

The Untouchable Bard as Author of his Royal Patron: A Social Approach to Oral Epic Poetry in Western Nepal

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The relationship between a bard and his patron in western Nepal links individuals situated at opposite extremes of the social hierarchy within the caste organization. At first sight their relationship is totally foreign to those in modern Western societies as described by Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, authoritative speech emanates from persons in a higher social position, which is bestowed to them by the tacit mandate of a group for which they serve as the mouthpiece.¹ To summarize, verbal communication directly reflects and reproduces the sociopolitical order. In the Himalayan bard/patron relationship, on the other hand, we are confronted with a paradoxical situation wherein the superior delegates the authority to speak in public to an inferior. This reverse transmission of the authority to speak, as puzzling as it may appear, was not uncommon in Medieval Europe, for instance, between the king and his jester. Openly contrary to the established order, the relationships involved in these cases are necessarily ritualized and highly regulated. They therefore call for a contextual approach in order to examine them and the rules that condition them, and make them acceptable. Yet studies dealing with comparable, yet defunct practices often lack the information necessary to undertake a detailed contextual approach and easily reconcile their paradoxical or contradictory elements, such as the two opposite depictions of the ancient Greek bard, as a prestigious poet on the one hand, and as a poor wanderer on the other.

The perpetuation of a fully oral bardic tradition, as well as its specific social setting in western Nepal, thus presents a rare opportunity to examine in all its complexity one such “reverse” relationship of authority within its context of enunciation *and* its wider social context. Such a configuration makes possible an ethnography of the conditions framing ritualized speech,² which obeys a greater variety of rules than the ordinary communication Bourdieu describes. In particular, it sheds light on the ambiguity of the role and position of oral poetry with regard to the sociopolitical order, an ambiguity that is widely attested in through time periods and across geopolitical boundaries, starting with Plato rejecting Homer from the ideal city.

¹ See, in particular, “Le langage autorisé” (Bourdieu 1975).

² Though the gods are invited by the bard to attend the epic performance, the latter is not a religious ritual, and it is even said that it should not be performed in the vicinity of a temple, hence my use of “ritualized speech” instead of “ritual speech.”

In these pages, I will first present a sociological portrayal of the bard in his relation to his patron, and then discuss elements relative to the form of his art, before examining a new oral composition—an embryonic epic of the People’s War waged in Nepal between 1996 and 2006—as a final discussion about the nature of the bardic contract.

The *Hudke* Bard and the Damai Caste

In western Nepal, bards belong to the untouchable caste of tailor-musicians called Damai or Dholi. No formal categories other than castes distinguish the category of people considered untouchable (*achut*) in western Nepal.³ The various untouchable castes, however, seem internally hierarchized according to the nature of their compensation for their work. Thus, the castes of artisans who are linked by contract to upper-caste patrons and receive a fixed amount of grain from them in exchange for work may be called “contractual” untouchable castes. Due to their tailoring activities, the Damai caste is ranked within this category. Yet the Damais are also part-time musicians, and in this respect, they are akin to a second category of untouchable castes, mainly of musicians, such as the Gaines and Badis, who are not contractual and are ranked below them at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Contrary to the contractual upper-untouchable castes, who live off the share of the crops that they receive from their “pure”-caste patrons as a salary for work, musician castes, which are small and scattered, have no regular source of income and are popularly said to “beg” when asking for money in exchange for their musical performances.⁴

The Damais, being both tailors *and* musicians, can be said to have a dual belonging, and this may explain why they hold the lowest rank among untouchable contractual castes and the highest rank among the untouchable “begging” castes. Contrary to the “begging” castes, playing music during their patrons’ rituals is part of the Damais’ contract, but it is noteworthy that when they act as musicians, the Damais are said to behave as beggars by “begging” (*māgna*) for cash or extra cash. A bardic performance, like any musical performance, is indeed “priceless” in the sense that it has no fixed price.

The Damai caste as a whole therefore holds an intermediate position within the two groups of untouchables, “contractual” and “begging.” And, among the Damais, this is even more true of the bards, who are often full-time musicians not engaged in tailoring activities, and thus more akin to “mendicants” than any other member of their group. Yet strangely enough, their strongest link to “begging” activities does not cause a drop in their status, but rather elevates

³These groups are now collectively called Dalit, and are engaged in a movement to gain freedom and dignity. The Dalit movement, however, is still embryonic in western Nepal, compared to other regions. Within this movement, one observes a will to erase a long history of domination by no longer mentioning any of its components, in particular names of address and reference. Yet, some believe, on the contrary, that domination must be documented to reveal its mechanisms and get the means to get rid of it. As I will show in these pages, understanding the bard/patron relationship without taking into account the ideology behind the relationship between the so-called upper and lower castes is simply impossible. Hence my use of derogatory terms used in this context, however painful they may be felt by those who were, and still are, stigmatized by them.

⁴In this region of Nepal, even today, all untouchable groups, contractual or not, are landless or possess only very small plots.

them.⁵ As I will try to show, this can be understood in sociological terms. Indeed, unlike “begging” musician castes such as the Badis and Gaines, who are itinerant or semi-itinerant independent performers, the bards never break the link they maintain with their patrons but rather reinforce it by their artistic activities. This holds true even when they are not performing for them or in their vicinity, but far from their place of residence.

The bards’ patrons, for their part, belong by rule to the other half of society: the so-called “pure castes” (*choko jāt*), who accept water only from each other, and include the priestly caste of Brahmins and the warlike castes within the Kshatriyas. The bards’ privileged patrons are members of the small Thakuri caste, who are considered as Kshatriyas of a superior, royal status. The Thakuris are internally divided into two main groups of clans related to the sun (*Surya vaṃśa*) and the moon (*Candra vaṃśa*), as well as into patrilineal (Shah, Shahi, Malla, Cand, and so on).

Performing for these distinguished people, the bards themselves are distinguished within their own caste for being first and foremost musicians, and secondarily only tailors, unlike the other members of their caste. They are also remarkable for playing the *huḍko*, the hourglass drum, an instrument which is so specific to them that they are named after it, *huḍke*, as is the whole bardic séance, called *huḍkeli*.

The *huḍko* drum itself is treated differently from other musical instruments, and from other membranophones. Apprenticeship for the *huḍko* drum starts late, around the age of ten or twelve, and begins without the instrument itself; the apprentice either beats the air, one’s fist (see Video 1), or uses a pot. As far as I know, it is the only musical instrument that is first practiced in this manner. Because it is fragile, the *huḍko* drum is kept away from children, who are



Fig. 1. A bard from Bajhang district holding his *huḍko* hourglass drum; photo by the author.

⁵This is true of the bards of Dailekh and Achham districts on which my study focuses. Fieldwork in Bajhang and Baitadi districts (October-November 2014, with Franck Bernède), which are west of the two districts studied here, has revealed a major difference regarding the bards’ status. Indeed, the *huḍke* of Baitadi district in far western Nepal have a very low status, because, it is said, they make their wives dance, which is assimilated to prostitution. It is believed that they were forced to do so by the local kings (of Askot). As a consequence, the Damais do not consider them as members of their caste and do not intermarry with them. They perform in pairs, without any chorister, and the bard’s wife does not play any instrument but dances and sings. In the Bajhang district, located to the East of Baitadi, two distinct groups of bards are found: the *huḍke*, akin to the Baitadi groups and ranked at the lowest, and the bards, who correspond to those I am dealing with in these pages, and who make a point of not being called *huḍke* for fear of being assimilated with the lower status bards; they instead call themselves *bhārate* (from the term *bhārat*, or “epic.” The low status of the Baitadi bards correlates with their weaker link to patrons, as evidenced by their wide but superficial genealogical knowledge (see note 13). For a clearer picture of the bard’s geographical distribution in western Nepal, see the map at the end of this article.



Video 1. Late Damai, who was considered as the greatest bard and magician of Achham district, teaching his art to his grandson. Séance filmed in October 2007; video by the author. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/lecomte-tilouine#myGallery-picture\(2\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/lecomte-tilouine#myGallery-picture(2))

seen playing other musical instruments, especially drums, as soon as they are old enough to stand up on their own.

In addition, the *hudko* drum differs from other instruments in that it allegedly produces “speech,” *bol*, not “sound,” *āvāj*. Its speaking faculty is emphasized by the widespread use of the active verb form *bolna*, with the *hudko* as the subject. *Hudko bolcha*, “The hourglass drum speaks,” people say, as if it were an independent agent. As a matter of fact, in a well-known folk tale from western Nepal, a *hudko* speaks on its own and when doing so, it reveals the truth, *satya*. The *hudko*’s truth-statements, *satya kurā*, have an immediate effect on reality, which they transform, just as truth statements

pronounced by humans do. The performative faculty of the *satya kurā* statements is encapsulated in the semantics of the term *satya*, which means both “truth” and “reality;”⁶ while the term *kurā* refers both to a “thing” or “phenomenon,” and to “language, speech, discourse,” so that, depending on the context, *satya kurā* can either designate a true statement or a real thing, or the process by which the first creates the second.

Like his drum, but unlike all the other members of his caste who are mere instrumentalists, the bard also “speaks” while he performs. Although he uses a variety of registers and modes of expression, including derision, license, and the grotesque, his speech is said to be endowed with *satya*, “truth/reality,” and to have the ability to subjugate the audience. It is qualified as being *itihās*, which refers to history or literally “what happened” (from Sanskrit *iti ha āsa*, “so indeed it happened”). Depicted both as *satya* and *itihās*, the bard’s speech may thus be considered “historical truth.” As both the audience and bard know that truth statements have the ability to become reality, the “subjugation” or “enchantment” (*mohanī*) evoked by the audience when they listen to the bard’s utterance of “historical truth” is closely akin to a transporting journey into the “past.”

The bard stands out among the members of his caste in many other ways: he is the only one to dance (or he leads the dance), he always wears a ceremonial dress, which is optional for his choristers, and he fulfills the role of director, whereas no one holds such a role in a Damai band. Bards are all the more remarkable in that, while members of the Damai caste are found in every village, their number is very small. Interestingly enough, their spatial repartition is far

⁶The definition of *satya*, in the *Nepālī bṛhat śabdakoś* (Parajuli 1983:1293) reads: *jasto hunuparcha tyastai vā sandeha nabhaeko; sācho; vāstavik; yathārtha* (“Such as it has to be or not doubtful; true; real; exact.”)



Fig. 2. The bards of Sera, Achham district, and their choristers; photo by the author.

from being random, and they usually dwell at ancient sites of royalty.⁷ This is so much the case that in searching for bards, one may discover unknown ancient sites of royalty, as happened to me in Sera, a hamlet in Achham, which was considered by the bards who live there as the very first dwelling of the kings of Achham. This correlation is one of the bards' many strong ancient links with the caste of warriors (Kshatriyas), and even more so, among the latter, with the ancient royal families or Thakuris.⁸

The Bard and his Royal Patron

The nature of the intricate relationship between these two socially-opposed groups struck me at once when I first went to western Nepal in 2000 to inquire about the history of the kingdom of Dullu. At the time the People's War was in its sixth year, and I was told to keep away from bards who, I had heard, were affiliated with the Maoists and would ask foreigners for enormous fees. Yet when I started talking to a member of the royal family about his family history, he advised me to go and ask "their Damai" who was more knowledgeable about the subject than himself. I was surprised by his answer, since my previous fieldwork in central Nepal

⁷In some localities bards have an official role in the rituals of royalty. Thus, in Dullu, dailekh district, a bard has to sing during the ritual celebrations of war (that is, the Dasain festival) in front of the Royal Palace. Dullu remained an independent kingdom within the kingdom of Nepal until 1962 and the palace was still inhabited by the local king's sister in 2000.

⁸For the sake of regional comparison, see the ethnographic atlas of the castes of musicians in Rajasthan (Neuman et al. 2006).

had not accustomed me to hearing a man of higher status recommend a man of lower caste for his knowledge, and even more so when it concerned his own family history, yet I went to find the specialist in question. This Damai happened to be a bard, *hudke*. In spite of his poor health, when I told him that I had come because I had been told that he knew a lot about history (*itihās*), he started singing two genealogies and three epics as a reply.

I then realized that any study of the local Kshatriyas would necessitate a study of their bards. My next experience proved that the reverse is true: to have a bardic séance performed without a Kshatriya patron upsets the latter. Word of my visit to the old Damai bard spread, and the next day, a dashing young bard from a nearby village came to offer a séance, saying that unlike his sick old uncle, he could not only sing but also dance. I accepted and he chose to perform on the auspicious day of Cait ashtami, the Spring Festival of Dasain. The séance included four epics that all described scenes of violence between members of royal families. The first epic traced the deeds of the child-king Kasiram avenging his ancestors and bringing back their heads, which had been severed and kept as trophies by the mighty monarch Hinupati. Kasiram was killed on his way back while carrying one ancestral head in each hand. The second epic was about King Rani Rawat, whose seven queens cheated on him with the same man. Both King Rani Rawat and his wives' lover both were killed by the other King. King Rani Rawat's son, born after his father's death, later avenged him with the help of a bard. The third was the story of twin boys, Sija and Bhija, who were taken away and impaled by their maternal uncle before they had even seen their father's face. Finally, the last story was about two sisters who were killed on their way from their marital homes to their native home, which they dreamed of reaching.

As these short synopses show, the local epics, which deal with kinship and war, are very cruel and transgressive, with respect to familial and marital norms.⁹ Yet, respect for the context of their performance is crucial, as I realized when my high-caste neighbor interrupted "my" séance, in my host's courtyard, to have it performed in his own house instead, where he treated me as a guest (see Video 3, in which he intervenes). Indeed, the bardic performance reflects the dual organization of society based on the subjection of one group to the other, and the contract that links them together. It is conceived as a gift from a prestigious man for an audience of guests. As confirmation of this order, Kshatriyas refer quite crudely to their bards as *angse* or *bhāge*, each of which can mean "inherited" or "received as a share," as if they were part of their ancestral property. Bards show submissiveness towards them, especially outside the bardic séance. However, if one asks a Kshatriya why he invites a bard to perform, he says that it is for his "praise," *badhāi*, a term that literally means "increasing" and that recalls the Latin etymology of "author" as the one who "increases."¹⁰ Conversely, when a bard is asked what his art is all about, he replies that it is to further his patron's name, or literally that he "makes his name," *nāu banāuna*. The bard is therefore the "author" of his patron; he is conceived of as an expert in

⁹ On the epic tradition in western Nepal, see Bordes (2005 and 2009), Lecomte-Tilouine (2007 and 2009b), and Nepal Yatri, (1978 and 1984). Similar traditions are found to the West of this region in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, see Gaborieau (1974a and 1974b), Leavitt (1997), and Oakley and Gairola (1977 [1935]). For a general overview of oral epics in India, see Blackburn et al. (1989).

¹⁰ On *auctor* and *auctoritas*, see Benveniste (1969 II:748-51), who considered the link between "author" and "increasing" to be strange. In the case under study here, it relates to the eulogy.

winning fame for his patron's benefit and at his patron's request. Both the bard and the patron's views converge on this point, which lies at the heart of the contract linking them together.

Such a contract raises the questions about how prestige can be increased from below, and, given the bard's miserable condition, about which rules allow him to play this role in relation to the most respectable persons while remaining himself at the bottom of the social scale. An examination of the form of the *séance*, of the bardic recitation, and of the oral texts will help to answer these questions.

The Bardic Séance

Reciting the Patron's Genealogy

As a prelude to the epic (*bhārat*) recitation, the bard recites his patron's genealogy alone and *a cappella* when he performs for his "royal" patrons. The genealogy may be recited in two forms: either the long *vamśāvalī* or the short *āśikā*. This part of the *séance* acts as a signature sealing the bard's and his patron's reciprocal, ancestral link, and is omitted when the bard performs for someone other than his master.¹¹ Embryonic genealogies of royal heroes are also found in the epics themselves.¹² The bard's genealogical knowledge places him as the guardian of the royal family's pedigree.

But, apart from the genealogy, and in spite of the strong focus on the character of the bard in local discourse, the bard cannot perform alone. He must be accompanied by two or three choristers, with whom he maintains a complex interplay of music, narrative, and body movements.

The Bardic Team

The bard and his choristers sometimes sing together. Sometimes the choristers repeat, like an echo, the second part of the verse sung by the bard. But at other times, the bard sings the first half of the verse and the choristers complete it by singing the second half. The choristers therefore not only have to know the text by heart, but also need to react appropriately to any modification the bard may introduce by skipping certain passages or by adding contextual flattery and so on. Bards also seek to multiply choreographic effect by dancing in a group of two

¹¹ This includes other patriline, including Brahmins, to whom he may also be attached by contract, but whose relationship is considered secondary. On the genealogical knowledge of the bards in Dailekh district, see Lecomte-Tilouine (2007 and 2009b).

¹² Imbedded genealogies are frequent in the oral epics of far western Nepal, where the bards co-exist with a distinct caste of genealogists (Winkler 1979). For an example of a genealogy inserted in an epic, see the beginning of *Maula Rani*, recorded by Marc Gaborieau and Mireille Helffer and translated by myself in: http://epopee.humanum.fr/corpus_epic.php. By contrast, in the Dailekh and Achham area, on which these pages deal, only micro-genealogies or genealogical landmarks are found in epics. The bardic institution in Bajhang district shares most of the features found in Dailekh and Achham, whereas in Baitadi district, the bard's status is low (see note 6) and his link with one family of patrons is weak. As a result, bards know a large number of short genealogies (up to 32 in one of the cases recorded).

or three. When accompanied by other dancers, synchronization and synchronized mirroring bring additional *effet d'ensemble* or “team effects” on the audience (see Video 2). The performance transforms the bard and his assistants into a single person with multiple faculties, while the patron is also made multiple in the assembly of prestigious guests and family members who surround him. This qualifies the bardic contract, which is more far-reaching than ordinary work contracts in that it tacitly includes the patron’s assembly of peers and the bard’s team of fellows.¹³



Video 2. The bards of Sera, Achham district, performing the opening dance of the bardic *séance*, on stage, Kathmandu valley; video by the author 2009. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/lecomte-tilouine#myGallery-picture\(4\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/lecomte-tilouine#myGallery-picture(4))

Inviting the Gods to Come and Sit

Following the genealogy, the bard opens the *séance* with a song addressed to the local gods, who are called by their names and invited to “come and sit.” The bard invites the most prestigious guests to the royal performance, rather than inducing their godly presence in human bodies, as is the case in neighboring Kumaon, and rather than treating men like gods, as was the case in Ancient Greece.¹⁴ Indeed, no further reference to the presence of the gods is made afterwards, and all the images the bard uses to flatter his patron and the audience borrow exclusively from royal imagery, without alluding to godliness.

The initial address to the gods and all subsequent sung parts of the epics are versified and formulated in a language that the villagers declare to be distinctly archaic. By contrast, the recitatives are in ordinary language (that is, in modern prose). Archaic language is not used to the same degree by the bards, but it is always difficult for the audience to understand, and some parts may even be obscure to the bards themselves: in this regard, this language tends to be self-referential and to embody the past.

¹³ It seems that the number of bards dancing together may have been greater in the past: the epic of Rani Rawat, for instance, mentions a *séance* gathering 22 bards at a royal court.

¹⁴ Indeed, Phemios, Odysseus’ bard, tells him: “I am such a one as can sing before you as to a god” (*Od.* 22.349, trans. by Lattimore).

Telling to Teach, Singing to Move

The epic (*bhārat*) starts with a long recitative, which is declaimed by the bard alone and punctuated by beats of the *huḍko* drum, played by the bard and his choristers. During the recitation, the bard sometimes uses his drum “to embellish his voice,” as he says, by placing it horizontally, close to his mouth like a microphone. But rather than amplifying the sound, it makes it reverberate. While he recites, the bard strolls about and makes large gestures with his hand, pointing his forefinger, as if he were teaching.

The recitative sums up the preceding, archaic, and versified sung part in an easily understood way, and pursues the narrative further, until another song takes over, which corresponds to actions, such as displacement or battle, or to strong emotions, such as weeping or rejoicing, (see Video 3). Epic thus makes use of a tiling effect, which is not only intra-narrative—tiling is frequent in other types of Nepali narratives, such as folktales or even novels—but also characterizes its global alternate structure in songs and recitatives.¹⁵

The songs are sung in turn or in chorus by the bard and his choristers. They are melodious and rhythmic, and the bard’s choreography follows the acceleration of the tempo, which provokes “joy” or “enthusiasm” (*joś*). As a rule, the rhythm becomes ternary, and the bard starts spinning round and round, always inclining his head in the opposite direction of the movement of his skirt, and he speeds to reach the climax that represents the moment his skirt attains the horizontal. He may also “break his waist” (*khambār mārne*) and dance in a squatting position while holding up his drum in order to “delight” the audience. Epics are



Video 3. Gome Damai, performing the epic of Kashiram, Dullu, Dailekh district; video by the author, 2000. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/lecomte-tilouine#myGallery-picture\(5\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/lecomte-tilouine#myGallery-picture(5))



Fig. 3. The bard’s skirt reaching the horizontal; photo by the author.

¹⁵ On intra-narrative tiling in epics of Doti district, see Bordes (2005 and 2009). On a similar epic tradition in Bagan, western Garhwal, where low-caste bards “alternate between sung verses and prose passages (. . .) to entertain their Rajput ‘Masters’ and to arouse their sense of pride,” see Zoller (1997:484).

thus constituted of two contrasted components, songs and recitatives, opposed by both their form and purpose yet tiled together. The sung parts, *cutkilā* or *churmalā*, (terms that also mean “refrain”) enact the story: the bard then mimics action, uses the language supposedly spoken at the time of the action, and addresses the whole audience rather than one member in particular. All this contributes to transporting the whole assembly back to heroic times. The bard’s dress, presented as the men’s ancient costume, reinforces this effect.

The recitatives that come after the songs are called *pharmāis*, a term of Persian origin, meaning “order,” as well as “announcement” in central and eastern Nepali usage. As for the bards, they use it in the sense of “instruction” or “explanation,” saying that the songs are intended to “make [people] understand,” *bujhāuna*. During these phases, the bard specifically addresses his patron within the assembly, narrating the story as he points his forefinger at him. This is a gesture of authoritarian instruction, apparently so strong that some bards claim that they have learned epics in this way, from the forefinger of their father or grandfather. The magisterial dimension of the *pharmāis* is reinforced by the fact that the bard then often uses his drum to punctuate his oral text as if it were a written one, by playing two beats at the end of a sentence, in the same manner as two bars mark a full stop, and by playing a series of beats between two episodes in the same way that a chapter ends with a whole line of bars.

If songs usually correspond to a climax in terms of the action or of emotion, they sometimes also totally break up the narrative and refer to whatever pleases the bard, such as the economic development of Nepal, or personal praise addressed to his patron or people in the audience, with the aim of collecting extra money. These interludes are highly appreciated and may last a long time. While flattering the audience, the bard describes himself as miserable, starving, and thirsty: he thus caricatures the social order, and pleases the assembly of “kings” and “beauties,” as he calls them, who then show their generosity.

To Beg

Several epics may be sung during the course of a single séance, and there is not necessarily any interruption between two of them. The end of the séance, by contrast, is clearly announced by a benediction of the bard, and then by the bard introducing himself. He mentions his name and precise place of residence, as if the author of the text, and then starts a special dance, holding up his skirt in order to receive in it the gift of money from his patron. It is an occasion for the latter to appear grand by paying a very high price for his praise, since he somehow sets a price on his own prestige. The price paid is displayed in a final magnificent dance where the bard exposes the bank notes fixed to his turban, or the golden jewels (such as earrings) he has received.

Raising Emotion, Disrupting the Audience

Enthusiasm and Tenderness

When speaking of their art, *kalā*, bards differentiate between the sung and the declaimed parts of the epics. They explain that in the sung parts the drum and the songs provoke emotion among the audience, while the declaimed narratives “make [people] understand.” The register of emotion is by far the most important of the two, with bards being evaluated by their ability to rouse them, that is, “to make [people] laugh and cry.” Bards identify and oppose two main feelings that their art generates: *joś* (“enthusiasm”/“excitement” and *dayā* (“tenderness”/“compassion”). They associate the first emotion with combat, action, and speed, which are said to provoke joy, excitement, and pleasure. On the other hand, tenderness is described as an emotion akin to sadness, and in epics, it is provoked by the ill-treatment of innocent, weak persons, especially child-princes and old royal mothers, who express their helplessness in laments. Its tempo is slow.

The epics themselves are said to fall into one of these two categories and are qualified either as *jośilo bhārat*, an enthusiastic epic or an epic that could make the audience laugh, or as *dayālu* (or *runuvā*) *bhārat*, a poignant or tearful epic, which could make them cry. Yet this classification of a whole epic is far from corresponding to its performance, which permanently shifts between contrasting emotions: it corresponds rather to its dominant tonality.

Disrupting Formulas

The shifting effect in epics is not only due to unrelated interludes, but more so to the use of formulas, which punctuate and ornament the narrative, and add either a heroic or a comic counterpoint, almost randomly. Formulas such as, “Will the valiant warrior’s son survive or die?” or “The valiant warrior’s son told me: bite your mother,” permanently blurs the narrative and mixes emotions. The formulas themselves are frequently divided into two parts, which are separated by the continuation of the narrative, and these two parts would further blur the meaning and intelligibility of both the formulas and the narrative. These additions and the different colors they contribute to the narrative thus maintain a form of distance from the text. It not only requires the audience’s full attention, and contributes to their capturing, but it also poses the comic as the systematic counterpart of heroism in the bardic séance. This mixture is not only present in the text itself but also appears in the sudden improvisation of a Damai from the audience, who may start to dance alongside the bard in a ridiculous manner while the latter lauds the glory of the heroes provoking loud laughter. This tends to transform the staging of the social order into a mockery of its fundamental values. But rather than being a dangerous critical depiction, it seems rather to indicate the secure distance between the two main protagonists, the

bard and his patron, which nullifies any possible competition between them and allows an extraordinary freedom of expression.¹⁶

To sum up, the *hudkeli* séance is particularly disruptive. It blurs the individual agency by bringing together a group of persons, the bard and his choristers, and their “speaking” hour-glass drums, to retell a single narrative in different voices, with several effects, such as chorus, echo, or stereo. It also shifts back and forth from the past to the present, from verses to prose, from song to recitative, from orality to literacy (with narratives declaimed as if they were written texts), from feeling to understanding, from enthusiasm to tenderness, from heroism to comic. In addition, the performance multiplies the effects of surprise: archaic songs may be followed by modern or ultra-modern songs improvised by the bard, recurrent comic interventions by Damais from the audience disrupt the performance, and formulas unrelated to the plot and punctuate the declaimed narrative, often breaking radically and unpredictably from its tone.

In this regard, the formulaic expressions in the epic tradition of western Nepal differ radically from the role it played in Homeric epic poetry, in which formulas are fixed epithets of the gods and heroes.¹⁷ While they bring regularity and predictability in the latter case, they break this predictability and maintain irregularity and unpredictability in the western Nepal’s epics. Their effect is maximized when the formulas introduce a register opposite to the narrative, such as the crudest vulgarity in the middle of a most noble or tragic episode, or a royal address in the middle of a comic passage. In this manner, the formulas often form create oxymorons within the narratives;



Fig. 4. The bard’s royal posture. Patal, Achham district; photo by the author, 2007.

¹⁶ On the other hand, the bards of western Nepal do not address mockery directly to their patrons, as was the case in early nineteenth-century’s Rajasthan, according to Tod (1829:xii), who wrote about this practice: “The vis, or poison of the bard, is more dreaded by the Rajpoot than the steel of the foe.” Contrary to these dreaded bards, who, beside their “sale of fame,” in their own terms, also wrote historical annals, the bards of western Nepal maintain a respectful joking relation with their masters, somewhat comparable to Molière’s attitude towards Louis XIV.

¹⁷ See Milman Parry’s thesis (1928) or his posthumous collected works (1971).

Michel de Certeau (1982:199) has analyzed such figures, showing how the juxtaposition of the unjuxtaposable creates a third unknown dimension, “a hole in the language,” which is transporting. In the case of western Nepal epics, the oxymoronic formulas play an important part in the subjugation that the performance exerts on the audience, perhaps because they create such a ravishing “hole” in the language, but also for two more immediate reasons. First, they capture the audience’s attention and force them to concentrate on the text, lest it becomes unintelligible, and second, by rupturing registers, they procure the pleasure of surprise, provoking enthusiasm and laughter.

Consistent with the effect of surprise brought about by the use of unrelated songs and formulas, the thread of the epic narrative plays with twists and turns in the plot, and portrays the Kshatriya heroes as most erratic. This unpredictability helps entrance the audience and create a space and time apart from ordinary life, bringing together gods, heroes, and men, pure and impure, past and present, as well as an array of values and conducts, and also to disrupting them all. Yet, this swirling art is said to be immutable and passed down unaltered from generation to generation. As a token of the stability of this ancient tradition, the bard maintains a very straight royal posture, with his head held high and an expression of disdain on his face, clearly enacting the nobility of the Kshatriya heroes that he brings to life, in all circumstances.

Epic Composition

The Bards’ Secret Alphabet

Contrary to most other regions of the world, the epic repertoire in western Nepal is still entirely oral, and until recently was not the object of any revival within a political or nationalist project. This may be explained by the fact that this is a remote and poor region, where the adult literacy rate in 2001 was only 25 per cent, and the Human Development Index 0.350. However, this is yet another paradox: though renowned as specialists of oral poetry, many bards in western Nepal are literate, which is particularly remarkable among their group as they are the only untouchables with an ancient written tradition. But their literacy is very specific and contributes to their isolation. Indeed, bards learn and use “their own” alphabet, a cryptic alphabet known as *kalāute akṣar*, the “artists’ signs,” which are said to be incomprehensible to those who can read Nepali, and vice versa.¹⁸ They never use this writing for ordinary purposes or for memorizing epics, but only to record genealogies and what they call “books of magic.” Though not all of the seven bards with whom I have worked in Achham and Dailekh districts knew the alphabet, those who were in possession of it affirmed that learning it is the prerequisite to becoming a bard. According to them, the training starts formally at the age of eleven or twelve. The future bard first learns the artists’ alphabet with a “guru,” often his grandfather. Afterwards, he must read “twelve books” written with it, and then record his royal patron’s genealogy using this alphabet;

¹⁸ There is not enough room here to devote a section to this alphabet, which is similar to the Devanagari script used in Nepali, except that some letters differ slightly, while others are radically different. This feature brings the *huḍke* of western Nepal close to the castes of genealogists in central India who use such an alphabet. See Chambard (1963) for a detailed study.

however, he will never read it in public nor show any of his writings, which are kept secret.¹⁹ Epics, dance, and music, on the other hand, are handed down orally and by imitation (see Video 1).

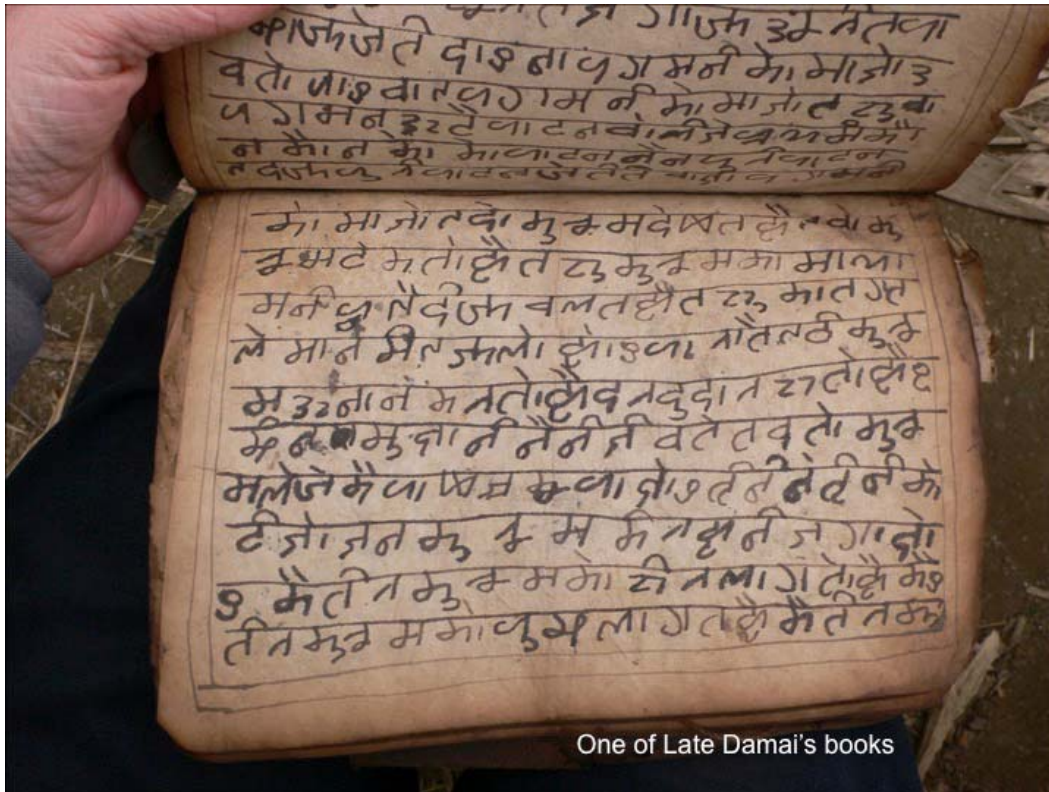


Fig. 5. Sample of a text written in the bards' cryptic alphabet; photo by the author.

To Preside over the Warriors' Clashes and Alliances

Bards say that their art was born from war, that they used to accompany their masters on the battlefield, singing their forthcoming victory on their way, and composing poems celebrating the battle afterwards. Bards are also presented as such in the epics they sing, in which they even teach their masters the tricks that allow them to defeat their enemy. The most common theme in this epic literature is that of a Kshatriya child, whose father and forefathers were killed by another Kshatriya who has kept their heads as trophies. This practice prevents funerals from taking place in a proper manner and the deceased from becoming ancestors. The child's quest consists in restoring his own patriline by killing the enemy, bringing back his ancestors' heads, and performing the required funeral rituals. But deprived of a father, the Kshatriya child receives no respect from his peers, and seeks support from men in his family's service instead. The bard and the smith are his main allies who contribute to restoring his identity before he can restore the integrity of his royal line and his own status.

¹⁹ The books I was shown deal with magic, and one cannot but think of the parallel with the fully oral Gaulish tradition, which knew only few exceptions, among which are magic formulas written in the Greek alphabet (Delamarre 2001).

Interestingly, in modern times when no such war is being fought, the bard's function is still related to the identity and integrity of the Kshatriya patriline and its relationship with other Kshatriya patriline, since he is invited to preside over their weddings.²⁰

A Maoist Epic: How the People's War Reactivated Epic Composition

With the revival of a warlike tradition by the Maoists who launched the People's War in 1996, the political situation has changed. By waging war against the government, the Maoists led a cultural revolution in the mountain regions held in their control. In many villages they forbade music that they considered to convey values they condemned, such as immorality or feudalism.²¹ In central Nepal, they introduced new musical forms and Chinese choreographies, whereas in western Nepal they chose to reform local traditions. They asked the bards to replace the apostrophe "O King" with "Hey Comrade," which apparently prevented some of them from performing at all. Globally, epic recitations were rare during the People's War. But when the Maoist Party chose to promote regional and ethnic autonomy from 2003 onwards, they invited bards to perform at their meetings. As the Maoist weekly newspaper *Janadesh* (Budha 2006) reported: "In the past, feudal rulers used this presentation to describe how glorious they were. (. . .) today the bards sing a political lesson."²²

Though it is not known if they did it willingly or not, some bards performed in Maoist events. Only two out of the seven groups of bards with whom I worked in 2007 in Achham performed for the Maoists, but they were happy to do so. Remarkably the Nepalese bards who had not composed anything new for three or four centuries found inspiration in the People's War. In their compositions, they inscribed this war into a long heroic tradition, while transforming their own art in accordance with its new Maoist ideology—to judge by the Maoist epic I recorded in 2007 in the hamlet of Sera, Achham. Apart from this recording, only a very short extract of a bardic show included in a Maoist propaganda movie is known to us.²³ The Sera recording is thus a rare testimony of the conditions of reactivation of the bardic tradition in western Nepal and deserves further examination.

²⁰ On these occasions, he first plays the role of an intermediary, with a family bard leading the groom's procession towards the bride's village. They are met at some point along the way by another procession made up of the bride's kinsmen led by their own bard. The meeting of the two family bards is the occasion for a recitation by the bards of the two parties' genealogies, generally related to the sun and the moon respectively.

²¹ I was also told that the Maoists forbade music because the Damais could transmit information at a distance by using a secret language with their drums.

²² This material is no longer on the internet because it was a clandestine Maoist newspaper.

²³ Eight glorious years. Video posted on www.cpnm.com, accessed January 2005 (now closed). The video can now be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARUvuKs0_sk. The passage in question is between 24:30 and 26:14.

The People's Epic (*janavādi bhārat*),²⁴ entitled by its author, Harka Bahadur Dholi, starts with the birth of the celestial bodies, of Baburam, one of the two leaders of the People's War, and of the Prachanda Path, which formed its ideology:

(. . .)

Yes, the moon, planets and the sun emerged in the sky

Yes, they originated in Paradise

They originated in Gorkha, Babu and Ram

It originated in Benares, the Path of Prachanda.

(. . .)

Yā āgās tapin lāgyā²⁵ candra ghara suraj ho. . .

Yā, soragaunī tapin lāgyā. . . ho

Yā, soragmā tapin lāgyā Bābu jati Rām ho. . .

Yā, Kāśī tapiyā Pracanda path ho. . .

Gorkha, the birthplace of Baburam Bhattarai (Babu and Ram in the text), is remarkable for being the cradle of the dynasty that conquered Nepal, as is the Prachanda path, which is made sacred by the bard who ascribes its birth in the holy city of Kashi (that is, Benares).

The epic then introduces Prachanda, the main revolutionary leader starting with his birth, and identifies him as the son of his father, whose name is provided; as such, it presents a very unusual picture in Maoist culture, but one that respects the epic tradition of presenting the hero as the offspring of a famous patriline, rendered here by a micro-genealogy. Then, in the same manner that the epics depict Kshatriya hero's physical development year by year, here the various stages of Prachanda's education convey his gradual development:

When, *O King*, Pushpa Dahal, Mukti Dahal's son, was born. *O King, the valiant warrior's son said: bite your mother,*²⁶ *O King*. When Comrade Prachanda was born in a village, when Pushpa Dahal, son of Mukti Dahal, was born, *Lord, O King*, he went to study at the village school.

O King, from the village, he went to study in the district. *O King*, from the district, he went to study at the centre. *O King, the valiant warrior's son, murderer of his parents, who studied up to the Civil Code of the Muggin Caste*. When he had finished his studies he returned here, he returned to his country.

²⁴ The People's Epic (*janavādi bhārat*) was composed and sung by Harka Bahadur Dholi, who was accompanied by his father and elder brother, bards of Sera (Achham district). I filmed the performance in their locality in October 2007. The following selections are my transcriptions and translations from this performance.

²⁵ *tapin lāgna*: "to start to shine or to heat, to emerge."

²⁶ For easier reading, the formulas are given in italics. They are identical to the ones used in the traditional repertoire narrating the deeds of medieval kings and heroes. This epic uses mostly one formula, but is frequently broken in two parts.

Jab mähārāj Mukti Dāhālkā chorā Pushpa Kamal Dāhāl tapī gayā chan ta ho. Mähārāj terī āmā toknyākā bhanyo mähārāj mardākājī paikelāko chorā. gāukā eutā jab kamred Prachanda tapī sakyāpachi Mukti Dāhāl ko chorā Puśpa Kamal Dāhāl tapi gāyā chan ta hajur he mähārāj gāukā skulmā paḍhna lāgyāchan.

He mähārāj gāukā jillāmā gāyā ra paḍhyā chan. He mähārāj jillābāt kendramā gāyā ra paḍhyā chan. Jab mähārāj mardākājī paikelāko chorā hāḍnātā jiumārā jāt kamārāsammakā ainsamma paḍhisakyāpachi ta jab paḍhiguni sampurna bhaisakyā paṭit pharkyā āphno deśtira pharkyā chan.

In the epics the Kshatriya hero usually decides to go to war at the age of twelve, when he learns of the atrocities committed against his father and grandfather. In the case of Prachanda, once his studies are over, he becomes furious when he realizes that education does not lead to employment, and that the Dalits (“untouchables”) and women are treated like animals:

Bite your mom! O King, told the valiant warrior’s son. “How bad is the country!” O King, Bite your mom! told the valiant warrior’s son. “Even those who have the SLC, a diploma or a degree do not find a simple job, one must understand the reason.”

O King, (. . .) he realized that here, it only works for the big ones, nothing works for the small ones. Bite your mother! “Well, where to begin the class struggle, how could I manage?” he said, O King, the valiant warrior’s son, and to do it he looked towards the Dalits. O King, “Their ability to work is good, and everything works, but their water does not work.”²⁷ O King, The valiant warrior’s son. They have qualities and skills, O King, the valiant warrior’s son. “Where is the good huḍkya from this village, where is the good huḍkya from this village?”²⁸ Come on, go get him and bring him,” they said, O King, the valiant warrior’s son. He was brought, he performed, and he charmed them by his bardic dances. Until then, everything was fine, but when the time came to sleep, they said, giving him a bundle of straw: “Go, go down with the menstruating women and sleep in the cowshed.”²⁹ O King, the valiant warrior’s son. Prachanda understood that behavior and also that women are Prajapati’s creatures.³⁰

Terī āmā ṭoknyākā bhanyo mahārāj mardākājī paikelāko chorā deś ta kāhā tal rahyo cha, he mahārāj terī āmā ṭoknyākā bhanyo mardākājī paikelāko chorā. paḍhi guni es el sī, āi e, bi e katāya pan ajhasamma piunko naukarī napāyāko pan vyahorā bujhyā chan.

He mähārāj, (. . .) thulākai calanyā nānā ko ta kehī na calanyā kuḍā bujhyā chan. Terī āmā ṭoknyākā, ab yo varga saṃgharṣa kāḍḍā uṭhāu ta ma kasorī lajjāu ta bhanyo cha, mahārāj mardākājī paikelāko chorā, phurukka phakyora dalit paṭṭi heryā chan. He mähārāj, sip calanyā sab calanyā pānī nacalanyā bhayo. He, mahārāj mardākājī paikelāko chorā, sip gun huno cha, mahārāj mardākājī paikelāko chorā, hudkyā kako cha, rāmro phalānā gāuko bajāunyā kāko cha rāmro phalāno gāuko, he mähārāj, lau ta, jāau lyāau bhanyo mähārāj mardākājī paikelāko chorā, lyāyo bajāyo, sajāyo hudkeli sudkeli haryo.

²⁷ That is, the water they offer cannot be accepted by anyone other than members of their caste.

²⁸ A variant pronunciation (and orthography) of *huḍke* (“bard”).

²⁹ The bard, as a Dalit (or untouchable), is not allowed to enter the houses of “pure” castes. When menstruating, women of all castes are considered untouchable and treated as these groups.

³⁰ That is, Prachanda understood that all human creatures share the same nature.

*Uhitak ramrai haryo sutanyā tak lau ta kã sutanyā bhanepachi ek ãtho parālko diyā, lau jā, tali chāupachi goth jā bhanyo cha. He mähārāj yo vyahorā pan bujhyā chan. Jab mähārāj mardākājī paikelākā chorā prajāpati nāri huncha.*³¹

In this section, the bard introduces his own character in the story, as is traditional in the epics of western Nepal and creates a direct link between himself and Prachanda, the hero. But, while in traditional epics the bard helps the hero to maintain or restore his status, here it is the hero who sets about improving the status of the bard.

Like a Kshatriya hero in the epics, his anger leads Prachanda to launch a war. He attacks all the king's strongholds, in a chronology that follows roughly that of the major Maoist attacks, but also comes progressively closer to the place of enunciation of the text: a hamlet near Kamal bazaar, the last place to be cited. Let us use this example to examine how this war is first "sung" and enacted in a song, which uses the present tense, to be subsequently "explained" in a declamation using the past tense:

(. . .) Where to begin the People's war, he said, *O king! Valorous warrior's son! Comrade Prachanda, the son of Pushpa Kamal Dahal, O king! Valorous warrior's son!* started to speak about launching the People's war, *O Lord*. How good, how excellent!

(song)

Now Lord, now from east to west the People's War spread
from east to west the People's War spread. . . (bis)

Now from east to west the People's War spread
from west to east the People's War spread. . .

Now from west to north the People's War spread
from west to north the People's War spread. . .

Now they attack Dang, they attack Tali.
Now they attack Rukum, they attack Rolpa.
They attack Rukum, they attack Rolpa.

Now they attack Jumla, they attack Khalanga,
they attack Jumla, they attack Khalanga.

Now they attack Binayak, they attack Kamal bazar,
they attack Binayak, they attack Kamal bazar,
(. . .)

³¹ These first three extracts in modern vernacular language serve to show the specificities of the Nepali used in Achham. Archaic language, on the other hand, is not used at all in the People's Epic.

(declamation)

“O lord, valorous warrior’s son! When comrade Prachanda launched the People’s War, O king! Valorous warrior’s son! from east to west the People’s War spread, from south to north spread the People’s War. O King! They attacked Dang, and Sindhuli, they attacked Rukum, they attacked Rolpa. O King! They attacked Myagdi and Bhojpur. O King! They attacked Kalikot and Jajarkot. O King, valorous warrior’s son! They attacked Mangalsain and Sampya too, O King, they attacked Binayak and Kamal Bazaar too. O king, valorous warrior’s son! Therefore we bow at your feet.”

The bard’s total allegiance to the warrior hero abruptly ends his relation of this blitzkrieg. Then comes an episode where Prachanda directly addresses King Gyanendra in the same manner as epic heroes verbally challenge each other, and recapitulates for his enemy the ten years of the People’s War. Interestingly, what is offered here is not a journey back in time, as is customary in epics, but a fast-forward from an archaic present to a modern future in the span of eight verses (see Video 4):

“O, the first year we fought with slingshot arrows,
 the second year with bows and arrows,
 the third year we fought with sickles and hoes,
 the fourth year, at last, we found homemade guns,
 the sixth year we fought with socket bombs,
 the seventh year we fought with rifles,
 the eighth year we fought with LMGs,
 the ninth year we fought with SLRs.”

Consistent with this inversion of the usual temporal transportation found in the epics, the entire text is sung in modern language, and even uses ultra-modern, that is, English terms, for weapons. Another obvious inversion is that it was not a bard who composed and sang this epic, but a chorister, Harka Bahadur; the bard (and his father) became the chorister’s assistants for the duration of the performance, dancing and beating their drum while their younger assistant sang and declaimed.



Video 4. Harka Bahadur Dholi, with his elder brother and his father (in bardic dress) performing the People’s epic, Sera, Achham district; video by the author, 2007. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/lecomte-tilouine#myGallery-picture\(9\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/30ii/lecomte-tilouine#myGallery-picture(9))

The Teachings of the Maoist Epic

The People's Epic is of special importance because it is the only epic text that we know depicts a documented reality. It shows how the bard literally makes the immortal hero by molding his person and action into a formatted narrative. Yet, in a reciprocal move, the bard had previously recognized deeds that were epic and heroic enough in the revolutionary leader's warlike actions to be consecrated by his art, providing a living example of the fact that Kshatriyas' qualities are not restricted to their group, and in the case of Prachanda, may be embodied by a revolutionary Brahmin.³² This composition calls for a reexamination of the nature of the bardic relationship.

Prestige Distribution and Re-distribution

At first sight it seems that the impact the Maoist revolution has had on the content and form of bardic séances and on the bards themselves, who found new patrons and subjects of inspiration, is unlikely to last, because the link established was indirect and not durable. Indeed one could consider that the absence of any direct contact between the bard and Prachanda would prevent further construction of the mutual reflection of prestige and the constitution of any bardic contract. Yet, the bards who composed such epics were aware of this limitation. They nonetheless sang their pro-people (*janavādi*) texts at Maoist meetings or for occasional patrons, such as myself. The first of these two contexts of performance is particularly important, because the recent development of political parties in Nepal parallels a general weakening of social units based on kinship and caste, such as the patriline or the clan, on which the sociopolitical order was hitherto entirely reliant in rural Nepal.³³ In the future the political parties may substitute themselves for eminent patrilineages and may patronize bards for prestige, as did the Maoist party at some point in its development, and this, especially if regional identity or autonomy gains strength. The bardic institution would thus detach itself from kinship structures to adjust to modernity and new forms of identity. But, this is notwithstanding the second configuration, in which individuals may be boosted by the glory of an unrelated glorious person, such as Prachanda. Indeed, the use of the latter's epic heroization for unrelated patrons clearly indicates that the prestige conferred by the bard on his patron does not amount to a direct flattery of the latter (and his ancestors) by the former, but follows a variety of indirect paths.

One such indirect path is taken when the growing fame of the bard leads him to perform for other patrons as far away as India, particularly in Kumaon, where the heroic epic repertoire has declined, but epic is still in demand.³⁴ The bard's independent career does not jeopardize his relationship with his patron, because the bard's personal prestige adds to that of his patron. The

³² The bards of western Nepal were not the only ones to celebrate Prachanda's warlike qualities: he was also honored as a reincarnation of Parashurama (incarnation of Vishnu as a Brahmin warrior) by a community of Indian merchants in 2009.

³³ Political parties became legal in 1990.

³⁴ On the other hand, epics relating to divine characters, which recitation induces trance, are found in Kumaon and Garhwal (See John Leavitt's contribution on Kumaon in this volume).

latter thus appreciates that their family's bard is invited elsewhere, provided that he reserves his performance for their own exclusive use when necessary. The bard's own fame in fact demonstrates his loyalty when he cancels his other prestigious plans to perform for his patrons.

In addition to the fame brought to the bard's regular patrons by his performances outside the locality, another indirect path that prestige may follow is when a bard performs for an occasional prestigious visitor in the locality, who transfers some of his prestige to the bard and prompts new patrons to invite him in order to benefit from his newly acquired prestige. This happened after I filmed Gome Damai in Dullu in 2000. When I met him again there in 2003, he came to me and said: "since you filmed me, not a single day has passed without my performing." The bard's consecration brought about by my video camera had this magic effect.

Prestige circulation during the bardic séance is thus not merely bilateral, between one bard and his patron, or between a group of untouchable artists and an audience of Kshatriyas, but involves a larger set of actors and factors likely to confer rebounding prestige. This aspect, evinced by my ethnographic observations in the districts of Dailekh and Accham, is more generally illustrated by the fact that the heroes depicted in the epics are not conceived of as the direct ancestors of the bards' patrons. Rebounding prestige may explain why these patrons seeking illustriousness use bards who do not sing their own glory, but stories of ancient heroes whose genealogical lines and even kingdoms are not—or not clearly—identified, and are indirectly related to them by sharing their warlike nature.

Epic as Sociodrama

It is not the Kshatriya heroes' qualities, such as beauty, youth, and courage, that matter, as Vernant (1989:83) argued about the Greek epics, but rather it is the picture of the sociopolitical relations between the two main groups composing the society that is at stake. Indeed, contrary to the Greek heroes as depicted by Vernant (1989:82), the heroes of western Nepal's epics do not lose their "private" identity when becoming public figures, but become rather emblematic representatives of their class of warriors. Western Nepal's epics narrate the unflagging loyalty shown by the bard and other dependents (notably the blacksmith) to their Kshatriya patron, as opposed to the immoral and unpredictable behavior of the Kshatriya heroes. In these narratives, while attendants remain faithful even after their patron's death, one never knows what the Kshatriya hero will do or what his fate will be, confronted as he is by other unpredictable Kshatriyas.³⁵ This uncertainty is constantly put forward throughout the epic recitation by the formula: "will the hero die or live?" that obsessively punctuates the narrative.

Like their heroes, epic narratives indulge in the unpredictable: they may take the husband's point of view versus the seducer's, or the reverse, they may depict the spouse's

³⁵ The Greek bard, who sang for an assembly of aristocrats at the house of one of them, was also attached to one patron, at least in the kingdom of Ithaca, as attested by the episode in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus comes back to his palace and is about to kill Phemios, his bard, because he has performed for the suitors in his absence (but in Telemachos's presence). Phemios addresses Odysseus in these terms: "I am at your knees, Odysseus. (. . .) Telemachos, too, your own dear son, would tell you, as I do, that it was against my will, and with no desire on my part, that I served the suitors here in your house and sang at their feasting. They were too many and too strong, and they forced me to do it." (22.344-354; trans. by Lattimore).

faithfulness to her husband or to his enemy. This interchangeability is strikingly illustrated in some cases where the hero of an epic is the enemy (and the enemy the hero) in the narrative of a bard from another locality. A strong perspectivism therefore presides over this tradition as a whole, probably reflecting ancient antagonistic relations and the political use of epic recitation. In this unstable universe, the Kshatriya appears as having a very wide range of possibilities: to fulfill his duty and face his rival, to forgive him, or to kill him in a very vicious, cunning way. An almost dead enemy may kill the hero in his dying act, leaving no one alive at the end of the story. The hero's wife may remain faithful to him, but she may also fall in love with her husband's murderer because he is handsome. Sometimes she even performs *sati* with both her dead husband and her dead seducer if both die when fighting over her. The *bhārat* therefore leaves open all possibilities to the heroes.

Fundamentally, it teaches that horizontal relations (between upper-caste peers) are dangerous, ephemeral, and unpredictable by nature because they are marked by competition, whereas vertical relations (between upper and lower-status individuals) are secure and made inalienable by a never-ending contract sealing mutual faith.³⁶ In ancient epics the patron's attendants and the family bard in particular not only restore their patron's identity and the Thakuri line's integrity, but also enable their master's victory by teaching him the tricks of war. In the People's Epic, this vertical relationship is still central, but reversed, with the hero launching a war to improve the bard's condition.

Enacting Epics in Wedding Rituals

The narrative reality of this vertical relationship is enacted in rituals, with the Thakuri wedding ceremony giving a crucial position to the bard. Indeed, the wedding's auspicious time, or *lagan*, is marked in this region by the recitation of the patron's genealogy (under its *āsikā* form, a short genealogy) by the bard *and* by the first snip of the Damai's scissors in the fabrics that will be used for the wedding. Their patron's *lagan* thus somehow brings coherence to the Damai's two occupations, as tailor and musician. Then, the wedding processions are led by each party's family bards who sing along the way and recite genealogies at different stages. Once the wedding rituals at the bride's house are completed, epics are sung at the groom's all night.³⁷

In this ritual setting the bard is a harmless intermediary between the different Kshatriya clans as well as their representative. He accompanies his patron, sings his praise and, most importantly, his prestigious pedigree during dangerous encounters with other Thakuris, with whom by definition he competes: both in the past, in times of war, and today, during matrimonial

³⁶ The competition between peers in western Nepal recalls the depiction of Ancient Greece by Vernant (1989:ii) as "une société de face à face, une culture de la honte et de l'honneur où la compétition pour la gloire laisse peu de place au sens du devoir et ignore celui du péché. . ." ("a face to face society, a culture of shame and honor where competition for glory leaves little room for the sense of duty and knows nothing of that of sin," my translation), with this difference that this does not represent the functioning of the entire society, but only of the most eminent group.

³⁷ Midway, the bard from the bride's family comes to meet and lead the allies, and when their procession reaches the bride's courtyard, the groom's bard sings his patron's short genealogy, *āsikā*. After the wedding rituals, the bride's family's bard once more accompanies the bride and groom with the procession to the midway point, and when the groom's house is reached, his *huḍke* sings the long genealogy, *vaṃśāvalī*, and starts the *bhārat* ("epics").

alliances. Through one of his kinsmen, the bard, who belongs to the caste of tailors, also makes his patron's status visible by sewing his "golden" or "multi-colored clothes," as the epics describe. The crucial importance of these status markers is made obvious in that the auspicious moment of the wedding is marked by the first snip of the tailor's scissors. Given all his attributes, the bard may be depicted as kin—and king—maker.

Both the wedding rituals and the epic recitation suggest that horizontal relations (between higher status peers) are established vertically from below, linking the two halves of society. In this manner, the rules regulating the bardic institution contribute to the perpetuation of an ancient order made of landlords fighting for prominence and backed by their respective attendants, an order from which modern protagonists supposedly descend, on which they undoubtedly project themselves, and in which they are periodically ravished during the bardic séances.

In this epic mythology social life occupies all space: there are no gods, except the sun and the moon, which are the ancestors of the two competing Thakuri clans. Their genealogy, their deeds, and their fights replace creation and model the world in a chaotic manner: through conflicts on land between half-brothers, ravishing of spouses or fiancées, verbal affronts, wars, and mortal duels. The rest of society (Brahmins included) simply gravitates towards these eminent warlike figures.

Heroic Death versus Social Death

The epic repertoire of western Nepal may thus be viewed as a social mythology, the main engine of which is competition, inasmuch as it both is vital for the Kshatriyas to maintain or improve their status, and is mortal, especially because it is waged by all means, including the most unfair actions. One such action consists of degrading rivals by using cunning to soil, or pollute, them. Such degradation equals death, because it excludes the rival forever from the competition between peers by turning him into an untouchable. Interestingly enough, among the bards I have worked with, those who had an idea about the origin of their group claimed to be the offspring of such a degraded royal individual, more precisely an individual from the very royal family for whom they now perform, and whom their royal brothers made untouchable by some treachery in order to deprive him and his descendants of any power and rights. The bards would therefore be a socially-dead royal heir.

This detail is meaningful. As I have shown in previous studies,³⁸ pronounced social death is found at the root of the royal institution in several neighboring Himalayan contexts. Although, elsewhere it is not by cunningness but by godly will that degradation occurs; it also results in the creation of an impure royal double in charge of maintaining the dynasty's power.³⁹ In the case of the bard, the degraded royal double is the *author* of his patron, the one who "makes his name," brings him back his pedigree or sings it publicly, assures his victory, and dresses him as a king.

³⁸ See Lecomte-Tilouine (2009a, particularly Ch. 3 and 6).

³⁹ This pattern is found among the Shah kings of Gorkha, who degraded their royal brother to the rank of Magar but gave him (and his descendants) the crucial role of priest to the goddess who protects their dynasty. It is also found among the Malla Kings of the Kathmandu Valley, whose heir was degraded to the rank of Kasain ("butcher"), and became their royal sacrificer. See Lecomte-Tilouine (2009a: Chapters 3 and 6 respectively).

A victim of Kshatriya competition, he is the best placed to deal with the central question of their status, as he literally incarnates its vital importance. When highlighted in this way, the bardic séance appears to literally stage the Kshatriyas' capacity to inflict infamous social death, as well as their own fragility as potential victims of such a process, while it explicitly speaks of their heroic death in combat and their immortality.

The Bard's Esoteric Knowledge

The degradation of a royal heir to an untouchable Damai is somewhat counterbalanced by the fact that it gives birth to a bard, an outstanding figure among his group, who may achieve great fame and become a star in spite of his social infamy. Somehow the bard and the hero thus embody the two opposite extreme fates that can befall a Kshatriya. Both remarkable, they stand in a mirrored position on the social axis, regarding the conception of their subject.

Indeed, whether he has retained or developed these attributes, the bard displays kinship with his patron by royal features, particularly his noble body language when he performs.⁴⁰ He also possesses genealogical knowledge of his supposed original patriline. He can even be considered as having confiscated it and turned it into his own secret realm by reciting the genealogies very rapidly and by writing them down using a cryptic alphabet. Interestingly this alphabet also gives him access to esoteric knowledge contained in books of magic written in it. As a matter of fact, bards are also well-known magicians who are said to challenge each other in public spaces such as mountain ridges in order to establish publicly their supremacy. Two of the bards whom I recorded in 2007, for instance, were said to have competed on the ridge of their locality in Kamal bazaar. People told me that one of them, Late Damai, won because he could cut off his son's head and then put it back, whereas his competitor only succeeded in suddenly making hot pepper grow in the palm of his hand. Like their patrons, bards thus also compete with each other, reproducing at their own level the peers' competition for supremacy from below and by different means. This draws a parallel world of competition between remarkable peers situated at the two extremes of the social hierarchy, and relying on radically different sources of power.

Ban and Monopoly on Musical Performance

In fact the bard and his patron's respective fields (using Bourdieu's definition) are not only distinct but also strictly kept apart: in the same way untouchables have no access to land ownership and political power, the "pure" castes are strictly forbidden magic, dance, music, and oral poetry. Dance (*nacānā*), in particular, is considered so wicked and closely associated with prostitution that when upper-caste members indulge in *deudā* ("ring-dances"), they make it clear that they do not "dance", but "play" (*khelana*). In the same manner, music has been so badly connoted until recently that, as an upper-caste woman from Dailekh in her fifties told me, "we

⁴⁰ A similar group in Gujarat, the Vahivanca Barot "genealogists and mythographers," patronized exclusively by Rajputs, are even more akin to their patrons than the bards of Nepal. Shah and Shroff (1958) note that they are treated like princes and receive rich presents, and that they "imitate" their patrons and claim to be Kshatriyas.

were only allowed to clap our hands, and if we were caught singing in the forest, we were beaten up at home.” These strictly forbidden artistic activities exercised, and still do, a power of attraction over the audience that is formulated in terms of magic. This is especially true of the bardic séance, which is said to create *mohanī*, (“magical charm”) a term that usually refers to a magical charm that attracts and inspires love in someone against his or her will. Art and magic form here a continuum that the bard masters in its entirety. But the capacity to display such a bewitching art in the society for which it was (and still is in a large measure) taboo is the monopoly of a few persons. This monopoly represented a unique source of power and prestige for the royal patrons who were in a position to order and finance the forbidden artistic activities.

Concluding Remarks

In western Nepal those who are in the position of royal-status warriors leave the job of “increasing” (*baḍhāuna*) their prestige to bards, who are situated at the very bottom of the social ladder and sing their genealogies and ancient tales of heroism. As for those bards deprived of a social status that would enable them to claim any political power, they accumulate esoteric and artistic skills (in music, dance, and oral poetry) so as to secure another form of power: magic and magical charm (*mohanī*). Winning prestige is thus pursued independently by each of these two categories of actors. But, as the Maoist epic suggested, prestige may follow other paths within the bardic context by a game of reflection. The bardic séance, far from amounting to simple ego boosting from bottom to top, is therefore altogether a down-top, a parallel, a bilateral, and a rebounding, fame-winning pursuit.

The bard’s authority for declaiming “historical” words of “truth” is made manifest in the charm that creates their enunciation, the enthusiasm and/or compassion they arouse, and in the prestige they confer. Yet his authority is far from corresponding to a tacit mandate from a group to a spokesperson placed at its top as in the modern Western societies, but results from an explicit top-down assignment. The latter depends upon and is made possible by a social organization in which the strict partitioning of status groups goes together with social division of labor and specialization. Such a specific social context radically transforms the conditions whereby a group develops exclusive knowledge and skills to form what Foucault calls a “fellowship of discourse,” as it transforms its consequences.⁴¹ Indeed, within a caste organization, exclusive knowledge and rarity of specialists may be products of exclusion that does not result in a higher status. “Arts” (*kalā*), such as music and dance, are ascribed to untouchables.

It remains true, however, that, within their caste, developing exclusive knowledge led the bards to set themselves apart from their peers, and to form a category of remarkable individuals. As public performers, they may even achieve great fame, in spite of their status, however difficult it is for us to conceive the coexistence of fame and low status from the modern Western

⁴¹ In such “sociétés de discours” (translated as “fellowship of discourse” by R. Swyer:225) ritual determines the “conditions of the taking place of the discourse” and the “rarefaction of the speaking subjects,” per Foucault (1971:42 [my translation]).

perspective in which rarity, fame, and artistic skills are components of the “social magic” that confers high status.

Like their royal patrons, bards do seek fame. But theirs, not being perpetuated by anyone in charge of it, remains entirely rooted in the present, while the bardic performance openly aims at “making” the patrons’ name pass down to posterity and through the Four Ages. The two forms of fame, vertical and horizontal (in the plane of time), are homologous to the two forms of relationships in the hierarchized society. The horizontal is in both cases problematic, whereas the vertical secures the individual: in the social plane it secures status, while in the plane of time (that is, memory/past) it secures immortality. Consistent with this view the patrons praise their bard’s ability to utter “historical truth,” silencing any other of their talents, as dancer, musician, singer, and storyteller.

The bard’s most secret knowledge, the cryptic alphabet that he should initially learn, introduces him to magic, which in turn establishes his supremacy among his peers. But the use of such an alphabet endows another dimension with regard to the patrons, as it conveys the idea that lauding their genealogy is so precious that it should be safeguarded by secret writing and initiated specialists. In the present state of the bard-patron relationship, the bard’s magic knowledge or “symbolic capital” does confer initiatory mystery to the royal patriline more than it contributes to the bard’s own prestige. The bards’ procedures of knowledge protection would not benefit foremost its detainees as Michel Foucault (1971) and, closer to our area of research, Jean-Luc Chambard (1963) claimed, but rather those in relation to whom they have developed it, that is, their patrons. This holds true as long as this knowledge is embedded in an ideology that makes it the result of an assignment, within a social organization that nullifies the danger of the power of speech when it comes from proscribed groups. Such disqualification may have played an even more important role than maintaining part of the population in a state of servitude. Indeed, a larger picture shows that in the area studied, the dominance of warrior groups went together with a remarkable withdrawal of the Brahmins. When compared with other Hindu contexts, the disjunction between power and status in western Nepal resulted in a multiplicity of mechanisms to counter and fragment what is “naturally” associated with higher status: the power of speech. Not only do the Brahmins play a secondary role in the major rituals, because deities directly address people through oracles, but also consigning and reciting genealogies do not fall into their field of competence as is the case elsewhere, and even writing was not their privilege, with the existence of a different alphabet specific to another group of specialists located at the very bottom of the society. All these elements suggest that the Brahmins have been stripped of their attributes, notably the most important power of speech in the royal caste’s concern, that of historical truth.⁴² This can be interpreted as one solution found by the royal power to control its representation. The “portrait of the king,” to borrow the title of Louis Marin’s seminal essay (1981), is a sensitive subject, especially in a society such as western Nepal where the “king” is not radically distinguished from his peers and does not occupy the highest hierarchical position. The pariahs of royal blood combined both the intimacy and the political immunity necessary for this function. Somehow the strangeness of the relationship between the bard and his royal patron

⁴² They thus merge oral poetry with “art,” *kalā*, a traditionally devalued domain associated with untouchability. On the other hand, literature and “[written] poetry” (*sāhitya*, *kavitā*) are not ranked as *kalā* in Nepal and are related to upper-castes.

should thus be understood as a confiscation of speech made possible by and reflecting (if not reinforcing) the social organization characterized by partitioning in castes, association of art with low pleasures, and valuation of purity: purity of the caste status, but also, in this warlike version of the caste organization, of the royal pedigree.

We finally come to agree here with Bourdieu that speech is the reflection of another, social, reality, even if the delegation of the power to speak follows radically different paths in the studied context. However, the social organization under study shows signs of fragility and of change, a dimension that was not really addressed by Bourdieu, who was primarily concerned with social reproduction, and for whom struggle within the social field would strengthen its structure more than it would deconstruct it (Bourdieu 1975:26). It is a fact that the continuation of oral performances related to medieval deeds in western Nepal is a striking example of social reproduction. Yet, we have also seen that the bardic tradition was renewed in innovative ways with the development of the People's War, breaking with traditional patterns of enacting the past, to praise the present and even the future, as well as the change in status of the untouchables, and this in spite of the fact that the whole tradition was hitherto tightly conditioned by an ancient feudal socio-mythology.

We are thus facing a transformation, embryonic in its scale, but revealing in its form, which calls for further investigation. In this matter, Michel de Certeau's analysis of the "mystic fable," as far as it is from the studied context, brings interesting paths to explore. Certeau (1982) claimed that the emergence of the mystic language in sixteen to seventeenth century Europe was linked to a change in the context of enunciation—the end of certitudes and of the unity of the Church.⁴³ The new, mystic language employed usual religious terms, but modified the language "from within," by numerous subtle processes, in the same manner that, by incorporating the People's War in their heroic epics, bards have discreetly transformed the sense of "historical truth." Among the specificities of the mystic language pinpointed by de Certeau, two have retained our attention because they cause "sur-passing" (*dépassement*): first, the oxymoron, whose cleavage "makes impossible any 'ontological' statements about what is said of the thing in question,"⁴⁴ and produces in the language effects that exceed it; second, the erasure of the referential, which turns the words into operators of detachment, and "deriving machines, for

⁴³ Michel de Certeau showed how the term mystic, meaning "hidden," was only used as an adjective up to the sixteenth century, then became an "independent field" (*un champ propre*), to finally disperse at the end of the seventeenth century, with the rise of a "new configuration of knowledge" (1982:104-05). It is tempting to compare the mystical processes described by Certeau with the magical power of the signature as analyzed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975). Indeed, if the latter postulates the existence of a field upstream, which would give words their power while revealing its modes of operation, the former, without neglecting the importance of the context of enunciation that makes possible the development of a particular language, adds another dimension that the language would in turn be able to create. This provides important avenues of research for the study of ritual or ritualized languages.

⁴⁴ My translation of: "rend impossible l'énoncé 'ontologique' qui serait le *dit* de la chose visée" (1982:200). Michael B. Smith's translation (1992:144) reads: "makes the 'ontological' statement, which would be the 'said' of the intended thing, impossible."

ecstasies out of the standard meaning.”⁴⁵ These two processes are central to western Nepal’s epics, where the opacity of the text, due to the archaic language in the sung parts and to the use of formulas, is combined with a plethora of oxymoronic forms and effects—the combination of feeling and understanding, of the past and the present, of the royal and the impure, and so on. Somehow the whole bardic séance could be described as oxymoronic, notably with regard to the respect or the mockery of heroism and Kshatriya values. Its unstable equilibrium, which blurs categories and registers, seems to suspend the norms, while it also reaffirms them, as long as it is tightly framed by strict caste rules.

It is unknown when the western Nepal’s bardic institution developed, and whether it has remained unchanged in the course of time; whether it could aim at the patrons’ divinization, or at ruining their reputation, in the past.⁴⁶ It may happen that it will gain independence from “royal patrons” in the future. But, it is uncertain that it will keep intact its magic effect over people then, since, by losing pseudo-royal patronage and its inscription in a field of knowledge strictly kept apart, bardic art may also lose its “rarity.”⁴⁷ One thing is certain, however: following the recent sociopolitical upheaval, the bardic repertoire incorporated new forms of historical truth and transformed itself from inside, showing its mirroring of the social context, its responsiveness to change, and no doubt, the role that its imperceptible transformations can in turn play in this regard.

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⁴⁵ My translation of “machines à dériver, pour des extases hors de la signification reçue” (1982:205). *Dériver* means both to derive and to drift. Michael B. Smith’s translation (1992:148) reads: “machines for setting adrift—machines for voyages and ecstasies outside of received meanings.”

⁴⁶ Detienne states that in Ancient Greece oral poets lost their power to tell the truth (that is, to blame or praise) during the Classical period to become specialists in flattery employed by the elite (1994:60-70): “le poète n’est plus qu’un parasite, chargé de renvoyer à l’élite qui l’entretient son image, une image embellie de son passé” (“the poet is now a parasite, in charge of reflecting its image to the elite that supports him, an embellished image of its past” [my translation]). In western Nepal, no document shed light on past practices; yet, if the bards do not blame their patrons, their relationship with them is far from corresponding to Detienne’s depiction.

⁴⁷ Analyzing the designer’s or the artist’s signature, which confers a huge surplus of value to the object, “transmutes” or even “transsubstantifies” it, according to Bourdieu. Bourdieu showed how magic works upstream by the rules of the field that create the scarcity of the producers and hence that of the product (Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975:21).



Map 1. Repartition of the bards in the districts of western Nepal. Black dots: lower status bards who perform with their wives. (Bajura and Kalikot have not yet been explored).



Fig. 6. Bard from Thalara, Bajhang district (locally called *bhārate*, from the term *bhārat*, epic); photo by the author, 2014.



Fig. 7. A low status bard from Ningala Saini, Baitadi district, performing with his wife; photo by the author, 2014.

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