The Language of Ethnicity
Indigenous Narratives in Nepal soon after the Peoples' War (1996–2006)

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Abstract

This text examines how ethnic activism in Nepal developed a political language that stressed local particularities and engaged in politics of difference while seeking to address audiences across the globe. It is argued that a language of ethnicity evolved in a series of translation acts. Looking back at long histories of oppression and marginalisation, members of ethnic groups – in Nepal as elsewhere – seek to reassert themselves by engaging in public representations and by creating a common ground in the framework of global ethnic activism and hence global normative horizons. While moving between local, national and global audiences, ethnic activists transport and mould meanings, creating a common denominator for a semantic field that is intelligible to the widest possible diverse audience. Translation is viewed here as a complex exercise: moving back and forth between local, national and global forums of communication and engagement while adopting, rejecting and shaping the means of expression and the related knowledge repertoires. These acts can engage with and react to meanings created within fields of power seen as oppressive or enabling. By deploying a wide-ranging repertoire of *narrative figures*, such political communication aims at capturing, channelling and expanding public attention.

Keywords: Nepal, ethnic activism, ethnicity, indigeneity, boundary work, globality, narratives, cultural translation

Over the last decades, political communication across the world has become increasingly ethnicised (see Pfaff-Czarnecka et al. 2007, Comaroff / Comaroff 2009). Ethnic activists have participated in symbolic struggles in the fields of knowledge, recognition and power relations and, after centuries of being silenced, have managed to bring their meanings into the public space, making them more visible and more relevant in political communication. Many of the persons interviewed for this text, soon after the end of the Maoist insurgency in the year 2008, were instrumental in promoting ethnic rights and in actively

working towards cultural, social and political recognition of their ethnic groups and of ethnicity in general.

This text analyses how ethnic activism in Nepal, which was significantly boosted by the Maoist insurrection between the years 1996 and 2006, developed a political language that stressed local particularities and engaged in politics of difference. I follow Karki and Gellner (2007: 362), who define activism as a "practice of campaigning to influence or re-make the world in line with a consciously articulated programme"; another important dimension is the activists' quest to shape meanings in the public space. The article concentrates on the unique moment of democratic opportunity (Hatchhethu 2017, Thapa 2014) between the years 2006 and 2008 that opened up with the peace process. From the point of view of ethnic activists, this highly dynamic period of time was especially geared at laying foundations for a new constitution (which was promulgated only in the year 2015) and at shaping a new administrative delineation of Nepalese territory that would accommodate ethnic demands.

It is argued that a language of ethnicity evolved in a series of translation acts in the sense of transporting terms from one context to another. Even the term "indigenous" has different connotations in every national or local context. These acts were situated between the politics of reaction to previous injustices and the new spaces of political opportunity. Looking back at long histories of oppression and marginalisation, members of ethnic groups sought during that period – and continue to seek today – to reassert themselves by engaging in public representations and by creating a common ground in the framework of global[1] ethnic activism and hence global normative horizons. My focus is on the ethnic activism that addresses the national agenda of Nepal, but it will become apparent how global and transnationally disseminated rhetoric and visions have been shaping negotiations at the national level and how this has been incorporated into local agendas.

The social world is, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu (1987), simultaneously the object and the consequence of contentious encounters geared at shaping social realities (see Wimmer 2008). The language of ethnicity – understood here as a global complex of rhetoric, symbolisation and translation that has been co-evolving with ethnic activism and with the promulgation and differentiation of indigenous and minority rights within the UN framework over the last decades – has emerged not merely as a rich repertoire for enhancing ethnic self-awareness, for cultural positioning and for increased power of definition in public representations. It has become an important resource in the struggles that define the nature of social orders and lay down valid principles of legitimacy. As in other parts of

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1   "Global" is used here for cultural meanings that inform ethnic activism world-wide and for the transnational dimensions of ethnic activism. "International" is used here for international agreements and frameworks for ethnic activism, especially within the UN system, such as the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the UN Working Group on Minorities.

the world, as well as throughout South Asia and more specifically in Nepal, ethnicity has established itself as a social formula that shapes imaginations and aspirations, occupying public agendas and legitimising political claims.

In the Indian Himalayan states, members of ethnic groups have stated that they had to learn anew "how to be tribal" (Shneiderman / Turin 2006). On one hand, re-learning how to "be ethnic" is a reaction to previous governmental politics that discouraged practices of ethnic cultures. On the other hand, the Indian and Nepalese governments have increasingly recognised minorities by offering benefits such as quota systems as a measure to counter-balance past injustices. Paradoxically, the public recognition of ethnic groups has instigated a drive to present "correct" depictions of ethnic symbols, and thus "correct" modalities of how ethnicity is performed. Such measures are increasingly inter-woven with ethnic struggles to gain political ground.

Identity work has become an important preoccupation among Nepal's ethnic actors (see Hatchethu 2017, Adhikari / Gellner 2016, Acharya 2021, among others). Ramble (1997), Shneiderman (2015), Shneiderman and Turin (2006), among others, have observed a strong shift towards highlighting ethnic sym-bols and towards reviving, inventing and reforming ethnic traditions. Ethnic activism uses ethnicity as a lens that bundles the discontent and gives it a name – so that ethnicity has emerged as a key formula of mobilisation and resistance. Ethnic symbols, grievances and claims have emerged as a fixture of ethnic politics all over South Asia (see Carrin et al. 2014).

In Nepal, overt ethnic dissent has grown since 1989, and the movement has brought significant gains in the political terrain, rendering ethnic issues public issues, incorporating more ethnic leaders in contemporary politics and admin-istration, offering significantly more legal recognition and offering avenues via the Nepalese affirmative action system. Affirmative action provides disadvan-taged groups with access to education, formal employment and political partici-pation, often based on quotas. The relevant measures include policies that affect college and university admissions, private-sector employment, government con-tracting and disbursement of scholarships and grants. Yet numerous grievances and demands continue to be the object of fierce negotiations. This paper cap-tures the moment of ethnic politicisation in Nepal in the year 2008, when the newly acquired peace, the democratic openings and the formal recognition and incorporation of ethnic leaders were taken as vital signs of possibility in a thorough-going societal change. I disentangle the language of ethnicity into several narratives that are an important indication of the complexity of ethnic assertion and of the most important struggles towards recognition and rights.

Given the tremendous development of ethnic mobilisation in world politics over the last 40 years (Geschiere 2009 speaks of "conjecture"), it is intriguing how little we know about the inner logic of its language, its components and about how it works. While ethnic societies and their cultures have been observed

and analysed very thoroughly across the world, including in Nepal, the cultural logics of ethnic assertions have remained understudied. Neither in the South Asian nor in the global societal context have scholars managed to fully grasped the complexity of ethnic discourses, in general, and the modalities how the global discourses shape the practices of ethnicity on the ground and how ethnic activists have brought local meanings to the international forums. In the processes of travelling back and forth normative horizons, institutional formulas and behavioural protocols are negotiated. But we still know little about which discursive elements the language of ethnicity deploys, how ethnic activists create valid public meanings and which rhetorical resources are used to translate ethnic grievances into political objectives.

Putting the collected material into context

I am drawing upon my own extensive research on ethnicity formation in Nepal (see Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997 and 1999, Pfaff-Czarnecka et al. 2007, Gellner et al. 2008) and upon 32 qualitative interviews with ethnic activists conducted by Anne Buzki from August to October 2008. Buzki carefully selected her interview partners from a range of ethnic groups living in Nepal who were engaged in ethnic umbrella organisations – such as Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) and National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) – that represented more than 60 of the ethnic communities officially acknowledged at that time. These groups speak Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan languages and mostly embrace the Buddhist and Hindu religions. Most interviews were conducted in English. I take the English wording in the interviews from which I quote below as acts of translation between the local languages and the international language of indigenous rights. Concepts and narratives used in the international forums have increasingly informed the modalities of speaking in local contexts. Buzki's interviews followed a set of questions, but the discussions were open-ended in order to allow as much opportunity for individual narration as possible. The interview partners have often used pre-existing formulas to put their experience into a language understood by the interviewer. The analysis of the interviews followed the grounded theory method (Strauss / Corbin 1996: 14). The theoretical sampling occurred in a circular process (Strübing 2008). Another important element of the research was the content analysis of published documents, especially the programmes of organisations and parties, the webpages of ethnic organisations and legal UN texts.

The interviews were collected during the peak period of ethnic self-assertion, which aimed to heighten the recognition of ethnic difference in politics and society, in general, and to exert influence on the judicial process of drafting Nepal's new

Constitution, in particular. At that time, ethnic activists in Nepal were hugely inspired by the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995–2004) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). In the first decade of the 2000s different political forces came to question the scope and content of Nepal's 1990 Constitution, which was promulgated after Nepal was declared a multi-party democracy and no longer a monarchy. The drafting process of the 1990 Constitution took less than half a year, and more and more critics were asserting that it failed to do justice to Nepal's heterogeneity – as reflected in the country's ethnic, caste, religious and regional diversity, as well as the inequality based upon these markers. By the year 2008, it was obvious that a new constitution was needed, but it took until 2015 for the new Constitution to be finalised. The analysis presented here takes up the ethnic narratives developed in the most crucial moments of the ethnic struggle to gain recognition and negotiate the meanings attached to "being ethnic".

These processes are analysed by drawing upon the examples of several ethnic groups in Nepal, while creating interconnections far beyond the national scope. The focus is on political communication in local (in specific ethnic regions and of specific events), national (the parliament, the media, and different commissions) and global/international public spaces, including the deliberations within the UN system. Besides the already named UN Decade and Declaration, important contexts were the adoption of the ILO Convention 169 (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention) in the year 1989 and the creation of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) that entered into force in 1969, which addresses ethnic discrimination.

The analysis reveals that specific narrative figures have established themselves as the most significant in translating between ethnic groups' past and present experiences and the salient meanings in national and global fields of politics and rights. The notion of "figure" borrows from the understanding of figures of speech in the sense that language is used in a shaped or figured way in order to produce a stylistic effect. I am especially interested in the metaphors used by the ethnic activists to render their public representations more emotionality, more meaning, and more power. It will be argued that public representations create enabling effects for actors who negotiate the popular depictions of their rank and file. Since these negotiations occur in a multi-scalar public space – spreading between international (UN system, development donors), transnational (individual and collective activist networks) and national forums (governmental institutions and politics), as well as local-level public spaces – they occur along different parameters of identification and othering and oscillate between different constellations of belonging. An enquiry into the language of ethnicity thus reveals the situated and performative nature of cultural translations, produced *through* collective action while deploying rich repertoires of expression when engaging in the ethnic language.

What is the language of ethnicity? It is a symbolic repertoire consisting of topical phrases, argumentative figures such as metaphors that seek to strengthen the argument and metaphors of differentiation. It is a resource of political communication: a medium and an object of political positioning and the politicisation of meanings. Its ability to place a strong emphasis on wording, while simultaneously remaining ambiguous, allows for manifold openings, multiple interconnections and interpenetration, as well as translations beyond local and national contexts, and it allows for an actualisation of former meanings and discourses. While the language of ethnicity is often used as political rhetoric, it is significantly more than rhetoric. The language of ethnicity discussed here refers primarily to the ethnic knowledge shaped during the long history of ethnic oppression and discrimination within the framework of a national hegemony dominated by high-caste Hindus in Nepal. To a large extent, this is knowledge of oppression and resistance and how to deal with it. The knowledge production in the framework of ethnic cultures of resistance and the organisation of these processes at different – intertwined – levels (Derichs 2017) still remains understudied.

Over the last decades, the language of ethnicity has been deployed in three related fields. Of interest are first the positionings of ethnic actors against the majoritarian hegemonies and the resulting inequalities. Second are the positionings in relation to the transnational entanglements that create new spaces of possibility: in particular, the expansion of rights and support in developmental fields. The third field comprises the discursive openings and closures in collective constellations. In all the three fields discursive figures, i.e. metaphors used to shape the nature of public communication have unfolded – which will be discussed below, drawing upon Nepal's recent history.

After this introduction that was geared at presenting the overall argument and the key concepts, the following section provides a short historical overview highlighting the background of the contemporary ethnic discontent and mobilisation. Against this backdrop, a number of narrative figures will be introduced and analysed that allow the ethnic activists to re-act to the past wrongs and to shape the nature of the Nepalese society. The final discussion and conclusions will highlight the main dimensions and transformations of ethnic narratives in Nepal in the early 2000ies.

Ethnic accommodation in Nepal: A historical perspective

An understanding of the majority-minority relations[2] in Nepal's history is indispensable for grasping the current nature and scope of ethnicisation in the country. Nepal came into being in its contemporary size as a consequence of military unification that began in the mid-eighteenth century. Prithvi Narajan Shah, the ruler of the principality of Gorkha, together with his troops, first conquered the adjacent principalities, then managed to overthrow the principalities in Kathmandu Valley after a prolonged siege, and eventually conquered ca. 60 political units to the East and West. This military expansion was brought to a halt when the Gorkhali troops clashed repeatedly with the East India Company, which had been expanding to the West and South of Nepal's borders. Most of the political units, if not all, comprised ethnic populations differentiated by language, religion and customs. In the course of Nepal's consolidation, in the year 1854 a legal framework was established that decreed that the totality of the population be ordered within a societal hierarchy based upon the Hindu ritual rules of purity and pollution (see Höfer 1979). This national caste hierarchy was the Nepalese answer to the European nation-building measures of that time, incorporating the modern doctrine of the nation-state together with the Hindu laws of *Manusmriti* – a fascinating example of a nineteenth-century intersection and translation between different systems of social ordering. The result was that the totality of the population was classified into five societal ranks, with the so-called "double-born" high-caste Hindus at the apex, the numerous ethnic groups (classified by the Nepali rulers of as the "alcohol-drinking castes", see Höfer 1979) in the middle and the so-called "untouchables", known today as the Dalit, at the bottom.

   This hierarchic and collectivising modus was the first model of ethnic accommodation in unified Nepal. In this historical period the national caste hierarchy comprised the entirety of the population. The hierarchical rank went hand-in-hand with differential rights and duties and with degrees of punishment corresponding to one's place within the social order. Cultural distinction was the norm, while the Hindu religion as the religion of those in power provided the ideological framework (see Pfaff-Czarnecka 1999). To say that cultural distinction was the norm does not mean that Nepal's indigenous people, with their cultural forms (such as the Dhami cults in Far West Nepal) or indigenous languages, such as Newari (also called Nepal Bhasa), were not oppressed by those in power. For instance, from the eighteenth century onwards, i.e. since the "unification" of Nepal, those speaking and seeking to preserve Nepal Bhasa

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2   Hachhethu (2017) rightly problematises this binary, showing that people in Nepal see different modes of dominance in collective constellations, depending upon the venture point of observation.

had to constantly struggle against state repression and a hostile environment (see e.g. Shrestha / Van den Hoek 1995).

The second historic phase started with Nepal's opening to the world, initiated by the overthrow of Nepal's autocratic rulers in 1951. This was buttressed by a unique process of democratisation in a political set-up based on a one-party-system and uniting all forms of political power in the hands of the King. The term "Panchayat democracy", referring to ancient communal forms of local governance in India and in Nepal, was an important framework in the Nepali Kings' endeavours to modernise the country by defining societal goals and seeking to impose them in a top-down manner. The Kings – in particular, King Mahendra (1955–1972) and King Birendra (1975–2001) propagated a homogenous national culture meant to unite the population in a national space of communication and to promote progress in this vein. The government used the metaphor of a multi-coloured flower garden to address cultural diversity in Nepal, but this was done primarily for folkloristic purposes, especially when disseminating folksongs (often interpreted by high-caste singers) on the radio (Stirr 2017). Mother-tongue education was systematically discouraged (Phyak 2021). Political constraints on all kinds of political activism were very severe. Paradoxically, but not unsurprisingly, the measures to unify the population contributed instead to social divisiveness – perhaps more than the previous hierarchical order – rather than forging unity. Anti-Panchayat activism coalesced in the contexts of underground political parties and often included ethnic dimensions. While those in power declared the culture of the reigning castes – Brahmins, Thakuris and Chetris – as the national culture, they marginalised indigenous cultures, impeded the care of indigenous customs, languages and religions, declared those as backwards-oriented or even dissident, and silenced indigenous symbols in national self-representations.

The exclusion from the public sphere and the powerful barriers impeding access to offices in politics and administration rendered the indigenous people devoid of cultural, social and economic capital – which again turned into an excuse for their further exclusion. For instance, indigenous populations were oftentimes depicted in the public discourse as lagging behind in the process of development and modernisation. This in turn provided a negative integration matrix – against which resentment and dissent began to form and to grow. Ethnic dissatisfaction gained increasing momentum after the peoples' movement in spring of 1990 curtailed royal power. The ensuing process of democratisation consisted in a number of important reforms (see especially Lawoti / Hangen 2013): the division of powers, significantly more freedom of opinion and organisation, and the promulgation of a new Constitution in 1990, which defined the nation as a "multiethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom" (Article 4).

In the early years of the democratisation process, as it paved the way for the third historical phase of ethnic accommodation, the hopes – as in any democratic transition – were very high and the disappointment very deep (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004) when most of the ethnic aspirations did not materialise in a new inclusive democratic order (see Hachhethu 2017). The wording of Article 4 of the 1990 Constitution reveals the many contradictions that society had to struggle with, such as, to take just two examples, the recognition of ethnic multiplicity vs. the continuation of the "one Kingdom – one religion" doctrine and the problematic interrelation of democracy and monarchy. The term used for "democracy" at that time was *prajatantra*, or "rule of the subjects", which well expresses the problematic of the peoples' taking power under a system still strongly subjected to monarchical rule. It took almost a decade until the term *lok tantra* (*lok* meaning "people") was introduced.

Ethnic self-finding, self-describing and self-assertion

The project of ethnic self-finding, self-describing and self-assertion subsequently rapidly increased pace and this project will now be analysed against the backdrop of our empirical data. At the beginning, indigenous activists concentrated particularly on displaying their languages, religions, customs and identities in the public sphere. After many decades of being silenced by the state-dominated mass media, ethnic media could now actively participate, which resulted in a growing presence in the Nepalese public space (Onta / Humagain 2017). One must not forget that the silencing of ethnic cultures was an intrinsic element of the national education system and of public administration. Hence, the realisation of the value of one's own ethnicity emerged only gradually and had a very empowering effect upon many members of ethnic groups, as the following interview fragment reveals:

> When I was in school we were taught to believe we have one culture, one language and we had to celebrate the king's birthday. You know, I believed that. It was a beautiful imagination but later I realised that the language that was taught to me was not my mother tongue. And I think you should maintain your identity, your language. So there is this new feeling going on. (Interview No. 12)

Such realisations resulted in an assertion of collective identity and collective self-understanding as indigenous ethnic groups, like the following examples show:

> Indigenous groups know now about their identification. They say "I have to be proud of my identification" […] And also the movement means a lot to me because that makes me a little bit more confident to believe in my own identity, you know in terms of social system, language, culture and so on. (Interview No. 2)

> Now indigenous communities have become sensitive of their self-rights and self-identification and self-autonomous rights. Also for my community it [the ethnic movement]

> has a big importance because my community was not known as indigenous people before and now they are feeling stronger. Now the ethnic groups are very much conscious about everything. They say: "Feel proud of who you are". (Interview No. 3)

> We hope and dream to be like this that all our traditions and culture and everything will be able to survive in a peaceful environment just like a rainbow or just like our body, you know? We have different organs with different functions, different parts of our body, right? And different ethnic groups, right? So each group should maintain their own identity and function, so all over the world indigenous people want to be like a body. They want to maintain their identity, they want to survive. (Interview No. 7)

It goes without saying that members of ethnic groups were increasingly aware of this sense of public presence after having been silenced in public communication for so long. In the public discourse, ethnic cultural heritage was increasingly being acknowledged. This included narrations of important historical personalities of ethnic background as well as the wealth of the ethnic languages and religious customs that came to be celebrated in the new multi-ethnic Nepal. Such cultural displays were accompanied by debates on how to preserve vanishing cultural elements and where it might make sense to initiate cultural modifications, such as revitalisation or reform. This early phase of ethnic re-assertion involved attempts to develop new ethnic narratives. After the early markings of presence, *figures of importance*, i.e. metaphors highlighting the value of ethnic cultures and practices, quickly followed suit.

> The Limbus have a very unique culture. […] I very strongly identify myself with the Limbus because we have a very peculiar culture and, you know, Dor Bahadur Bista used to say that, you know, Limbus are one of the ethnic groups that lost their cultures but we still feel that we have a separate identity and culture. So that feeling is very strong among the Limbus. (Interview No. 11)

The figures of importance have many facets. Once the value of collective ethnic identity was established, it allowed for individual introspection. The importance of collective identity buttresses the individual's sense of place, as well as of recognition and value, as the following statements reveal:

> I belong to the Gurung ethnic people and we have our own culture, own identity, own ancestors' territory. I always feel that I belong with the Gurung people and we have a certain emotional attachment to the other Gurung people. (Interview No. 8)

> All the time I feel like a Newar. I'm very proud of being a Newar. (Interview No. 15)

> I'm Navin and I am Limbu. You know, my individual identity is being Navin but my collective identity is being a Limbu. That entails social and cultural elements that are very important for me, for my identification. I very much, I very strongly belong to the Limbu. (Interview No. 29)

> For the persons' ethnicity is a central thing for living, it really is for persons. Ethnicity is the key indicator of ethnic people […] Ethnicity is so important to me because my traditional culture does provide me a framework to relate to my sense of my personal, my sense of who I am and also provides meanings to my relationship with my family, my community. My personal history, where I come from can't be separated from who

> I am as a Rai. That is a strong part of me. For example, my traditions like all the ceremonies are basic things that provide a framework for looking at the world. (Interview No. 12)

> My traditional culture is very important. I love my culture. (Interview No. 26)

At the same time, the importance of collective identity increasingly developed into a political argument:

> Only since 1990 the movement came out and the identification of the indigenous people began and everybody was saying, "We have our own identity. We are not a Nepali-speaking group." So since 1990 all these groups started, "We are Rais and we are not Nepalis only. We are Rais first and then Nepalis. We are Limbus first". (Interview No. 10)

Members of ethnic groups increasingly began asking questions about their own identity. Identity came to mean that "they should be Chepang not Praja [political subjects] and practice their language and their culture" (Interview No. 32). But establishing the value of collective identities was only the first step in the process of politicisation:

> One thing we achieved substantially is that we established our identity and we also became successful in getting proportional representations in the CA [Constituent Assembly]. We have also raised the issue of proportional representation in the CA on the basis of ethnic population. And for that we have fought and the government accepted our proposal for proportional candidates. So on the basis of that now we have 215 ethnic representations, I mean 215 ethnic members in the CA. That comes to 36 per cent of the total representation in the CA. That is a big historical achievement, it never happened in the history of Nepal before and it is a reason, a result of our movement. So in terms of representation we have achieved our mission. (Interview No. 5)

Moreover, this mission was only one step in the incremental process of ethnic assertion, which was meant to result in Nepal's restructuring into semi-autonomous regions with ethnic identification (see below). From identity depictions, from being present in the public space and being able to speak with one's own voice to different types of audiences, to political representation and to political demands for one's own territory is a long trajectory. The *figure of importance* lies at an intersection between the public spheres, national politics and the individual politics of the self.

The examples presented here reveal that the public emergence of ethnic groups did not mean bringing hidden meaning into the public space. On the contrary, public meanings have enabled individual and collective actors to grasp their identity and to use such meanings as political arguments. This development gained substantially from the global process of ethnic self-assertion (Pfaff-Czarnecka / Büschges 2007) that provided ethnic activists with a great deal of aspiration and practical support. It goes without saying that the particularist introspections within the realm of one ethnic group went hand-in-hand with joining forces with all members of the Nepalese *janjatis* (the Nepali term for "indigenous") – a term that has become a natural category over the last two decades.

When the Gorkha ruler Prithvi Narayan Shah united the country, he described its population as a blooming wild garden. This metaphor – also embraced by the Panchayat government, as mentioned above – made new sense in the ethnic activism that had begun organising in the transnational space.

In particular, this activism took up the acknowledgment of indigenous activism within the platform of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro: indigeneity and environmentalism came rhetorically very close to one another and remained intertwined up until the time that data was collected for this article in 2008. The celebratory discursive figure of *wealth through diversity* rendered ethnic cultures all the more precious, as their preserving nature came to light. Individual ethnic cultures as well as the rich ethnic, and thus cultural, landscape were turned into a great asset discursively. In general, all ethnic activists interviewed in this study stress the wealth of Nepal as thriving upon ethnic difference:

> I think ethnicity has very great potential because you know that Nepal has great diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, culture […] So I think it has great potential for both harmony and prosperity, because if you allow people to practice their culture it is a big essence. We have many people with different skills and Nepal is full of potentiality. We have very intelligent people. You can see the Sherpas that are very good climbers. We have the Thakalis that can be good trainers. So in my view, ethnicity can help to make the country more developed. (Interview No. 1)

> What makes a jungle a jungle? Only one tree? No. Different trees, different groups make the life, the jungle beautiful. We need these different trees to make a real jungle, yes? Or as it is in our body. There are different organs that all have their own function, right? If you take one organ out of the body, the body will work no more. (Interview No. 7)

This general perception of the diversified ethnic landscape of Nepal reiterates the importance of ethnic groups in the society:

> We have rich practices for the sustaining of the environment. […] The ethnic cultures have a rich knowledge to manage their own environment. They have typical skills to use natural resources. (Interview No. 8)

The evocations of the blooming garden brought the diversity of the ethnoscapes to Nepal's mental map and simultaneously revealed the contrast between this idealised metaphor and the reality in the country, with its striking disparities between the societal centre and the peripheries, the differentials in the possession of power and in peoples' well-being. The decentred observation of the social landscape coincided with the growing preoccupation with new models of social development. Since the late 1980s, global discourses of development, with a strong bearing upon the Nepalese communicative space (Bista 1991), had begun placing an emphasis upon civil society networks and participation. In this vein, the local populations were no longer seen as objects of development interventions, but depicted as active subjects involved in shaping visions of collective life and acting accordingly.

Politicisations

Social anthropology has a great interest in the local appropriation of globally circulating goods, institutions and cultural messages. Sally Engle Merry highlighted these processes in her study of the vernacularisation of human rights into "local languages", i.e. into local meanings, values and norms (2006). The processes of local appropriation are shaped by the nature of the channels through which messages travel. Manifold international and national entanglements and channels create rooms of possibility where meanings are negotiated. Ethnic positionings need to be seen in the context of these wider entanglements. An important stepping stone for ethnic positionings in the framework of development measures was provided by Dor Bahadur Bista's book *Fatalism and Development* (1991), which initiated a fierce debate on collective characteristics for carrying out development processes. The thrust of his argument was a thorough critique of the Brahmins' fatalism and egotism. These negative qualities of the high-caste Hindus were highlighted against the backdrop of the communal, egalitarian spirit of Nepal's ethnic groups, which encourages solidarity.

> Indigenous peoples' nature is different than other communities. They can't cheat on other people. They are very straightforward. They don't lie. What they say they do. They have good discipline and they are also very hard-working. (Interview No. 8)

In a time-period that celebrates civic-mindedness throughout the world, members of ethnic groups have emerged in public communication in different kinds of media such as daily press and radio as those whose qualities perfectly fit the requirements of the moment, while the high-caste Hindus have been left (rhetorically) out in the cold.

> Our culture is important for the country because, what I think is that we believe in actions. We work instead of barking like the Brahman. If all Nepali follow our practices, the country will be constructed. [...] For example in my community they make their roads themselves and the Brahman communities are always dependent on the government and the donors but my community is willing to develop their villages themselves and that culture is a potential for the development. [...] The Brahman could learn so many things. (Interview No. 31)

This figure of *ethnic solidarity* goes perfectly hand-in-hand with development discourses, drawing upon participatory models, fed by communitarian values. The rhetorical exclusion of the high-caste Hindus accords them the status of the other, against whom ethnic actors could unite. Common belonging has become an important bracket for what holds ethnic groups together internally as well as across ethnic boundary-lines; an egalitarian ethos, a propensity for cooperation, the high value placed upon generalised reciprocity and political commitment have thus become precious resources that ethnic people have – and high caste Hindus do not.

> All the indigenous people have a feeling of unity. I represent my ethnic community and I'm part of the whole community. It's like doing puzzles. I mean we all belong together as in a puzzle. There are different parts but they belong together. Together they are one unity. (Interview No. 31)

> We can sense this ethnic feeling. We have a strong communal friendly relationship. We feel as a whole family. We *janjatis* are all the same. (Interview No. 20)

> Actually I feel that I belong to that group [*janjatis*]. I feel this group is nearer than other groups to me. For example, in Nepal you can see in the public bus and other areas when one Mongolian person meets another Mongolian person they start to talk. Why? Because they feel we are from the same group. That's the feeling of we. That's the emotional feeling of the ethnic groups. (Interview No. 8)

The ability of ethnic members to forge ties across their collective boundary-lines has been rhetorically expanded to global civil society networks, to work in the realms of development and natural protection as well as the transnational indigenous movement in Nepal. With the increasing momentum of the discourse of "social inclusion" since the year 2000, these openings have also extended to women in general, to Dalits and eventually to some extent, also to the Madheshis – the inhabitants of Nepal's Southern region or the Terai Belt, known as Madhesh. In the words of Laclau and Mouffé (1985), the communitarian discourse created a situated discursive politics of alliance.

For such constellations, Andreas Wimmer (2008) suggests the notion *transvaluation*. With this term, he means strategies that enable new understandings or changes in the normative principles that underlie hierarchical orders. He distinguishes between the strategy of *equalisation*, on the one hand, which aims at forging equality of status and power, and the *normative inversion*, on the other hand, which seeks to remodel a hierarchical order, putting those formerly ranking at the top of this unequal order at the bottom. In the current era of "political correctness" the normative inversion is a risky strategy because it seduces the ethnic spokesmen and women to make pejorative collectivising statements on the other that may be regretted later on. It thrives upon more or less subtle means of expression. In the Nepalese context, the *figure of having endured historic wrongs* or *victimisation* is conducive to normative inversion (as in the quotation above: "The Brahman could learn many things").

The *figure of having endured historic wrongs* comprises the depictions of the ethnic groups' dispossession in the course of the Hindus' influx into tribal areas as well as the overwhelming concentration of political power in the hands of high-caste Hindus.

> The indigenous groups are the excluded from the state. We have no access to state resources, to political power so we wanted to change this system through this movement. You know that we have a common history of oppression so that indigenous groups have a common agenda for the survival of their culture and language. (Interview No. 4)

> We have a collective power because most of the indigenous people have similar problems because they don't have enough resources. Everywhere there are the same problems

among the indigenous people. The level of discrimination might be different but the issues are similar. So for example all ethnicities are suffering from poverty. (Interview No. 23)

We all are being exploited. So many groups are in Nepal but they are backward, they don't get chances, they are exploited. And because of that we struggle all together, hand in hand with all indigenous people. (Interview No. 20)

These narrations cast a negative light on the higher castes and allow the ethnic actors to represent themselves as having higher moral standing. The figure of victimisation also narrates the extent of cultural oppression:

No, I can't speak the Danuwar traditional language not because of my choice. This is because of the state policy of Hinduisation, because of bringing all the people into Hindu policy. The state said that most Danuwars are Hindus but originally they are animists but the state brought all the Danuwars into the Hindu system. They destroyed their culture, their language and they imposed their own culture on them. So in that sense I'm very poor because I have lost my language, I have lost my tradition, my culture, I have lost my land. So I'm very poor because of the state. (Interview No. 3)

as well as discrimination on the labour market:

I applied for governmental jobs several times but I was never selected because of my ethnic background. When I saw the list of the people who were selected, only the Bahun and Chetri were selected. For me, the fault was that I was born as a Lhomi. (Interview No. 17)

Against this backdrop, the *counter-hegemonic figures* gain in importance. These challenge, in the first place, the power of the centralised state and then the stifling dominance of the high-caste Hindus in all important societal realms – above all, politics, legislation and public administration – as well as the blatant inequalities based upon the collectivising Hindu hierarchy. The counter-hegemonic discourses do not thrive upon grievances, but formulate a fundamental critique of the societal order; they claim rights and insist upon thorough societal reforms, including state restructuring.

Now indigenous people have started to say "We are not Hindus" and a kind of struggle between the indigenous people and the Brahman and Chetri started. And also, you know, I am not a Hindu person, I'm a Tharu. People are feeling that they have been exploited by higher castes, who ruled for 260 years our country, and are rising up nowadays. (Interview No. 20)

By the turn of the millennium the *figures of territoriality* and *temporality* came up in the public space. The figure of territoriality marks ethnic belonging to particular regions and landscapes. Ritual markers and other symbols stress particular locations of ethnic groups in space, the scope of formerly possessed lands and other territories, along with political prerogatives going together with these possessions – that were often lost to high-caste Hindu settlers or appropriated by the expanding state apparatus. Discourses of belonging have rhetorically connected spiritual ties, the emotionality of local attachments, existing and lost

landed belongings as well as authority over particular territories – going hand-in-hand with a sense of recognition. Furthermore, the duration of ethnic presence (*figure of temporality*) becomes increasingly important – and in particular the question: who was here first. Gradually, the term "*adivasi janjatis*" was introduced in the indigenous discourse. It denotes those population groups:

> […] whose ancestors had established themselves as the first settlers or principal inhabitants in any part of the land falling within the territory of modern state [Nepal], or who inhabited the present territory of Nepal at the same time when persons of different culture or ethnic origin arrived there (Indigenous 1994: 2).

Activists often voice varieties of this narration. I am providing several examples here to indicate the different shades of one theme expressed by the various activists interviewed by Buzki.

> The evidences are there. You can find them in our history. It is true that the Tamangs' ancestors live in this place for already 3,200 years. We Tamang are the ancient people of this land. […] For example, the Aryans of this land go to India to worship their ancestors there but we Tamang we go nowhere. All our things are here. That is the evidence. And also the Magars, Rais, Limbus you don't get them anywhere else than here. (Interview No. 25)

> The Limbus are the original settlers of the land because of my mythical point of view. Our stories tell it. Our ancestors haven't migrated, they still live in the same place, the came as the first group in their place. (Interview No. 29)

> In Nepal, Hindus arrived in the 12th and 13th century but many other groups, like the Rai, Limbus, Gurungs, Magar and many many more, we don't know since when they have been here. […] The Hindus captured the indigenous communities and exploited their land, their culture, their tradition. (Interview No. 13)

> We used to be landlords, my ancestors, my brothers but that land has been encroached by Brahman people. In Nepal we ethnic people are the indigenous people of Nepal. We are the sons of the land, people of the land but we have been exploited by some groups. We have no rights in the state though we are indigenous people, the sons of the land. (Interview No. 14)

> In the beginning, just like other indigenous communities in Nepal, Danuwars were having a very prosperous life. They had traditional settlements and these lands were owned in the very beginning by the Danuwar community only. They were the rulers of the land in the beginning. They had ethnic autonomy and they had a very developed civilisation but now they are displaced from their own land. (Interview No. 3)

> Brahman and Chetri want to show that there are no indigenous people here. If you ask them "Who are indigenous people?", they say, "Some came from India and some from Tibet." But we claim that we are the sons of Nepali soil and you people came from India. For some ethnic groups it might be true what they say. For example, we Gurungs came from Tibet area but we don't know when. So we are here for a long time and the Brahman and Chetri only came here recently. (Interview No. 31)

The rhetorical figure of "first-comers" has buttressed the indigenous peoples' quest for re-ordering the Nepalese society. Along with normative inversion, the narrations of past wrongs have increasingly turned into a broad-scale move-

ment demanding social justice. This new strategy, which started around the year 2003, found a new focus under the umbrella term "social inclusion". This combined the quest for more ethnic representation and autonomy with other areas of reform that came to Nepal from abroad. In the regional context, the Indian quota system has emerged as a role model, all the more so as it has evidently buttressed ethnic self-assertion on the subcontinent.

Indian Dalit activism has also proved enabling. In the global context, human rights activism, including the growing recognition of indigenous peoples' rights, the struggle against racism and last but not least the struggle for women's rights, has had a substantial impact upon the formation of socially-oriented movements. As ever so often in Nepal, the channels of development aid have provided the main platform for bundling the different movements and discourses together. It was the Nepalese branch of the World Bank that gave the concept of social inclusion substantial support, discursively combining the objectives of ethnic groups, Dalits and women as those "excluded". A side effect of this discursive operation was the general tendency to collectivise or even ethnicise such social conditions as "poverty", "untouchability" or "local community". All these semantic interpenetrations of diverse social spheres have resulted in the effect that the entire social body, dominated by ethnicising sediments, is currently described as fragmented into a myriad of holistic figurations. I am using the notion "sediment" because it is assumed that these discursive formulas will occupy the public sphere for a long period of time in future, by decisively shaping the public meanings in contemporary Nepal.

"Inclusion" is a complex and a somewhat risky term. To include the "other" in the establishment means to share resources, power and status, and this is never unproblematic. To incorporate someone into the dominant collective can amount, from the point of view of those formerly excluded, to co-optation – a strategy aimed at appeasing critical voices and dismantling a movement of its bite. Social inclusion into the existing constellations of power comes at a very high price and means challenging powerful glass ceilings, as well as crossing powerful barriers protected by the insiders. Elite co-optation into power constellations tends to result in new resources for legitimising social orders and naturalising power differentials. Given this ambivalence of social inclusion – which, unfortunately, is addressed only seldom in political communication – ethnic activism turned to another avenue towards greater participation, by insisting upon a thorough state restructuring. This path came in an entanglement between ethnic activism and Maoist politics and greatly bolstered the public success of the ethnic movement.

From 1996 until the year 2008, when the research was conducted, the Maoists gained increasing force, also as actors in Nepal's political communicative space. During this time, Maoism and the indigenous concerns were synergetic: the Maoists supported ethnicity while the *janjati* movement boosted the Maoists'

credibility. Their struggle and the state's counter-violence resulted in many deaths as well as in the destruction of material and immaterial goods (such as trust). At the same time, violence acquired transformative power: the Maoists knew the grievances of the population and they saw themselves as the spokespeople of the poor, the Dalit, women and the ethnic groups.

> Indigenous people are mobilised a lot by the Maoists because the Maoists raised indigenous peoples' issues. For example, the Maoists bought out the plan for the autonomous region for the Limbus. That was something new, strong for us, you know. That also means to me to be part of the movement that we have now. (Interview No. 18)

> Mostly indigenous people participated in the people's war. The Maoist party made a strong commitment for the right of self-determination and ethnic autonomy. Otherwise I think indigenous people would have waited many decades to think about ethnic autonomy. So that was a turning point for our movement, the indigenous people's movement. […] I can't blame the Maoists because they opened up everything. (Interview No. 6)

> The political change was only possible because of the Maoists, because they got the ethnic issues. They are more vocal to these issues. They were very sensitive to the marginalised people. […] Nobody would deny that the CN [Maoists] played a great role in achieving what indigenous people have now. (Interview No. 30)

The Maoists insisted upon a thorough state-restructuring and suggested the establishment of autonomous regions that would carry the identity label of the majoritarian ethnic group. Social inclusion – so the Nepalese Maoists' argument – can only be effective under conditions of decentralisation. The ethnic activists would add: "and only where the dominant ethnic groups prevail".

The ethnic activists introduced the term *janjati* into the communicative space of Nepal during the 1990s, to refer to "being indigenous", connoting authenticity and rootedness, with a durable relationship to a given territory. This term has significantly gained in sharpness in recent years and does not include the high-caste Hindus, now depicted as those who immigrated into the ethnic territories from India (NEFIN homepage, accessed 15 June 2012). The discursive figures of temporality and territoriality thus exclude the Hindus as those who came later from "outside".

> This is our territory, our land. We have been colonised by the people that came from outside. Now many indigenous communities such as Limbus, Magars, Tharus are displaced nowadays. In the very beginning definitely all the lands were owned by the indigenous people but the Bahunbad came to Nepal and covered it. Nowadays, the indigenous people are suffering. (Interview No. 4)

> The lands were originally owned by us but then it was taken by the government. And that is why my ancestors had to move away. Finally, they came to Kathmandu. […] I still have the dream to go back to my homeland. (Interview No. 30)

The plan to establish autonomous ethnic regions can be read as an agonistic collective positioning vis-à-vis the previous hegemonic practices and cultural codes sustaining the hierarchical social order. Simultaneously, these practices and codes allowed for constituting particularistic modes of thought, imagina-

tion, representations and modalities of political action that are postulated as "without alternative". In this vein, the political can be thought of as an antagonistic moment that constitutes a social other and reinforces unity within. The *figure of membership* acquires importance, here. Membership is designed anew according to a territorial principle of anciennity and some degree of differentiation of rights along collective boundary-lines.

The politically sanctioned fostering of collective identities would bolster the commitment of ethnic members – so runs one of the expectations embraced by the activists. But under the conditions of a significant diversity of population groups, which frequently lack a clear-cut majority, that live together in most places in Nepal, the claim to autonomous regions under the banner of ethnic identities is a risky political plan aimed at reversing the societal order. With the spatial ordering along collective lines and the mental maps reinforcing "container cultures", ethnic un-mixing may take place, especially when the local minorities would receive fewer rights and more obligations. These preoccupations have accompanied political negotiations over redesigning the administrative units of Nepal into newly delineated zones, and since 2016 into provinces that give some nod to the ethnic federalist demands.

Internal differences and boundaries

Our conversations with indigenous activists have revealed that joint political action has occasionally been impeded by conflicts and grievances from within their rank and file. In particular, despite the many depictions of ethnic solidarity at large, hierarchical attitudes have often been resented:

> There is also a cleft among indigenous groups that is upper class supresses lower class. Actually those communities that are stronger always try to capture more resources than the communities that are at the bottom. […] But if there are resources why only Newar and not Raute? […] Bigger communities like Newar, Gurung, Thakali, Rai, Limbu are dominating this movement. (Interview No. 3)

> There are a little bit disputes among them [the ethnic leaders] because the present leader [of NEFIN] has not been able to accommodate all the indigenous people in a common agenda. […] So a little bit dissatisfaction I can smell from other communities. Some are saying that NEFIN has not done anything for the very poor communities. (Interview No. 5)

> The Brahman, Chetri, Gurung, Newar don't want us to come into their sitting room […] Even the Magars discriminate against us and say, "Oh you are dirty". (Interview No. 17)

In the same vein, female activists voice criticism with regards to gender disparities. One representative of the National Network of Indigenous Women (NNIW) depicted the situation – and this can be read in intersectional terms – as follows:

> Our own organisations are male dominant. If NEFIN had raised our indigenous women's issues, then we wouldn't have established a different organisation. In NEFIN's structure there are only two female members, the others are all male. There is also no proportional representation there. (Interview No. 7)

Yet another important divisive line reveals the discrepancy in some activists' approach to their own ethnic cultures in actual practice:

> There are *janjatis* who are sending their children to English schools. They talk with their children "breakfast, lunch, dinner" and at that time they talk about their language, culture, their identity. These are called "artificial leaders". There are some fighters like that but others are doing a very good job. […] So for the preservation of our language and culture we have to bring it into practice […]. Otherwise, you know, it's only fighting with the government. […] That's the weakness of the *janjatis*. They talk about their cultures but they send their children to boarding schools and they talk English at home. They should come into practice I think. If they want to preserve their language […] they have to do it themselves. (Interview No. 31)

These examples point to an important degree of internal critique and even conflict, but this tends to shift backstage when entering the public arena. On the one hand, such criticisms can be taken as an expression of blurring boundaries in the process of intersectional negotiations. On the other hand, the tension between internal critique and the ways in which public narratives are shaped becomes apparent.

Conclusion

Obviously, ethnicity cannot be understood as static. In recent years, it has become increasingly crucial to pay attention to the dynamic processes of negotiating ethnic boundary-lines, of "social" or "ethnic boundary-making" (Wimmer 2008). Semantic interpretations and re-constructions, i.e. the elements of indigenous cultures, allow for a diversity of operations: the options can be exclusivist closures of ethnic boundaries, but also blurring of boundaries – while forging depictions of the united "*janjatis* of Nepal" as well as their modifications when internal differences come to light. This article documents in particular the strategies of ethnic closure that were prevalent in the negotiations prior to the year 2008. But the attempts at blurring ethnic boundaries cannot be overlooked. The activists needed to emphasise the common denominations of the diverse ethnic groups and also to highlight what all the indigenous people of this planet share.

I have argued in this contribution that the ways how the metaphoric language of ethnicity is deployed provides social actors with a broad range of options that allow for semantic connections or closures. In the political negotiations in post-peace-treaty Nepal, identities became reinforced and this resulted in

strategic essentialisations – that according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) allow for a fixation, stabilisation and a naturalisation of subject positions. The emerging public meanings comprised collective re-positionings, in particular, the downsizing of the social horizons of collective belonging as well as localisations. Simultaneously, also enlargements of social "we"-constructions (as belonging together to the collective of "indigenous people") have been wide-spread in the Nepalese communicative space.

The concept of positionality brings the situative and processual dimension of ethnicisation to light: the communicative negotiation of meanings. In these processes it matters very much who is included and who is rhetorically considered an outsider, and who is addressed as the audience. Accordingly, more or less subtle re-adjustments of the symbols at hand take place according to context. Nepal provides a very good example how dynamic the process of symbolisation can be when symbolic enrichment of ethnic repertoires takes place, over comparatively short time-spans.

This analysis takes up the crucial theme of the global travel of ideas and the empowering nature of cultural translations. Ethnic relations and conflicts, the negotiations between societal majorities and minorities, transnational interconnections and civil society contestations over the realisation of rights provide important avenues for uncovering layers of oppressed knowledge, standing in a clear-cut connection with the struggle over valid public categories and interpretations. I have understood culture as practice (Bauman 2011), in this enquiry: the cultural construction is social production. I am interested in the symbolic repertoires, in the negotiations over values in processes of translation, the exchanges on interpretations as well as the structuration of the social field that is characterised by inequalities and power differentials. This methodological position allows us to grasp the configurations of diversity as perennial negotiations where the language of ethnicity acquires key importance.

The language of ethnicity broaches the issue of the social effectiveness of ethnicising repertoires and highlights the dynamic nature of ethnicity formation. This concept enlarges our perspective at the modalities of coping with past injustice and suggests new modalities of social action: how to mobilise support, how to stage violence and make it effective and how to ritualise social unrest. The main emphasis was on emotionally charged meanings embraced by ethnic activists in Nepal that have buttressed the closure of ethnic boundary-lines in the first decade of this millennium and that have remained vital until today as members of ethnic groups continue to be dominated and marginalised (see IWGIA 2021). But it goes without saying that the discussed semantic repertoires can also effect boundary-blurring or shifting through acts of translation. As we all know, culture can achieve both aims, erecting forceful boundaries but also bridging social cleavages. The social negotiations in multi-ethnic societies demand from all involved stakeholders compromises that will never

result in definitive solutions. The analysis of the "language of ethnicity" brings to light how powerful, but also how dynamic the ethnic boundary-constructions can be.

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