵ Neither Sherpa nor Tamang as described in the ethnographic literature—see, particularly, Adams 1996; Bista 1972; Brower 1991; Desjarlais 1992; Fisher 1990; Furer-Haimendorf 1964; Holmberg 1989, 1992; Kunwar 1989; March 1979, 1983, 1987, 1998; Ortner 1978, 1989—correspond in an *exact* way, culturally, historically, or in terms of felt identity, to the Sherpa and Tamang of Charigaon.

- DS when we were first born as people, it was from a cow, *re*⁷
 a cow-mother
 and after that cow gave birth,
 we Sherpa, Bahun, Chetri—
 it turned out that there were three jaat, three brothers
 Chetri—there was another, they said Tamang, or . . . ?
 four, there were four brothers, *re*
 four brothers, one [of them]—which clan was it?
 doesn't seem like it was a Newar; not a Newar
 and we, Tamang—not Tamang
 there are two kinds who eat this cow's meat
 and after giving birth to those four sons,
 that cow died
 well, lets call her [the] mother, after all
 that cow, that elderly cow died
 and then, after [she] died, now, the oldest brother is Bahun, *re*
 the second brother is Chetri, *re*,
 and from there, the youngest son, sec—
 the third brother was us, Sherpa, and—
 which jaat is it, *re*?
 we, the youngest brother and the third
 we are the Sherpa jaat, *re*
 and after doing that, they—
 that Bahun and all were clever and
 sent the two younger brothers to wash the intestines, *re*,
 that cow's intestines
- CJ wash the intestines?
- DS sent them to wash the intestines
- CJ oh, oh, sent them to wash . . .
- DS sent them to the fountain to wash . . .
 and then that Chetri and Bahun, they were the two oldest, those two
 then, they, keeping silent,
 they cooked and put away that cow-mother from before,
 now [they] cooked [their] mother's meat and put it aside, *re*
 and after cooking and putting it aside
 after those two younger brothers came back,
 [they] took out that cooked meat and gave it
 after taking [it] out and giving [it] [the younger brothers] ate

⁶ Dawa has told me this story more often than any other, never with my direct solicitation. I also heard it from others within the village. The version given here is a translation of the story the first time I heard it, in the spring of 1990.

⁷ *Re* is an evidential, a particle that can follow any phrase to indicate that the information conveyed in the phrase is not personally attested to by the speaker, that it is second-hand. It can be read as "they say" or "I've heard." It is a

consistent element of stories like this one, and serves to lend authority to the unfolding narrative. In using "*re*," the storyteller appeals to a wider knowledge: she or he is saying, in effect, "I didn't make this up; this is how it's told; this is the way I heard it." But although "*re*" authorizes a story, it does so by making an ambiguous appeal to an unidentified source.

they ate
“you, our brothers, eat with us too!”
“we’ve eaten and eaten
we’ve eaten and still there’s some left over here,”
saying that, they lied
the Chetri and that Bahun lied
and those
we of the Sherpa jaat ate
ate, and after we’d finished eating, we’d finished eating it *all*
and they said that [we were] the type to eat our mother’s meat
the Bahun—
the Bahun and the Chetri
the oldest and second brother
they told them
later—*after* [we’d] finished eating!
and said, “you all gave it to us and we ate it”
the two younger brothers picked up the intestines
and struck both the older brothers with them, *re*, with the intestines

CJ yeah

DS struck them with the intestines, *re*
and “you don’t have to tell us before [we eat]?
you lied to us,”
they said and with those intestines, with the intestines they struck, *re*
those two, the Bahun and Chetri, the two younger brothers did
struck them and nowadays Bahun don’t eat meat, don’t eat it
and you know what they call a sacred thread?
yes, that sacred thread is the cow’s intestines, *re*

CJ yeah

DS and they are always required to purify this way

CJ yeah

DS that intestine, *re*
they placed it, *re*

CJ the sacred thread?

DS the sacred thread
and from that time on, Sherpa
from there, we ate and are eating [beef] still
our jaat is the same, we ate and are eating still
if that cow dies, then there’s no question—we eat it
it even happens that we eat a living [cow]⁸
and nowadays Chetri and Bahun don’t eat [meat]
but they put that
and [in] that first believing,
Chetri and Bahun don’t eat chicken’s meat either, *re*,
nor [do they] eat mushrooms
now, though, they’ve found it available to eat
now they generally eat it

⁸That is to say, a deliberately slaughtered cow. Dawa, in fact, sees the consumption of beef or any meat as problematic from a moral and religious point of view, but from a specifically *Bud-*

dhist ethical stance—not specifically related to the sacredness of the cow.

In this story critical, reflective, and naturalized perspectives on jaat twist through each other, creating a vision of social difference in the world that “talks back” to itself. The story reveals Hindu caste as an accepted and encompassing part of the social universe, a social vision whose historical incorporation of Sherpa has all the authority that generates from its projection back into mythic time. Sherpa are contrasted explicitly with Bahun and Chetri but at the same time are enclosed with them inside a single social universe, connected by their common mythical origin within a single family grouping.⁹ Moreover, this myth preserves and naturalizes the specifically *hierarchical* aspect of the distinctions between high-caste Hindus and Sherpa, legitimating it in the primacy of elder over younger brothers.

The events of the story give an account of the first time that Sherpa ate separately from Bahun and Chetri. The act and circumstances of *not eating together* created the social differentiation in which high caste Hindus today may not eat food served to them by Sherpa, Tamang, and other mid or low-caste groups. This negative act—*not eating together*—set a pattern whereby Sherpa and Tamang eat beef, eat together, and eat with gusto—“we ate and are eating still”—and Bahun and Chetri are restricted in their eating, may not eat all foods freely and may not freely eat with social others.¹⁰

Charigaonle Tamang and Sherpa often offered me unsolicited comments that contrasted their sociable practices with those of Hindus.¹¹ On occasions when I attempted to refuse food or drink that was offered to me, I received explicit statements of identity like the following:¹² “*nepali haruko ek kap dekhi hudaina; haami sherpa-tamangko jaatmaa ek kap maatrai khaaeko alachhin hunchha*” (Nepalis¹³ never [give] more than one cup; in our Sherpa-Tamang jaat, it’s inauspicious to drink only one cup);

“*haami baahun-chetri jasto hoina; haami tamang-sherpako gharmaa aeepachhi khuwaaihaalchha; baahun-chetrikko gharmaa ek cap chiyaa maatrai dinchha, tyati ho; tara haamile ek cap maatrai didaina*” (We are not like Bahun-Chetri; after you come to our Sherpa-Tamang houses, [we] will certainly immediately feed you [offer food and drink]; in a Bahun-Chetri household, [they] only give one cup of tea, that’s it; but *we* don’t just give one cup). Charigaonle even say that Bahun-Chetri don’t feed their dead sufficiently; they say that Bahun-Chetri dead, because they are not properly fed at death and beyond, turn into ghosts. Such ghosts are responsible for a variety of illnesses, troubles, and miseries afflicting Charigaonle. Charigaonle can list a number of specific Bahun and Chetri ghosts that have taken up residence in the village.

Dawa’s story shows the younger brothers’ act of eating their mother’s flesh as an *appropriate* act, insofar as it is one of accepting food that is offered and eating it together, thus engaging in properly sociable—from a Sherpa-Tamang standpoint—interdining. From this perspective, it is the elder brothers in the story who contravene the principles of appropriate sociability by refusing to eat with others, even when asked—“you, our brothers, eat with us too!”—and by making false offers of hospitality, offers designed to split the brothers apart and establish themselves as “big,” in a position of social, ultimately ritual, superiority.

“we’ve eaten and eaten, we’ve eaten and still left over here,” saying that, they lied
the Chetri and that Bahun lied
and those—
we of the sherpa jaat ate

Hindu models of social order posit discrete social groups with relatively impermeable social boundaries; they restrict and regulate social interaction, especially in terms of sharing food. Tamang-Sherpa social life, on the other hand, involves a kind of escalation of exchange, of those with whom they exchange and of occasions for sociable eating (cf. Holmberg 1989; March 1979, 1987; Ortner 1978). Charigaonle perceive Hindu models of social interaction to be unreasonably restrictive, and this is the fundamental point of difference that they articulate between themselves and high-caste Others. Dawa’s story brings out this distinction in the contrast it draws between those who openly accept food that is offered—and invite their hosts to eat with them—and those who offer food in the spirit of deception—and refuse to eat with others.

In addition to commenting unfavorably on Bahun-Chetri sociability, the story also expresses a more general tension around the sharing of food and drink; this tension

⁹ This image of a family reiterates a Dumontian conception of caste in which differentiated groups form a socially functioning whole that is deeply bound together. At the same time, it is a distorted, even parodic reiteration: this particular family is dysfunctional, on the verge of fragmentation, and, moreover, represents only an incomplete piece of the social universe.

¹⁰ Additionally, among Brahman and Chetri, those women who prepare and serve food, eat only after others have finished. Among Tamang and Sherpa either women or men may serve and in neither case are they expected to wait until others have finished.

¹¹ Other contrasts that Charigaonle emphasize deal with sex and gender practices; here again, Charigaonle perceive Bahun-Chetri practices to be unduly restrictive compared to their own.

¹² These statements came from both Sherpa and Tamang and most often—though by no means exclusively—from women.

¹³ Here, the speaker means Indo-Nepalese, or, more specifically, Brahman and Chetri. At times, though, Charigaonle say “Nepali” and include themselves.

is culturally *internal*. While reciprocity is absolutely necessary for Tamang and Sherpa—is, in fact, the foundation for sociability—and is manifested daily in exchanges of food and drink, it carries its own dangers. Charigaonle display considerable ambivalence towards their *own* forms of sociability. In the village, it is considered rude, unsociable, and even potentially dangerous to refuse *either* to give or to receive hospitality. Charigaonle interpret—and condemn—both kinds of refusals as forms of “acting big.”

In this respect, Dawa’s story can be interpreted as revealing the ways that accepting the offerings of others *always* carries an element of risk. Within Charigaon, people fear witchcraft, poisoning, or ghost attack as potential results of accepting the hospitality of others. Charigaonle tell stories of being trapped or tricked into eating food from the hands of witches, individuals who are also their neighbors within the village (the “trickery,” in such stories, is practically indistinguishable from normal hostility insistence). I was consistently warned of the possibilities of having a ghost attach itself to me in the vicinity of one house or another in the village and warned against accepting food from certain people because of the danger of witchcraft. Even those who warned me, however, would generally accompany me to eat at “dangerous” houses, if invited, since to refuse hospitality can be as risky as accepting it. To refuse to accept food or drink from someone is insulting, unsociable, and can even, in some cases, be interpreted as an accusation of witchcraft.¹⁴

On a less dramatic plane, the escalation of social, hospitable exchanges, though culturally desirable, has practical limits. Sherpa and Tamang hospitality constantly reverses the roles of host and guest, the one owed and the one who owes, the one who gives and the one who receives, in “ongoing cycles of reciprocity” (March 1987:351-352). The dense webs of obligation and reciprocity that characterize Charigaon life create equally dense—and unfinalized—webs of sociality. To accept food and drink is to embark upon a relationship, to begin a series of debts owed and debts receivable. Not all such relationships are desired or tenable.

¹⁴ Accusations of witchcraft are not made directly, but circulate outside of the hearing of the accused and without directly naming the individual. Moreover, although witches are believed to live in the village, it is not widely agreed just *who* these individuals are. Each villager has a different idea of who the witches are in the village; there is no public consensus over the matter. Since witchcraft accusations are not direct and do not accrue to fixed individuals, they constitute a way of handling hostility without the necessity of bringing conflict out into the open. The indeterminacy and indirectness of accusations encompasses discord but often keeps it from erupting into the kind of situation that would require direct social control (“acting big”), something Charigaonle avoid whenever possible.

From this perspective, then, the story reiterates daily gossip and stories villagers tell about their neighbors within the village. Read at this level, Dawa’s story mirrors the deep suspicion and anxiety that villagers feel toward *each other* as well as commenting on their relationships with Hindus.

So far, I have read the story from the perspective of Sherpa-Tamang hospitality—first in terms of its contravention by Bahun-Chetri, and then in terms of its uneasy aspects within Sherpa-Tamang social life. But the story can also be read in terms of *Hindu* practices and mores, a hegemonic point of view which is always accessible and present to Charigaonle, whether by way of radio and government discourses or through contact with high caste individuals. In this context, the central problem is not the *form* of eating (whether together or separately, based on deceit or based on reciprocal sociability) but *what* it is that was eaten: the meat of a cow, an animal sacred to Hindus. It is anathema for traditional Hindus to eat beef or to slaughter cows for any purpose. The notion that there is something fundamentally problematic about eating beef is supported in the story at one level: consumption of beef and, by implication, the present low caste status of Sherpa are equated with the outrageous act of eating one’s own mother’s flesh. The younger brothers are shocked to find out what they have done, and the older brothers have clearly tricked them into doing it.

Yet the narrator, Dawa, clearly distances himself and his people from a Hindu ethical stance regarding the consumption of beef. He does so by reiterating the present practices of his community: “we ate and are eating [beef] still.” He emphasizes this point even though he has often told me in other conversations that he thinks the slaughtering and consumption of meat is problematic *from a specifically Sherpa Buddhist ethical standpoint*. That is, in order to highlight *contrasts* between forms of sociability in his own and Hindu groups, he expresses solidarity with a practice about which he actually feels deeply ambivalent. David H. Holmberg argues, “in Hindu social logic, to accuse people of consuming beef is to accuse them of violating essential principles of order, including the political order” (1989:28). For Dawa to claim that his jaat is to eat beef is a clear assertion of non-identity with Hindus, a refusal, in some sense, to participate in Hindu hierarchy, and a knowing violation of essential principles of that order (however unknowingly beef may have been consumed in the context of the myth itself). At the same time, those who ate beef in the story were only following the directions of those who became “proper” Hindus, and who were within the story context their elder brothers.

Although beef eating is powerfully meaningful in a Hindu context, the central image of the story, dismember-

ment of a cow, is one which is found in many Tibetan and Tibetan-derived stories. In an article titled "Creative Dismemberment among the Tamang and Sherpas of Nepal," Alexander W. Macdonald writes of a number of Tibetan myths in Nepal that involve yak dismemberment and consumption. He argues that in these stories humans "in consuming [yak meat], acquire not only rights to be what they are but also religious duties," that "the animal victim serves . . . to fix the relationships between its human consumers" (1979:203). Thus although in Dawa's story the image of the slaughtered cow is an image whose significance lies squarely with its problematic relationship to a *Hindu* social order, it takes the form of an image with strong Tibetan resonances.

If the act of eating beef is ambivalently presented, the ritual superiority of Bahun and Chetri in Hindu society is definitely undermined when we see the much prized and highly revered sacred thread of the twice-born Bahun and Chetri as an intestine. Instead of being a marker of ritual purity and high social status this story presents it as a public sign of high-caste deviousness. The elaborate purifications of Bahun, as well, are not portrayed as indicating the superior ritual purity claimed for them by dominant Hindu discourses, but rather, at least implicitly, as a reflex of guilt, an effort to wash away their transgressions of the hospitality codes of Tamang and Sherpa worlds. Moreover, by supposing that the sacred thread originated as a cow's intestine, the story also portrays high-caste Hindus as being impure according to their own standards, since they are not only prohibited from eating beef but from wearing products of a cow.

If it is clear on no other point, the story unequivocally insists that caste is a system created by the knowing actions of those who are at its apex and with only the innocent participation of those who became their social inferiors. The system of caste, and by implication the disenfranchisement of Sherpa and Tamang within the Hindu state, are shown here to be a direct result of the duplicity, the hypocrisy, and the false hospitality of the Bahun and Chetri brothers.

Overall, the story neither presents a clear stance on Hindu hierarchy nor on Sherpa identity. It ruminates, it confuses, it conflates issues and images, it creates layers of interpretive possibilities in which the story can be seen to flirt with any number of potential meanings. The story is not a *direct* critique, nor is it a full explanation of either a contemporary or a historical social universe. It neither embraces nor explicitly attacks a dominating hierarchical social system, nor does it comment fully on *Sherpa* values or social organization.

Charigaonle hover between a model of the social universe which sees particular practices as appropriate for

certain jaat and not others (as in a caste system) and a model which judges Sherpa-Tamang practices to be appropriate—and preferable—for *all* humans. More often than not, the latter perspective wins out, and Charigaon Sherpa and Tamang represent their own practices to be more open, more sociable, and, simply, preferable to the practices of high-caste Hindus. They value their own forms of eating and drinking, their constructions of the host-guest relationship, and their emphasis on participatory sociality rather than restrictiveness and purity.

At the same time, however, they are critically aware of the fact that Hindus define the low status of Tamang and Sherpa at least in part through these very practices, particularly drinking alcohol and eating meat. Where Tamang-Sherpa sociality *requires* alcohol for both ritual and sociable interactions, high caste Hindus are *forbidden* to consume it. Where Tamang and Sherpa eat meat of most kinds¹⁵ (though Sherpa do not like to slaughter animals themselves), high-caste Hindus are traditionally vegetarians—or are at least restricted in the kinds of meat they may consume. The low status of Tamang and Sherpa was originally legislated by the state, but it is enacted and reproduced in their daily practices, practices which they positively value but which are negatively valued by national, dominant, Hindu standards.

This particular story is less about the origins of Sherpa or even of the caste system than it is about the incorporation of non-Hindu groups—specifically Sherpa—into a disadvantaged position within the Hindu social order. It leaves out other groups in its focus on Bahun-Chetri—acting in concert—on the one hand and on Sherpa on the other hand.¹⁶ In this instance, the storyteller could not even remember which jaat the third brother was meant to represent. The story does not describe the beginning point of all social

¹⁵ This includes beef (a category which encompasses water buffalo and yak), chicken, lamb, goat, fish, and wild game and birds; they often balk at pork however.

¹⁶ Low caste *Hindus*, though they live in Charigaon and are historically part of the caste system in a way that Sherpa and Tamang are not, are not even mentioned in Dawa's story. This reflects the general exclusion of Kami as problematic from the everyday discourses of Charigaon Tamang and Sherpa. Relationships in the village between Sherpa and Tamang and Kami are influenced both by the pressures of Hindu hierarchical society and by Tibetan traditions of outcasting (cf. Holmberg 1992). Tamang and Sherpa clearly perceive Kami to be "small," yet they do not want to acknowledge that they "honor themselves as big" (*aaphailaai thulo maanne*). Sherpa and Tamang deal with this dilemma by constructing the "smallness" of Kami in large part through silences and spaces, absences in their discourse. The near equivalent use of the phrases "we Tamang-Sherpa" and "we Charigaonle" in the talk of Sherpa and Tamang, for example, indirectly erases the presence of Kami.

differences, only of a few. It does not present a coherent or complete social world.

And where, we really must ask, are Tamang? They are not present at all in the social universe of this story—a fact

when we were first born as people, it was from a cow, *re*
a cow-mother
and after that cow gave birth,
we Sherpa, Bahun, Chetri—
it turned out that there were three jaat, three brothers
Chetri—there was another, they said Tamang, or . . . ?
four, there were four brothers, *re*
four brothers, one [of them]—which clan was it?
doesn't seem like it was a Newar; not a Newar
and we, Tamang—not Tamang
there are two kinds who eat this cow's meat
and after giving birth to those four sons,
that cow died

One explanation for Tamang absence from this story may lie in the fact that Charigaon Tamang are more-or-less socially equivalent to Charigaon Sherpa, though distinct, and this story focuses on the hierarchical dimension of social relations.¹⁷ The second time that Dawa told me this story, it was in his home in the context of conversation with his (Tamang) wife, and in the flow of incoming and outgoing guests. That time, while telling the story, he noted that none of the brothers could be Tamang because “the Tamang came later.” He then followed with a narrative about Tamang origins. The stories of Sherpa and of Tamang

which briefly seemed to puzzle some of those who told it to me. On more than one occasion, a storyteller would stop when identifying the cow's sons, as Dawa did in the version given above:

provenance are seen by Dawa to be in some way related, holding parallel or equivalent explanatory power, though the stories themselves are quite different.

“What we call Tamang, they didn't exist at first, I guess,” Dawa began, and went on to explain that a mortally ill Tibetan king was advised by his astrologer to send a pure or unmarried boy (*kanya ketaa*) off on a horse as *daan* (prestation or ritual gift). The boy wandered into what is now Tamang country but was, at the time, a Newar village.

¹⁷Tamang are perhaps “present” in another sense, though not as characters, since this story, here told by Sherpa about Sherpa, closely resembles narratives found in more purely Tamang areas of Nepal and which are specifically about Tamang (Holmberg 1989). The version that Holmberg reports contains a fuller social universe; the four brothers are Brahman, Chetri, Tamang, and Kami (blacksmiths). I came across another reference to this motif in Landon's history. He wrote of the Murmis (people who later became Tamang): “They eat beef freely and have earned the title of carrion eaters from Tibet from their traditional descent from Mahesur, a younger brother of Brahma and Vishnu, whom his seniors, by a trick, induced to eat cow's tripe. It is a curious

local belief that the wearing of the sacred thread by Brahmans is due to Mahesur's anger at being thus trapped. He struck his brothers with the tripe, some of which clung round their shoulders and originated the custom referred to” (1993 [1928]:246).

DS and going and going [from] country to country
and with whatever happening
[the boy] arrived in one country
and after arriving there, that person from Tibet
that person from Tibet arrived now in that place
and then that place called Timal,
now near Kathmandu is a village called Timal
in that place, in a Newar village, lets say
[he] arrived in Timal village, arrived in a Tamang village
—there were no Tamang at that time—
weren't any, [he] arrived in a Newar village,
and then raising and raising and raising and raising up that youth
[he] became [an] adult
became an adult
now what *thar* [clan or surname] to give him?
now which is his jaat, what is [his] *thar*; what is it?
he didn't know
now [they had] put him on top of a horse and sent [him]
and then that horse is called "taa"
called "taa"
. . . .
now [he] became an adult, that child
in that country raising and raising [him]
and saying what *thar* to give him?
then, now, [he was] brought atop a horse
atop a horse
[we] must call [him] *taamaang*
"taa" means horse
he came atop a horse
"taa" means horse,
adding "maang" [we] must give [him] Tamang [for a name]
CJ in whose language?
DS that, well [that's just] how they worked out [his] jaat?
that, now he arrived in that country
now he arrived atop a horse
I've forgotten half and half of that
and then, what *thar* to give him, saying and saying which *thar*?
and [he] came atop a horse, *re*
[they] must give him Tamang [as a name]
below and above
exorcised/blessed him [as *daan*] and made him just like a spirit
and then Tamang, [calling] him Tamang, Tamang
and then, after saying Tamang,
it falls in the country of Timal *re*
it lay right near to Kathmandu, *re*, that [place]
and from there [they] spread out
CJ eh
DS the Tamang jaat
CJ yes
DS now their songs also mostly come, most of them, from Timal
and they bring a lot from there
like that, [I] have forgotten half, half
if [one] continually tells stories, then [one] finds out
but that much is so, [they] say¹⁸

While lacking the symbolic excess of the previous story, this one is also concerned with issues of identity. In this story, the central problem is what to name the boy once he is grown, what jaat to give him, how to classify him relative to others around him—in short, what his social identity is to be. This narrative elaboration of a preoccupation with classifying him socially, and its resolution by calling him Tamang—for lack of any other category to fit him into—has a certain resonance with conventional historical narratives of Tamang. Holmberg (1989) argues that those we know today as Tamang were in fact originally a number of different groups who were legislated into unity by the state in the early part of this century. The story outlines the Tibetan origins of Tamang, gives them a center within Nepal, and creates a jaat where none previously existed.

Bahun-Chetri do not appear at all in this story; nor do Sherpa. The boy is taken in by a Newar community. The story doesn't really comment on relationships between Newar and Tamang, except to suppose the groups to co-exist; the Newar create a separate existence for the boy. Newar provide an interesting category for Charigaon discourses. Like Tamang and Sherpa, Newar had a Hindu caste system legislated onto them; like the conquering Hindus, however, they have their own elaborately tiered caste ranking system. Like Tamang and Sherpa, they eat meat and drink alcohol; but like Bahun-Chetri, they are deeply concerned with women's sexual purity. Like Sherpa and Tamang, they chafe against the dominance of the high-caste Hindu majority; as an urban people, however, they have had many successes in urban political and economic arenas. Charigaonle often lump Newar in with Bahun and Chetri, but they also sometimes point out limited similarities in their practices and experiences.

Like Dawa's other story, this one neither presents a complete social universe nor constitutes a direct statement about the social order. This story further identifies the Tamang of Charigaon as peripheral to an identifiable and centrally "Tamang" community—a community from which Tamang and their songs spread out over time—and in this way emphasizes the feeling of Charigaon Tamang that they are somewhat peripheral to "Tamang" considered more generally as an ethnic group.

These two narratives in some sense, "fix" or legitimate present caste or ethnic categories by projecting them into the mythic past. At the same time, however, they are full of gaps and inconsistencies that in many ways do more to

disrupt contemporary forms of identity within the nation than to finalize them. They are not totalizing; they do not include a full, integrated range of social categories, as do, for instance, classical Hindu stories of the origins of caste. They do not posit a common heritage for Sherpa and Tamang, or for the village, even though these categories are powerfully experienced as forms of community in the present. Rather, separate histories are provided: one that describes a common descent for and also explains the deep differences between Sherpa and Bahun-Chetri; one that details the origin of the Tamang in a single individual from Tibet, lost without identity among the Newar. The stories connect to the present, leaving their marks on particular practices ("we" eat beef; Bahun-Chetri perform purifications and wear a sacred thread; Tamang are centered in Timal); rather than on the social order *per se*. The marks and traces of the past fall on the present as fragmentary visions, as incomplete and flexible kinds of knowledge, and as particular social practices.

The fundamental differences between Charigaonle views and those of the ethnic organizations that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper lie in what constitutes meaningful cultural difference—or meaningful similarity—at all. The ethnic organizations concentrate on visible arenas such as language, dress, dance, and song, codifying these through formal displays of "traditional" song and dance and through political discourses that emphasize fixed ethnic identities.¹⁹ Charigaonle, far less politically engaged, articulate their notions of culture more emergently, around everyday forms of sociability. They put forth a highly complex and relational model of identity, a model in which history leaves traces but no clear directives, in which social power is unequally divided, and in which *how* people interact is a defining characteristic of *who* they are.

¹⁹Although song and dance—the "cultural heritage" served up by urban ethnic organizations—are very important to social life in Charigaon, they are not extractable from it as formal signifiers or displays of "culture" or "identity." Indeed, the songs that they claim as a significant part of their local identity are, paradoxically, versions of national, professionally composed songs that villagers originally heard on national radio (see Jacobson 1999).

¹⁸Dor Bahadur Bista (1972) and others (e.g. March 1979) have reported that the name Tamang derives from the Tibetan word for horse: "later on the term 'Tamang' was attached to them because they were horse traders. *Ta* in Tibetan means 'horse'; *mang* means 'trader'" (Bista 1972:52).

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