

The Cult of the Earth Goddess Among the Magar of Nepal

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The military conquest of the Magarant, the Magar land, took place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Thakuri petty kings and their dependents (priests, artisans, soldiers) fled India to settle there. The Magar resistance appears to have been weak, due to their lack of unity and the alliances the conquerors formed with some of them. The Magar people quickly opted for assimilation into the royal caste of the Thakuri, adopting most of their cultural traits, notably their language and religion. Nevertheless they retained or developed particularisms in their relationship to the earth, as we can see in the rites they devote to Bhume. We should emphasize first and foremost that the name Bhume is itself Nepalese, derived from the sanskrit *bhû*, *bhûmî*. This goddess is neglected by the Hindi of high caste, whereas she is central to the Magar. This paradox has two possible sources: the Magar might have identified one of their principal goddesses with a minor Hindu deity by virtue of a common relation to the earth, conferring an unusual importance on the latter. Or they might have constructed a divine being on the basis of Hindu concepts, as the result of a new-found need to defend their rights to the earth in the face of the Hindu invaders. The second hypothesis seems more likely, since there is no trace of a Magar earth goddess before Bhume. Even in the regions where the Magar retained the use of their original language (such as in Palpa, Syangja, or in the Kham country) and where, consequently, some of the gods have Magar names, the earth goddess is called by Nepalese terms, such as Bhume, Bhuyar, or Bhayar. Furthermore, even if the Magar themselves once had an earth goddess of their own, the renaming of this deity would indicate a change of identity, given the importance of a divinity's name.

There are other indications that tend to support the idea that the goddess Bhume was developed as a reaction to the conquest. For example, the Magar call themselves autochthonous and freely describe themselves as “elders by the earth,” an expression that was obviously created afterwards, and rests on the idea of linking ancestrality and power over the earth, two central aspects of Magar identity. The precedence of their settlement of the land, as well as their martial character, in point of fact earned the Magar the relatively noble position of lower Kshatriyas in the new society created during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The precedence of their settlement is an indication of prestige among the Magar – who never tire of flaunting it – as well as in a caste society that recognizes it. And in fact the Magar easily found a Hindu deity, Bhume, upon which to graft an ideology that equated rights to the earth with ancestrality, placing the people of high caste, the more recently installed Hindi, in a delicate position, analogous *mutatis mutandis* to that of the Aryans in tribal India. As the example of the Magar in Nepal demonstrates, the earth cults and the monopoly of the priesthood over the earth deities can reflect a reaction to an invasion rather than a set primitive tradition. Confronted by people who flaunted their superiority in terms of purity, the Magar responded with a faint echo that claimed themselves elders by the earth and thus deserving of respect. The link between power and ancestrality, on the other hand, which is clearly illustrated in the Magar sense of the word *mijar*, meaning both elder of the founding line and the head of the village, and which underlies the cult of Bhume, was not recognized by the people of higher caste.

Bhume in the Local Pantheon of Gulmi

In a polytheism as richly developed as that of central Nepal, where Hindu and Magar cultures (to cite but the two cultures under examination here) are inextricably bound, the gods often lack distinct traits, and their functions are not clearly defined. Their nature can nevertheless be gleaned through their various associations, which are expressed verbally or made manifest in rites. This is why I consider Bhume a special case in their pan-

theon; in some ways she is like an evil forest spirit, in others she shares certain characteristics with the great masters of the earth, the mountain ridge gods.

Of the three levels that make up the world, the earth is the one shared between man, "the kings of cultivated lands," and the "petty deities," the "forest kings." This realm is ruled from on high by celestial gods residing on the mountain tops, the "Kailash" gods, who govern the whole earth (*prtvī*) as well as the great natural phenomena such as rain, hail, and epidemics. Associated with asceticism, these gods are nonetheless described as owners of the earth, such as Malika, whose name means "the owner." Identified with extreme purity, their worship is reserved for the society's elite, the Indo-Nepalese high caste and, to a lesser extent, the Magar. They are inaccessible to low castes and to women.

As we have mentioned, the men and their ruling deities share the earthly level with "forest" spirits. In this world the forest includes water, roads, and the underworld. The earth and the underground are part of the same level, and the gods found there are often described as evil spirits or forest deities. Bhume herself is conceived as such, but her position is unique; a wild goddess domesticated by man, she sides not with her own kind, but with the villagers who nurture and honor her. Her ties to the forest, where violent death prevails, are nevertheless emphasized by the fact that she is often described as the goddess of death. We cannot see this as a characteristic of an indigenous Magar earth goddess, dating from before the concept of Bhume, because relations between the deceased and Bhume are also found both among the caste peoples in central Nepal and in popular Indian Hinduism.

Men and forest deities are competitive and malevolent to one another. The main difference between them is a knowledge of agriculture, possessed by man and unknown to all others. These forest divinities are much like hunter-gatherers, living on predation. In fact, the groups of hunter-gatherers on their way to extinction, such as the Raute or the Kusunda, are imagined as forest divinities in central Nepal. When they offer up a prayer to the forest divinities, the men begin by offering them precisely what they lack, such as small shelters, the replica of movable sheds, as well as a miniature technical panoply (bow and arrows, a drum,

kitchen paddles, yeast), and, in particular, an ensemble of agricultural tools (hoe, swing-plough, beam, plane, etc.)

The Representation of Ploughing

Of all these agricultural tools, the swing-plough is held in the highest regard. It is the only tool to which people offer a prayer before using it, and the one that represents the highest achievement of their culture.¹ This is because the use of the plough not only distinguishes man from the spirits, it also defines a territory, and likewise a property. Thus up until the 1960s, non-cultivated private land was not considered the sole property of the owner. For example, in the village of Darling (Gulmi) where I stayed, anyone could gather fodder or firewood there. In similar fashion, itinerant farming did not correspond to ownership. It was only after three years of working the same spot that someone was expected to pay taxes, and in this way assumed ownership. In the many regions of Nepal, such as the Terai or the Mahabharata, the boundaries of the locality or properties are marked by ploughshares driven into the earth. While ploughing distinguishes man, as a peasant, from the errant spirits living by predation, which is to say from the spirits on this side of the divine, it also separates him from the other-worldly divine, those who inhabit the world of gods. Indeed, contact with the earth, of which ploughing is the most complete expression, is the lot of the ordinary man; the Hindu gods never touch the earth, and ascetics (or the crowned king) keep their distance from it by wearing wooden sandals. Furthermore, it is written in the Sata-patha Brahmana 1.9.1.29 that the sacrificer may reach the heavens through sacrifice, but that if he does not return he risks going mad. To remain human, he must in fact touch the earth. The brahmins, who live on earth in spite of their divine pretensions, nonetheless do not till it; they have neither the right to work the land nor to enter it for its exploitation, such as entering a mine, for example.

The passing of the plough has an important sexual symbolism. Valued for both its virile aspect and for the fact that this activity requires great skill – it is one of the only manual labors in which men are proud to be photographed – it also represents, in Hindu

terms, an impure blot that might taint a man of high caste. Sexuality and impurity in fact characterize both ploughing and its fruits. People say that in order to avoid all contact with cultivating the land – but might this not rather be with sexuality? – ascetics traditionally do not eat the fruits of ploughing, while brahmins living in the world content themselves with avoiding the touch of the plough. Moreover, nubile women, in anticipation of the day of *rsi pancami* – a ritual during which they purify themselves of their menses and recover their virginity – turn up small plots with hoes and eat pure rice in the furrow. The homology between earth and woman, between ploughing and the resulting sexual relationships, is taken even further in certain regions of India such as Bengal, where men stop ploughing and having carnal relations with their wives during a ritual period of five days corresponding to the “earth’s menstruations,” a taboo one also finds in Nepal, during a day set aside “to avoid the earth.” Significantly, the virgin and wild goddesses of central Nepal, such as Malika, must not be offered products of the fields, while people must abstain from eating grains on the day of their worship. The sexual symbolism of the plow can again be found in a ritual practiced by the shamans of Gulmi. This consists of being rid of the spirit of a still-born child or a child who died young by sealing it into an earthenware pot, which symbolizes a womb, the opening of which stoppered by a swing-plough before it is buried at a crossroads.

By the passing of the swing-plough, man thus enters into a special relationship with the earth. Here I am speaking of man with a small letter “m,” since women are excluded from the cults pertaining to the fertility of the fields and the earth in general. She is not supposed to step over the swing-plough or even an ox harness. As we see, the swing-plough belongs to the realm of the masculine in the face of the feminine, to humanity and the cultivated world in the face of untamed spirits and gods.

The Earth

The earth is ambivalent. It contains an intrinsic power that regenerates both men and demons. In the myth of the struggle between

the first shaman and the nine witch sisters in the Gulmi region, the shaman is vanquished by the sorceresses, who rip out his heart and roast it. The shaman nonetheless succeeds in eating his own heart and falls into a transe, declaring that he will "entrust himself to the earth." He lies down flat on his stomach on the ground for seven days, at the end of which he is reborn in all his glory. The power recognized in the earth can also be found among the Kham Magar, who call the ceremony they devote to Bhume a "ritual of power."² Its principle of vital energy is quite often the trump of demons, who come back to life or multiply in contact with the earth, as does Raktabija. Although the earth contains a formidable energy, the passage of the plough is considered an extenuating activity, the only one for which in the end the laborers are for the most part compensated for their efforts. The ambivalence of the earth can also be found in the myth of Prthu. Usually depicted in Hindu mythology as a defenseless woman oppressed by too heavy a load, who begs the gods or the king to come to her assistance, the earth appears in this myth as a perfidious creature who swallows all the vegetation herself and causes the world to waste away.

In short, the ambiguous nature of the earth is related to purity. As opposed to elements such as fire, which nothing can deprive of its pure character, the earth absorbs impurity, purifying it, while it is also capable of becoming tainted or contaminated. Hence women of high caste can be seen washing themselves with earth, then avoiding contact with it once purified by sitting on a banana leaf and not on the ground during the rite of *rsi pancami*.

We can identify two different male attitudes toward these ambivalent aspects of the earth, which I would call "brahmin" and "royal" respectively. The former is respectful. One finds this attitude among the brahmins of Gulmi, who make sure they do not plough so as not to "wound their mother," the earth, or among the Maharastra, who excuse themselves each morning before beginning to plough. The second attitude is much more complicated, as the myth of Prthu, mentioned above, bears witness. The king, generally depicted as the protector of the earth, here appears to dominate it. Earth had swallowed the vegetation and allowed the world to waste away, until Prthu forced it to return its bounty, leveled it out, and founded agriculture. In the Mahabharata or the

Bhagavata Purana, Prthu is thus described as the father of the earth, but this filiation is not so firmly established since the Laws of the Manou describe him as her husband. In fact, there are many indications that the king enters into a very intimate relationship with her, both protecting and dominating her, and that he is conceived of as her ploughman and husband.

In classical mythology, the earth goddess Bhume is a young woman of great beauty, is in danger. She plunges into the depths of the ocean. He who will save her is in fact the prototype of the ploughman, a wild boar. Let us remember that the wild boar digs the earth with his tusks to hunt for roots and that in the myths of central Nepal, it is often on land dug up by a wild boar in this fashion that a hunter sows seed and founds a village. It is significant that the Hindu kings often identify themselves with the wild boar, saving, working, and loving the earth. The deep intimacy between the Hindu kings and the earth is expressed through the Nepalese royal consecration, marked by anointing the king's body with earth from the different parts of the kingdom, while this unction is compared to a union. Moreover, the king is frequently called Bhupati (in the national hymn for example), the master or husband of the earth.

The privileged relationship that unites the sovereign with the earth can likewise be seen in the belief held among some of the Magar, according to which the king of Nepal would plough each year, followed by the queen, sowing the seeds. This ritual is thought to take place every year in the beginning of spring, opening the agricultural season. I was not able to verify this, although it seems improbable, since the custom has not lasted up to the present time. Whether or not the king of Nepal ploughs is of little importance, since this belief underlines the strict tie between the king and the earth's fertility in the eyes of the villagers. And the king radically distinguishes himself from his peers in this act (or in the belief of the existence of this act), which is forbidden to the brahmins and the Thakuri. We do have a famous example of royal labor in the Ramayana, when Sita is born from the earth when king Janaka makes a furrow with his swing-plow, and the custom has been verified at least in the ancient Indianized royal kingdom of Cambodia. Faced with the brahmin's respectful attitude toward

the earth, imagined as a descending filiation, the king, her protector, demonstrates his domination over her; he is either her father or husband, and not her son. The Mahabharata 13.8.21 clearly establishes the privileged relation between the earth and warriors, without, however, explaining why the brahmins are "absent": "In the case when the husband is absent (dead), the wife marries his younger brother. In this way, since the earth cannot have a brahmin, she takes a Kshatriya to wed."

Let us now examine the agrarian rites that punctuate the agricultural cycle in the Gulmi region, before examining the collective cults offered to the earth gods, who on this level are imagined as the protectors of a territory in connection with power.

Offerings to Bhume and the Earth Deities

The three main crops cultivated in the district of Gulmi are rice, corn and eleusine. The oldest of the three crops is eleusine, but this grain for the poor is considered impure, and its first fruits are rarely offered to Bhume. To my knowledge, only the inhabitants of the village of Darling offer four liters of eleusine to the goddess after its harvest. The cultivation of corn probably dates back to the seventeenth century in Nepal, and its first fruits are offered in most of the villages and among all the groups. The ceremony is simple. The divinity is represented by a stone in the field and is usually accompanied by Nag and Nageni, a couple of divine snakes, and Jhankri, the shaman of irrigated lands, as well as Sikhari, the divine huntress. A chicken is often sacrificed, then a libation of milk and fumet of clarified butter mixed with artemisia are offered to the deities. Afterwards, a whole cornstalk is uprooted and the officiating priest, opening the husks, places it on Bhume's altar, "ready to be eaten." One ear is then grilled on the hearth, then a few kernels are mixed with butter and offered in three vessels intended, respectively, for Bhume, the divinities of the lineage and the "divinities of the outside." More simply, the brahmins of the village of Musikot, for example, content themselves with alerting Bhume that they are going to harvest the field with this phrase: "Very well, now we are going to eat grains."

Aside from these widespread offerings of first fruits, the villagers from Darling offer four litres of corn in the name of Bhume after the harvest, but here again they are an exception.

The offering of four liters is most often made when only rice is cultivated. The offering is presented to a young virgin girl in each household in the name of Bhume. The young girl disposes of it as she sees fit, eating it, selling it, or even making it into alcohol if her caste allows it and she desires to do so. This offering indicates that Bhume is conceived of as daughter of the head of the household. This is unusual, for it is not a question of food left over from an offering to the gods or a sacrificial wage; the young girl is substituted for the goddess herself, as recipient of the offering. The worship of Bhume also accompanies the cutting of paddy. It takes place on the threshing floor or in the field and usually includes the sacrifice of chickens.

Aside from these agrarian rites, two similar ceremonies in which Bhume, Jhankri, Nag and Sikhari are worshiped take place in the months of November and December (*mansir*) and April and May (*baisakh*). During these times, both a compensation and a restitution are offered to the earth deities. Therefore the brahmins of the village of Asleva leave a little chicken in the fields so that it may go into the forest and become wild. In exchange for the fruits of cultivated earth, man gives nature a small domesticated animal, in order to maintain an equilibrium between the wild and the cultivated, as if to appease the wild side of Bhume.

As we can see, it is mostly harvesting that prompts the worship of Bhume. This includes three other deities in the agricultural context. First of all is Sikhari, the forest deity presiding over wild animals and the hunt. The relationship between Sikhari and Bhume can be seen in the village of Neta, in the commune of Dibrung, where the Magar offer the heart, liver, and rissoles of meat of the slaughtered game to Bhume (in her dual guise of Sime-Bhume) in place of Sikhari. The second deity accompanying Bhume is Jhankri. Jhankri is a generic term that designates, in the region of Gulmi, the forest divinities related to shamanism. Bhume herself sometimes qualifies as such. Most often, Jhankri or the couple (Jkankri and Jhankreni) who accompany her in the rites preside over the muddy earth, such as irrigated fields, as well as the aquatic ele-

ment in general. Just as Bhume appears to the Magar in dreams in the guise of a young and beautiful brahmin's daughter, decked out in finery and dark-complexioned, Jhankri is imagined as a rich man with black skin. More than Bhume, he is a *lago*, a god who sends calamities. A Magar once told me that after having ploughed his irrigated fields he saw two beautiful women with dark complexions walking in it. The next day he fell ill and concluded that he had seen Jhankri's wives, who had sent him his illness. An irrigated field is considered dangerous. The Dogmani Gharti Magar of Darling thus imagine that one of their ancestors died in his irrigated field when he tried to plough it, sinking into the mud with his oxen, where he remains to this day. Jhankri is the counterpart of Bhume, her complement. Bhume herself is often called Sime-Bhume, although Sime, whose name means "the one from muddy ground, from the source," never appears as an individual entity. Their inseparability serves as a reflection. Hence a Kami artisan from Darling explained to me one day that the Kami and the Magar were like Sime-Bhume, inseparable and complementary.

Finally, the last divine figure associated with Bhume is Nag, the divine snake living in the underworld. Like Bhume and Jhankri, the Nags appear as bearers of wealth, and this trait should be considered characteristic of the earth and all those who inhabit it, particularly in the region where mineral lodes are plentiful. Here again there are strong ties between Bhume and the Nags. Their figures are, it appears, partially confused among the Kham Magar.³ Likewise, in the village of Darling, one day someone said to me that "they were making a snake of ashes for Bhume," without it being clear whether the snake represented the divinity or was being offered to her.

Nag plays a special role in the agricultural cycle. He is the object of a well-known cult in the Hindu world, the *nag pancami*, which falls on the fifth day of the somber two-week period of *saun*, in June and July. On this occasion, all over Nepal and in the north of India, people paste drawings of Nag onto the doors of houses and temples. In Darling, people say this day is the day that Nag and all the other snakes emerge and rise out of the ground. For the villagers it is also the beginning of winter, which corresponds indeed to the "descending season" (*udauli*), the season

during which the sun begins its trajectory toward the north. The purpose of this ritual is made clearer through comparison with what takes place during its counterpart six months later, in *sri pancami*, in the beginning of spring and the rising season (*ubhauri*). People say *sri pancami* marks the beginning of cultivation. Each person must plough his field or have it ploughed. The first cut of the plough is ritualized. First the "snake is scaled," then "split," and then "cut into pieces." The placing of this snake in the field is determined by an astrological computation, and the ploughman must take special care to scale the snake by beginning with the tail. With the snake thus cut into pieces, the field becomes "homogeneous." The presence of the snake in the earth is an obstacle to working the field and especially to the working of the swing-plough; they compete. Once scattered, "there are Nags everywhere, in a continuous fashion," people say, and working the fields may begin. The snake regulates the solar and agricultural calendar. Killed for the rising season and working the fields, it is reborn in the descending season to protect the crops as they ripen. The main role the villagers attribute to the Nag is to protect the crops from thieves and evil spirits. The role of protecting the crops is also an attribute of Bhume. It is taken much further in the case of the latter, since she assures the protection of the men who cultivate the fields. Thus a young Magar, frightened to see me walking around the village at night, told me that if I encountered an evil spirit, I would be advised to jump off the road and into a field where Bhume would protect me. The protection is better, he added, if the field belongs to you, which underscores the contract that independently links each domestic group with the form of the goddess presiding over his lands.

Akin to the forest deities and to those of the underground, Bhume appears as the daughter of the head of the household at the time of the offerings of the first fruits. This idea, which is linked to the "brahminic" attitude toward the earth, coexists with the idea that the chief, or *mukhiya*, can be substituted for the goddess. This is indicated, for example, in the symbolic purchase of a tomb site near Bhume, an act usually performed with the chief. In this the Magar chief is no different from the Hindu king, often described as akin to the earth.

The Village Cults Dedicated to Bhume

Intimately linked to the founding of a village, the cult of Bhume remains associated with the first settlers. Most often it is conferred through tribal lineage. In the village of Aglung, the inhabitants go so far as to hire an officiating priest from a neighboring locality, descendent from a group of Magar who once lived on their lands, and who had been pushed north at the time of the subsequent settlement. Four hundred houses join together for this cult and offer an enormous sacrificial payment to the Magar officiating priest from the village of Kahare Darling, who receives a half-liter of rice from each for his office. Should we see this as a ritual compensation, guaranteed by Bhume, for lost lands?

The collective cults dedicated to Bhume are intimately tied to power and political units. Bhume is an omnipresent deity, defined by the sociological group that worships her. Hence in Darling one speaks of the "Bhume of each man's field," who are the recipients of the agrarian rites I mentioned, as well as the "Bhume of the whole village." One finds this distinction among the Magar of Sikha who recognize on the one hand a Mukhiya Bhume, the deity of the territory of the chief, or *mukhiya*, who is worshiped by the chief who "protects the people, the crops and prevents epidemics," and, on the other hand, a "*thum* Bhume," belonging to a vast political unit comprised of many territories of *mukhiya*. In Sikha, over and above individual and village cults, there exist territorial cults devoted to Bhume.⁴

Conversely, in the district of Gulmi, the cult of Bhume is often based on very small territorial units, such as the *tol* (quarters), or the *ward*, administrative divisions of the Panchayat. This can probably be explained by the fact that the Magar are less numerous there. Hence, in a Panchayat such as Badagaon, in Gulmi, where the population is largely made up of people in castes, only the Magar hamlet organizes a collective cult of Bhume. In many Magar villages, the officiant of the collective cult of Bhume was the chief, or *mukhiya*, up until the reform of the Panchayats in 1961. This cult, intimately tied to political organization, changes considerably with each political reform. Before examining its evo-

lution, I will describe, as an example, the cult I was able to observe in 1990 in Syaulibang (the district of Pyuthan), where the former *mukhiya* continues to exercise his role of officiant as in the past.

Some time before the offering, each household under the *mukhiya's* control sends him a half-liter of corn with which he makes beer. Then, three days before the offering, he presents himself to the Bhume's sanctuary, where he remains alone, day and night. The villagers take turns bringing him his meals there. These meals must include a fish, supposedly the first catch of the year. The offering takes place on the tenth day of the bright month of *mansir* (November and December), at the beginning of winter and the fishing season. Hence at one time it opened the season of hunting, since an animal killed in the forest was supposed to be brought to the *mukhiya* at the same time as the fish. In the sanctuary, the *mukhiya* may not speak during his close confinement; no one may even touch his house. When he returns home on the morning of the offering, he sprinkles his way with holy water in order to remain pure. He sits on a leaf on the veranda of his house, wearing a white turban on his head, still without speaking. All the villagers gather in his courtyard, bearing rice as well as kids and sheep offered as pledges of sacrifice to the deity. Damai musicians play their instruments, to which strips of cloth have been hung. A man from the *mukhiya's* lineage officiates as priest. He takes the twelve jars of beer from the chief's house and places them in the courtyard. Then he measures the rice brought by each person into a large cloth placed on the ground, verifying that each family has indeed brought a half-litre, and places it all in a basket. The chief gives orders with gestures of his hands and head. He designates the priests and the Damai, signalling for them to leave. They go straight to the sanctuary, where the priest offers incense, milk and strips of cloth to Bhume. The chief then points to a man in the crowd who carries a bow and quiver. He comes to the center of the courtyard and executes a very beautiful dance, flourishing his drawn bow. Turning slowly, he removes an arrow from the quiver and pretends to shoot it in the four directions of the universe. With a wave of his hand the *mukhiya* dismisses him. This man is a Bhujel Magar, a wife-taker in the chief's lineage; he leaves to worship Sikhari near a spring. The priest then returns

from the sanctuary and the chief orders him to leave again. Seizing the basket containing the rice, he goes back to the sanctuary. Finally the twelve jars of beer are seized by different men, at the *mukhiya's* command, and brought to the sanctuary (*than*). The chief and the priest then wash themselves in the river and afterwards all the villagers proceed to Bhume's *than*, bearing their sacrificial victims. Only the men have the right to approach the sanctuary, although they do not have the right to go inside. They prepare rice with milk in a large pot, while the *mukhiya*, alone and still silent, takes hold of a large sabre with a flared blade and decapitates the sacrificial victims one by one in a great slaughter, for the animals are not supposed to be attached and no one is allowed to help him. Next comes a banquet in which the entrails of the victims are eaten with milk, rice, and the corn beer offered by the community. Here again, the women do not take part in the feast, which nevertheless unites the men of all castes and notably the Damai, the very low caste of tailor-musicians.

This rite is enacted primarily by the chief. Based on a script well-known to all, since it takes place wordlessly, it stages a pure chief of supreme authority: all the actors obey the slightest nod of his head. One sees clearly the role of the village priest, who is acknowledged as chief among the Magar. During the time of the cult, he enters into an exclusive relationship with the earth goddess, with whom he first spends three days and nights in private conversation, speaking to no one. He finds himself transformed by this intimate contact with the goddess into a state of purity that cuts him off from the rest of the world, since when he emerges from his asceticism he still may not speak to anyone and must particularly avoid contact with the earth, purifying his way with water and sitting on leaves. In short, he is the only one who may penetrate the goddess' sanctuary and offer her sacrifices. This exclusive relationship with the goddess is very unusual in central Nepal, and one can notice the quasi-matrimonial relationship between the *mukhiya* of Syaulibang and Bhume, whom the chief's brother described to me as "our wife" (since the chief himself could not speak to me).

In fact, information from the village of Darling indicates that the "Bhume of the whole village" was once, long ago, merely the

Bhume belonging to the chief. The ritual took place in the very courtyard of his house, where he sacrificed to the goddess, with his own hands, a pig whose flesh was eaten by all the village men, to the exclusion of the women. The purification of the Syaublicang chief no doubt embodies a collective dimension, as does the Darling chief's cult of Bhume. Elsewhere in fact, as in the Kham Magar village studied by A. de Sales,⁵ the whole village must be purified before worshipping Bhume, and all the villagers are confined.

For the Magar, the concept of the village community is structured, in part, around the cult of Bhume, in which everyone participates. In Sikha, where a certain number of people recently settled, the celebration of Bhume defines the "real villagers,"⁶ and those who do not participate are not really part of the community. The cult of the goddess combines an ancestral connection to the earth with a recognition of an inherited power over the earth, the power of the *mukhiya*. A Sikha villager thus defines the *jagatko puja* ("cult of territory") in the following, negative terms: "It is different from Bhume because the *mukhiya* does not participate in it; even if he participates, it is as an individual, not as the *mukhiya*."

The strict link between the cult of Bhume and power is seen in the modifications it has undergone as a result of political changes. Thus in Sikha, the cult of the goddess was not carried out in 1960, a date that corresponds to the reform of the Panchayats.⁷ J. Kawakita notes: "We stopped giving offerings to Bhume in 1960, because the *mukhiya* took the advice of the younger generation. Unfortunately, this resulted in epidemics, scant crops, and hailstorms in the village. Thus the offering was reinstated in 1960." Similarly, in Darling the reform of the Panchayats had an impact on the *Bhume puja*. Bhume's sanctuary was transferred from the chief's courtyard to the top of the mountain. While it is still the man elected to office by the Panchayat who decides its precise date, he is no longer the officiant of the divinity, but rather a Magar priest. More significantly, the cult of Bhume has been to some extent supplanted by that of a new divine figure, Grama, "the villager," who seems to be for the Panchayat what Bhume was under the *mukhiya's* jurisdiction.

People in Castes and the Divinity

The attitude of the people in high caste toward the collective cults addressed to Bhume differs according to the context. J. Kawakita discovered that some people refused to participate in a collective cult organized in the territory where they live in the region of Sikha. This extreme attitude seems to belong to the people who have more recently migrated there. In the region of Gulmi, I did not encounter this attitude, and was, on the contrary, struck by the fact that the people of high caste participated in the collective cults of Bhume organized by the Magar, accepting the subordinate role of cook. We must, however, note that this participation took place in contexts in which the Magar were in a majority; but I did discover an extreme case of the organization of a "tribal cult" by people in castes, where there was not a single Magar. The attitude of the high caste toward the Magar Bhume is thus no doubt tied to the conditions of their implantation in their territories. In the former zones of cohabitation, a *modus vivendi* took root, giving a certain prestige to the indigenous people, or allowing them to believe they still had a monopoly of power over the earth.⁸

Regardless of the apparent disinterest in Bhume in the high caste, the religious practices in the district of Gulmi demonstrate that the earth goddess is nevertheless represented in some sanctuaries and receives collective worship in the context the Dasehra festival, during the ten days dedicated to Durga, the warrior form of the goddess. In Dasikot, Rupakot and Juniya, Bhume in fact has a sanctuary in the *kot* (temple arsenal), next to Kadka, the divine sabre. The goddess is represented by a sacred rock driven into the earth. She must remain anchored, as the *kot* in Rupakot demonstrates, where she is situated on the ground floor, while the sanctuary containing the arsenal and the divine sabres is on the first floor. The cult of Bhume still retains an impure connotation in these cases. In Juniya, a Kami officiant (from the lower, artisan caste) offers her chickens, impure animals, that is. In Rupakot she receives chickens as well. The Dasehra, on the other hand, celebrates royal power above all else, through the mediation of the local chief. The very association of Bhume with Khanda, symbol of sovereignty, suggests that for the high caste the only truly

divine relationship between a man and the earth is established by the king, of which the local chiefs are but the representatives. Through the cult of Bhume, a direct relation between the chief and the earth takes place among the Magar, while it is mediated by the king among the Indo-Nepalese high caste.

Bhume is the wife of the Magar chief, as she is to the Hindu king. She is the mother (or the virgin daughter) of the Indo-Nepalese of high caste and the ordinary villagers. One might interpret the king's forbidding of brahmins and Thakuri to plough, and severely punishing infractions, as a way of distancing them from direct power over the earth. Nonetheless, while the Hindu king's power over the earth is limitless, except for the ocean, and rests on his military might, the Magar associate power with the first occupation of a territory, thereby restricting it by definition.⁹ This idea is obviously bothersome for the high caste immigrants, who arrived after the tribes, seized power, and never ceased to extend it. Thus in the *Gorka Vamshavali*,¹⁰ the lack of enthusiasm for the territorial expansion of the Magar is invoked by two brahmins when they discourage the king, Narabhupal Shah, from taking ministers from this group.

The supremacy of the Hindu king over the earth is nonetheless recognized by the Magar at the time of the Dasai festival. Up until the reform of the Panchayat, the Magar *mukhiya* was doubly legitimized: by a direct relationship to his ancestral land through the cult of Bhume and as a representative of the Hindu king at the time of the Dasai festival. This situation is different from that of the Tibeto-Burmese Limbu peoples from the eastern tip of Nepal, who preserved two concurrent forms of legitimacy after the conquest of their territories: the one delegated by the Hindu king to the Subba chiefs, affirmed by the Dasai festival, and the one conferred upon the former *Hang* chiefs by the power of the mountain.¹¹ The concentration of these two types of power among the Magar probably goes back to their ancient contacts with the Indo-Nepalese and the alliances their chiefs formed with them. Knowing nothing of the specifically Magar forms of rule before their conquest, the particularisms they cultivate today during the cult of Bhume, in which the chief plays a large role, give us food for thought. Since they were a population of hunters and wandering

clearers of the land at their origin, the importance the Magar grant to ploughing lies in contrast to the Limbu ideas of power based on a force of nature. One has the impression that the Magar made a royal Hindu model their own, by rooting it into the earth, in order not to be chased from it. On the other hand, if we refute the idea that the Magar created a later-day ritual in the case of Bhume, the ideas of power over the earth and the source of the chief's power expressed therein manifest great similarities to Hindu thought, which certainly helped in their Hinduization.

Notes

1. Quite often a new plough is put through a little ritual before its first use. Similarly, during the Tihar feast, the plough is the only farm implement that is being venerated. It is decorated with a flower wreath and a *tika* good-luck tag; in the Sallyan, Rolpa and Jajarkot regions the masters of the house take off the plough-share and fill the slade slot with rice.
2. A. de Sales, *Je suis né de vos jeux de tambours*, Nanterre, 1991, p. 93.
3. See M. Oppitz, *Frau für Fron*, Frankfurt, 1988.
4. J. Kawakita, *The Hills Magars and Their Neighbours*, Tokyo, 1974, p. 345. To relativize this statement it should be noted that the *thum* comprise lands of very different sizes depending on the region. In Gulmi they are very large and correspond to those of the ancient kingdoms, and perhaps this explains why they do not have the same rituals.
5. A. de Sales (note 2 above).
6. J. Kawakita (note 4 above), p. 369.
7. At the village level, the reforms of the Panchayats involved a rearrangement of the ancient lands of the *mukhiya* chiefs into larger areas called Gaun Panchayat. Moreover, a person elected by means of the universal suffrage (the Prandhan) replaced the traditional village chiefs whose authority was hereditary.
8. M. Lecomte-Tilouine, "About Bhume. A Misunderstanding in the Himalayas," in: G. Toffin (ed.), *Nepal. Past and Present*, Paris, 1993, pp. 127-34.
9. If the authority of the king in the territories he controlled militarily was not being challenged, his possession of land put him among the Brahmins in Indian history. According to R.C.P. Singh (*Kingship in Northern India*, New Delhi, 1968, pp. 101-10), the Visvakarman Bhauvana myth offers a Brahmin representation of the land that stood opposite to the pretensions of the king.
10. Y. Naraharinath (ed.), *Gorkha Vamshavali*, Benares, p. 101.
11. Ph. Sagant, "Le double pouvoir chez les Yakthumba," in: G. Krauskopff and M. Lecomte-Tilouine (eds.), *Célébrer le pouvoir. Dasain, une fête royale au Népal*, Paris, 1996.