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Following the Ancestors and Managing the Otherness

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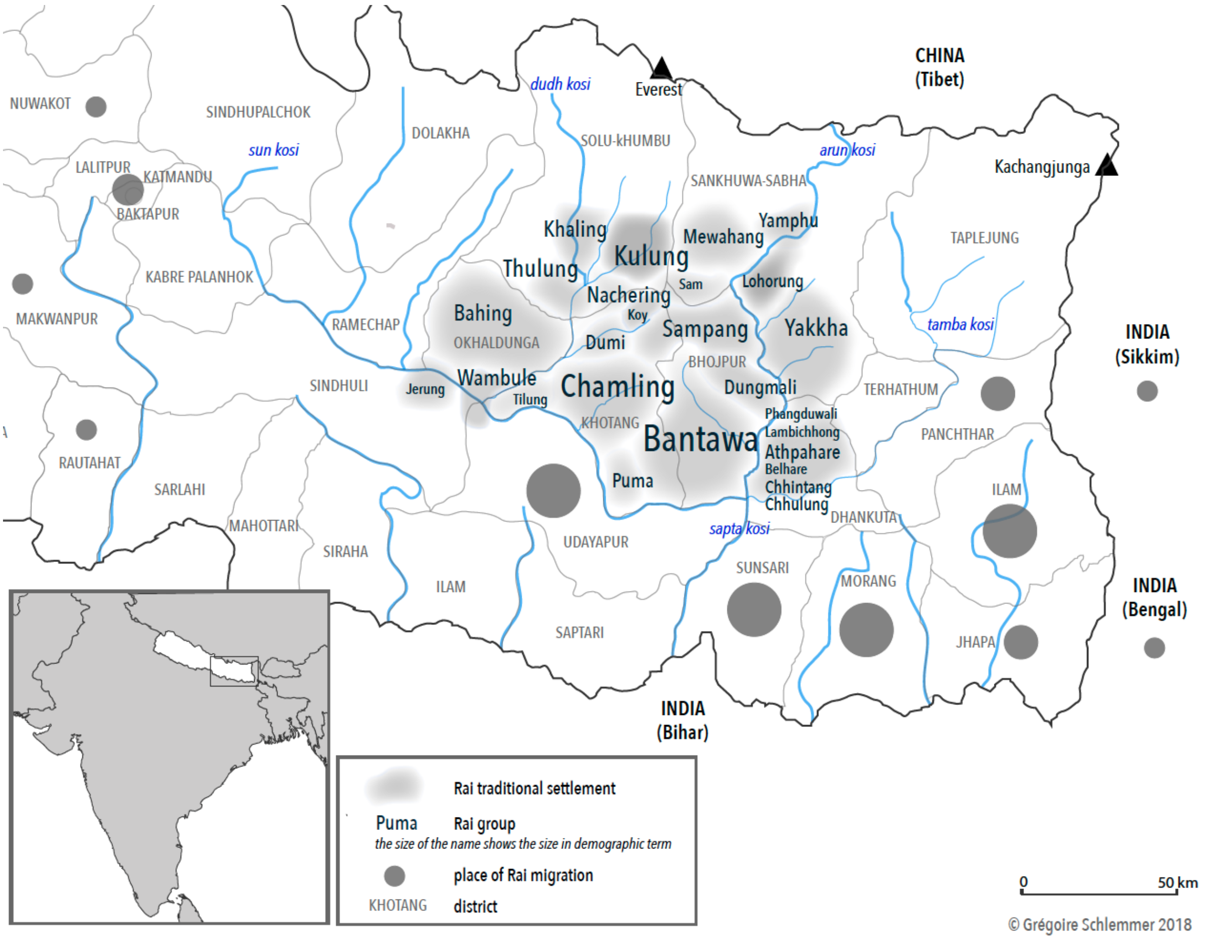
The Rai

The Rai are a set of groups, numbering about 750,000 people, inhabiting the mountains of eastern Nepal, except for some tens of thousands who are based in India. They belong to the so-called “tribal” groups, now called Ādivāsī-Janajātī, “indigenous nationalities,” that is, those who are not part of the Indo-Nepalese population or “caste groups,” dominant in Nepal. The number of groups that make up the Rai population is uncertain. While the 2011 census has officially recognized the existence of 12 Rai groups, linguists have identified up to 28 different Rai languages, most of them mutually unintelligible. Borders between groups are indeed not always clear, as they can be based on linguistic, territorial, or genealogical criteria. Moreover, village and clan affiliation is de facto the most relevant criterion, as these groups are organized in patrilineal and exogamous clans extending over seven generations and grouped together in “villages” – often no more than a number of houses scattered in the fields. Rai is a relatively recent exonym (i.e. a name used by non-members of a group to designate it), but it has been appropriated by some persons as the first and foremost way of defining themselves: this is mostly the case among those who now live outside their traditional territory and/or those who only speak Nepali and no longer use any of the Rai languages (corresponding roughly to one fifth of the total Rai population). In addition to Rai, as an ethnic category created by outsiders, there also exists an endonym (i.e. a name used by members of a group to define themselves) which all the so-called Rai use to refer to themselves as a people: Rodu (with some variations, but all related to the linguistic root *rak-dong). Some of the Rodu groups – those who inhabit the area located between the Dudh Kośī and Aruṇ rivers – also call themselves Khambu (and the following pages will mostly focus on these Khambu groups). To complicate matters further, it should also be mentioned that the Rai, together with some other groups (mainly the Yakkha, who are sometime also referred to as Rai, Limbu, and Sunuwar), are considered and consider themselves to belong to a larger social unit: that of the Kirant people, a name derived from the Sanskrit term kirāta. While the term was used in ancient texts to refer to mountain and forest people in general, it has now become an ethnic designation. Since the 15th-century Nepalese chronicle Gopālarāja Vaṃśāvali mentions an ancient “Kirāta” dynasty having ruled over Nepal, today’s Kirant people like to think of themselves as their descendants, even if this is not historically supported. The linguistic family of the Kirant (Himalayan branch of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family) suggests that they actually belong, together with the Magar and Newar, to an older population stratum that inhabited the area in earlier times. According to their oral history, the Rai were originally seminomadic groups who made a living by practicing shifting cultivation and hunting (game hunting is indeed still important in Rai religious representations). They entered the

Himalayas through the Terai Plain in the south, along the banks of the Sapta Kośī River, before settling on the slopes of the mountains (1,000 to 2,000 meters), where they gradually started to practice terraced farming and cattle breeding. They subsequently became strongly territorialized groups, even though many of them have moved since the 19th century and now live outside their original territory, especially in the Terai Plain, in Sikkim, and around Darjeeling. This territorialization process was first politically endorsed by the Sen kings of Makwanpur and their Kirant minister in the early 16th century. It was reinforced by the ruling Shah and the Rana after the integration, in the late 18th century, of the Rai areas into the Nepalese kingdom. This marked the end of the dominance of “big men” (hang), who had emerged on the basis of their prestige and their alliance networks. But like all Kirant people, Rai communities were granted a degree of autonomy, based on the kipaṭ, a legal system of inalienable community-land tenure, and on a political autonomy accorded to newly appointed hereditary leaders. Many of the terms by which these groups chose to be referred to are of administrative and political origin: rāi/rāya (king), subbā (chief), jimi/ jimindār (landowners), and so on. Their landownership prerogative, which gave the Rai the position of a “dominant caste,” has contributed to the structuration of group identity and to the preservation of specific religious traditions. However, the Nepalese state has gradually suppressed both political and land-tenure privileges. Kipaṭ was abolished in the 1940s in most of the Rai areas. The Rai are now part of the multiethnic Nepali society, and apart from a few isolated villages, they live together with other groups (Chetri, Bahun, Kami, Tamang, etc.). Moreover, numerous Rai people have moved to the eastern Terai Plain (25%) and to the cities (16%).

Main localisation of the rai groups


CHINA (Tibet)
Everest
Kachangjunga
INDIA (Sikkim)
INDIA (Bengal)
INDIA (Bihar)
dudh kosi
sun kosi
arun kosi
tamba kosi
sapta kosi
NUWAKOT
SINDHUPALCHOK
DOLAKHA
SOLU-KHUMBU
SANKHUWA-SABHA
TAPLEJUNG
LALITPUR
KATMANDU
BAKTAPUR
KABRE PALANHOK
MAKWANPUR
RAMECHAP
OKHALDUNGA
SINDHULI
KHOTANG
BHOJPUR
TERHATHUM
PANCHTHAR
ILAM
RAUTAHAT
SARLAHI
MAHOTTARI
SIRAHA
ILAM
UDAYAPUR
SAPTARI
SUNSARI
MORANG
DHANKUTA
JHAPA
Khaling
Kulung
Mewahang
Yamphu
Thulung
Sam
Lohorung
Nachering
Koy
Bahing
Dumi
Sampang
Yakkha
Jerung
Wambule
Tilung
Chamling
Dungmali
Phangduwali
Lambichhong
Bantawa
Athpahare
Belhare
Chhintang
Chhulung
Puma
Rai traditional settlement
Puma Rai group
the size of the name shows the size in demographic term
● place of Rai migration
KHOTANG district
0 50 km

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Mundum: A Religious Tradition

Despite the strong similarities between the rich mythological corpuses of different Rai groups, it is difficult to speak of a homogeneous Rai religion owing to the internal diversity of the Rai and to their varying degrees of "Hinduization" (see below). Both vocabulary and ritual practices vary from group to group, if not from village to village. For the purposes of this text, I will set these differences aside and focus on the global logic of the Rai religious world instead. To do so, I will take the Kulung, a Khambu group, as a case study. This is not only because this is the group that is most familiar to me but also because it has the bigger population and is one of the groups that has most tenaciously clung to its specific practices due to the very low presence, in its midst, of settlers from other groups that populated eastern Nepal in large numbers during the 19th century. Using data on this group, I will draw implicit conclusions about other Rai groups in order to highlight the overall logic of Rai religious ideas and practices. Indeed, data collected among other Rai groups (especially the best-known groups, such as the Mewahang, Thulung, and Lohorung) show that they share similar patterns.

It is also difficult to speak of a Rai "religion" in the sense this word carries as a translation of the Nepali/Sanskrit word *dharma*, which is used in South Asia to refer to the major established religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. When compared with major religions, especially Semitic monotheisms, Rai religion seems rather different. Until recently (and this is changing in the wake of ethnic association work, see below), the Rai did not, strictly speaking, have a pantheon (as a structured set of gods), nor gods (as transcendent and beneficent powers), dogmas, temples, books, statues, and the like. Nevertheless, they do have a term, very important to them, that corresponds quite well to what we call a "tradition": *mundum* (or the equivalent, as the term varies from group to group).

Mundum may rightly be called an ancestors' legacy. In contrast to what is locally perceived as *dharma*, which should transcend communities, *mundum* is intrinsically local: each group has its own ancestors, and thus its own *mundum*, rooted in its community and territory. It is the reason why some Rai people view themselves as followers of the *mundum* (as their tradition) and simultaneously claim to be Hindus (as their *dharma*). The term *mundum* could thus be seen as equivalent to the Hindu notion of *kuladharma* (or *deśadharma*), that is, the *dharma* that is linked to a specific group (or place). Among the Kulung, the first meaning of *ridum*, the Kulung term for *mundum*, is "genealogy." "To tell the *ridum*" means to tell stories about the origins of humankind. The chronological thread of these stories is the genealogical line that begins with the first creatures (e.g. Sumnima, the first woman, who gave birth to Ninam Ridum, who mated with Paruhang, the Jupiter star) and ends with current peoples. *Ridum* is intimately linked to the use of a ritual language. More than a means of describing things, this language, composed of binomial words (e.g. *ridum-hodum*), acts upon the world, like the uttering of magical formulas. The designation of objects with such words links them to their mythical prototypes, thereby charging them with ancestral power. *Ridum* can be "told," but it can also be "done." "To do the *ridum*" means to perform a ritual, which can be regarded as the central element of Kulung religious life (out of the more than 80 different types of rituals that I have been able to identify among the Kulung). In short, the polysemic word *ridum* refers to all the ways of "doing" and "speaking" that are thought to have been inherited from the ancestors.

Ridum is mandatory and prescriptive. It is less faith than an inheritance. It can sometimes be perceived as a burden, but it is considered as having succeeded in preserving the group up to the present day. It is like a law, and respecting it helps to maintain a person's harmonious place in his or her group and the place of the group in the world. *Ridum* is not based on an explicit ethic or on a moral discipline. Rituals are primarily motivated by the desire to maintain, restore, or increase "vitality," the attainment as well as loss of which is largely attributed to invisible agencies, namely spirits. The idea of vitality is contained in several local notions that could – albeit imperfectly – be translated as soul, life force, prosperity, and prosperity's "flower" (*law*, *sai/saya*, *ji*, and *bung*). Nevertheless, *ridum* underlies moral values and encourages the behavior that is required to uphold the order defined by the ancestors, which includes self-control, paying attention to one another, and compliance with social order. Acted out in rituals, this behavior must develop social relations based on altruism, sharing, and collaboration, which in turn promote the group's productiveness and prosperity.

Rituals and Powers

The main spiritual providers of vitality are the ancestors. The Rai’s complex funeral procedure is conducted in two stages, over some weeks, by a ritual specialist (Lachocha among the Kulung, *nokcho/nakcong for other groups, see below*) who guides the dead person’s soul through a ritual journey. The main objective is to pacify the spirit of the dead and transform the dead person’s soul (*cap*) into an ancestor (*khal*). Ancestors are in a relationship of exchange with the living. As guardians of the tradition, they may cause misfortunes to punish the transgression of a prohibition, the broken promise to offer a ritual, or just because they are angry – there is a range of rituals aiming at dealing with ancestors’ anger, maledictions, or sanctions (*chul*, *pastun*, *hiu*). But, above all, ancestors are said to bring prosperity to the community of their descendants. This is why they are honored during domestic rituals, such as *nwagi*, during which ancestors are fed with the first fruits of the harvest on the three stones of the fireplace, a core place for the Rai. Ancestors are also involved in collective rituals that punctuate the agrarian cycle. This cycle is overseen by a ritual specialist (*nokcho*, *nakcong*, etc.; the term varies slightly from group to group) who can be regarded as an example of the “village priest” described in ethnographic literature. Among the Kulung, he is chosen by lot among the elderly. He represents the whole community, which comes together three time a year for ritual celebrations and gathers around a permanent altar located within the village. All households that have inherited the land from the founding ancestors participate in the ritual. Buried in their fields, ancestors’ flesh becomes soil. They then merge with a more abstract principle of the ground to form the “force of the territory” (*tos*, *was*, *sakela*, etc.; Nep. *bhūme*), which lends prosperity to the community. These rituals generate unity and solidarity among the landowning community and reaffirm their rights to the land.

Those who have died a violent death (by drowning, burning, falling, or committing suicide) become “bad dead” (*hilsi*, *hillasi*, etc.). Bad dead are the reverse face of the ancestors. Having been suddenly deprived of life, they are characterized by a dangerous feeling: resentment. They are thrown into the woods, where they become forces of nuisance and sterility. The feeling of resentment generally characterizes all dangerous spirits (*mang*; Nep. *bhūt*). These dangerous spirits are considered “external,” both spatially and socially: spatially, as they are linked to the forest, the outside, and socially, because they come from other clans, villages, or groups. They are a kind of personification of the dangerous otherness. Perpetually unsatisfied, affectively and nutritionally, these spirits are conceived of as solitary beings who wander about in uncultivated areas and nourish themselves by hunting humans with magical arrows or stealing their souls. Disease is often thought of as the result of the dangerous spirits’ hunting activity, in which humans take on the role of prey. In response to these malevolent actions, a transactional ritual is performed on a temporary altar: a blood sacrifice is given as a substitute for the stolen soul. The maleficent spirit is then driven away by taking it on a ritual journey that leads it back through time and space until it finally reaches its place of origin.

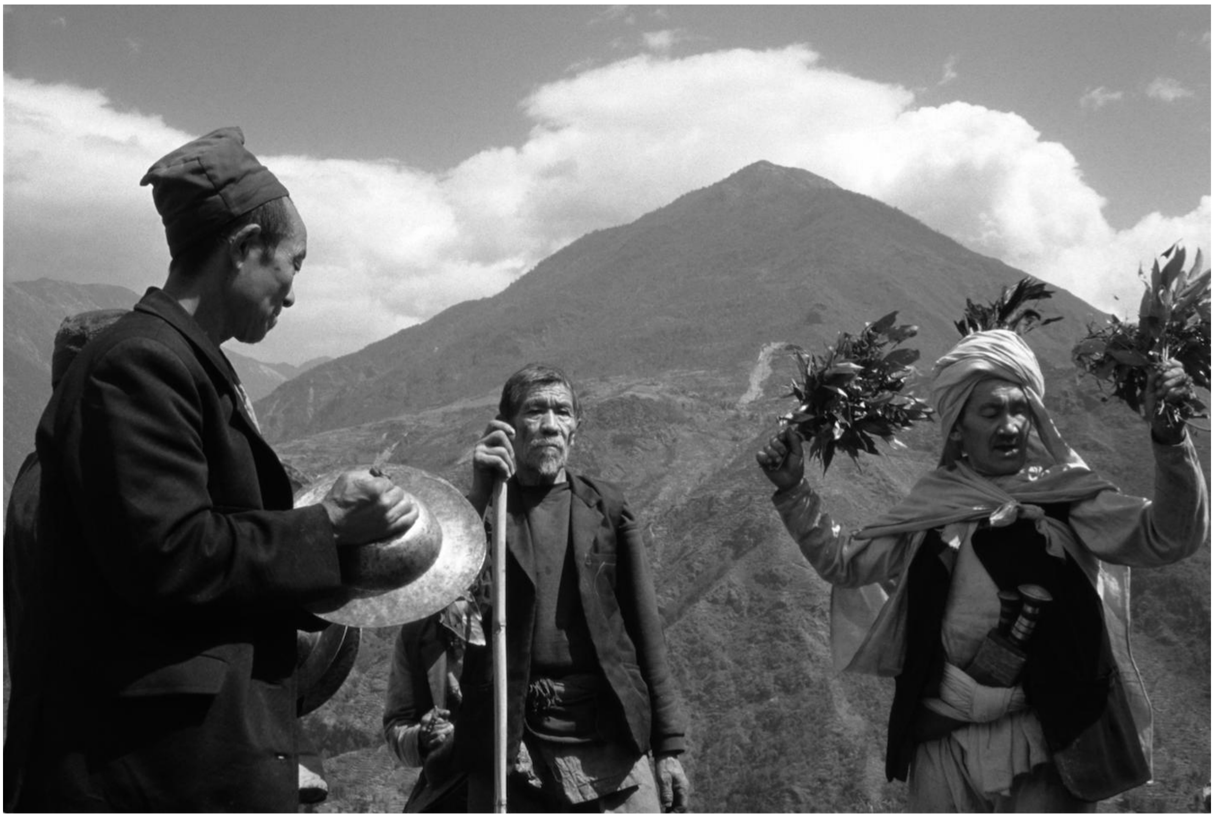


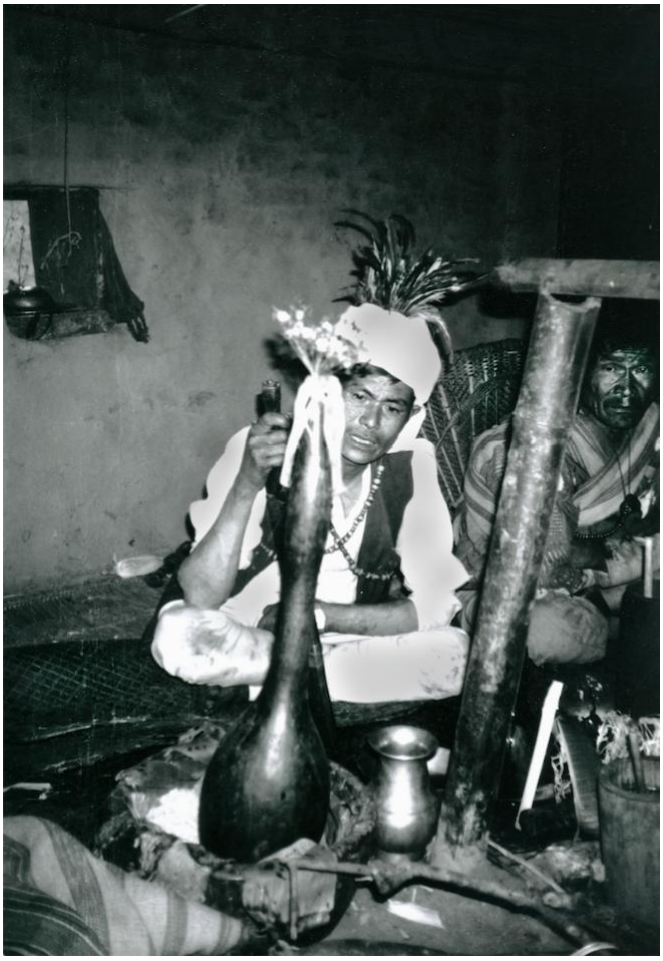
Fig. 1: elder and priest (*nokcho*) dancing for the land (photo by author).

Among these spirits, those living in the forest are considered to have been the first occupants and owners of the world. Their relationship with humans is one of confrontation. But in this case, the predation is mutual: humans use the land and take forest resources, while these spirits take human souls in order to nourish themselves and to punish humans for their disruptive activities. Sometimes, this relationship can be beneficial. The “Master of the Game” (Diburim, Dibumi, etc.), that is, the supposed owner of wild animals, favors the catching of the prey (prey is the ideal food for the ancestors, and ritual hunts are sometime still performed in honor of both Diburim and the ancestors). A female forest spirit (known as Laladum and Dolemku among the Kulung and by many other names among other Rai) chooses some humans and gives them the power to see the invisible and to divine the future: they become shamans (*selemop*, *mangpa*, etc.; Nep. *jhāṅkri*). Inspired by his or her spiritual *guru*, who makes him or her tremble, the shaman drums and dances along the mythical path of the first divination, after which he or she then smells the unseen and tells people what the causes of their diseases and misfortunes are, or in other words: which spirits need to be conciliated. Shamans are also the ones who trap bad spirits, exorcise witches, or kill the spirits of bad death; they are, in a way, the specialists in the handling of disorder.

Most spirits are ritually fed on an irregular basis, when a divination performed by these shamans has identified them as the cause of an illness. Even if it is dangerous, the relationship with these figures of otherness is inevitable. The world in which humans live is open and hazardous, but human survival depends on it. Moreover, forces of prosperity, fertility, and vitality are considered powerful, especially because they are regarded as external and dangerous. Attracting them requires establishing an accord with this externality.

Fig. 2: ritual officiant (*nagi nokcho*) specialised in the ancestral worship (*kul devatā*) for Lucirim performing a ritual journey with his sword and gourd (photo by author).

Having to deal with "externality" is also a crucial element of weddings. Being a foreign body, married women bring external and dangerous spirits. Like epidemic diseases, these spirits are transmitted by women to their husbands after the wedding. But once pacified through periodically performed rituals, these spirits become essential for the renewal and prosperity of the household. It is these formerly dangerous spirits, brought by women, that become house, domestic, and lineage spirits. In other words, women are the ones who bring in the spirits that are considered the most important for the Rai people; these spirits are among the few spiritual entities to whom regular household rituals are addressed.



Among the Kulung, the most important domestic and ancestral worship (Nep. *kul devatā*) is that of Lucirim (or Nagi), a snake-shaped being living in the primordial lake where, according to myths, all life originated. These myths also portray Lucirim as the father of the girl whom Kokcilip, the cultural hero, literally fished out from the lake and married. This alliance with Lucirim brings culture (the couple built the first house and performed the first ritual) and prosperity. But for humans, the relationship with this powerful father-in-law is not only a fruitful one; he is also a dangerous relation, since a father-in-law is a potential enemy, and Lucirim is also a soul thief. The ambiguity that characterizes the relationship of humans to Lucirim is well illustrated in the ritual dedicated to him. This ritual is based on acts of confrontation and seduction. Lucirim is offered the articles that are considered the best possible gifts: pork and beer, seen as the purest food, and the same goods that are also given as bride price (cloths, cooking tools, etc.). But when he is thought to come to receive the goods, he is welcomed with a threatening sword demonstration (*sakpasil*). If Lucirim is angry, he brings diseases and misfortune. But if the ritual is successful, Lucirim brings vital force that gives strength, potency, and honor to the householder who has organized the ritual.

The Managing of otherness and the borrowing of Religious Elements

The same openness to the outside world that can be observed in the rituals, and which may be viewed as a central feature of the Rai people's religious conceptions and practices, is also reflected in their willingness to borrow practices and notions from their neighbors. The influence of Buddhism is rather marginal, consisting mainly of sporadic offerings to local monasteries and in the performing of some meritorious acts for the dead, such as the building of *stūpa*s. Moreover, it specifically concerns northern groups (Khaling, Kulung, and Yamphu), which are in contact with Sherpas. Conversely, the presence of Hinduism is a more important and complex one. To highlight the local practices that can be considered Hindu is not an easy task because of the inclusive aspect of this multifaceted religion. I shall nevertheless attempt to convey a picture of the main religious elements that are connected to Hinduism.

(1) To be Hindu primarily used to mean the performance of *dasaĩ*, the Nepali equivalent of the Indian *daśarā*, a ritual marking the recognition of the power of the king and his representatives. For a long time, this ritual was performed in each village on behalf of the state-appointed "chiefs" (*dvāre*, *tālukdār*, *jimmāwār*, etc.), but it was progressively abandoned after the disappearance of these chiefs (1990s) and the subsequent end of the monarchy (2008).

(2) Another element that can be connected to Hinduism is the habit, embraced by some Rai people, of summoning a Brahman to perform rituals (such as *saptāha :* reading the *purāṇa* text, *rudri or satyanārāṇaya :* honoring Śiva or Viṣṇu, *dakṣiṇā ko bhākal:* donation to brahman). Among some Rai groups, people also perform Brahmanic types of life cycle rituals (such as the newborn's first haircut or first ingestion of solid food) or consult astrologers. Formerly, only members of the Rai political elites used to call Brahmans, but gradually, this practice became more widespread. This process could be referred to by the notion of Sanskritization: a wish to improve the social status of one's own group by imitating high-caste and especially Brahman practices and values. Nevertheless, this sporadic implementation of Brahmanic rituals by some families does not necessarily imply a Brahmanization of the group's values. For example, pork (sometimes even beef) consumption is still frequent, even among those families who call upon Brahmans to perform these rites. It also does not imply a higher caste status for those who perform them.

(3) Rai also borrowed a whole set of rituals performed in the Nepali language that are used to keep away diseases by casting off dangerous spirits or placating angry divinities. These rituals are mainly transmitted and performed by shamans (selemop, etc., see above). Since shamans, as pointed out above, must handle the difficult relationship with the predatory forces that come from the outside world, they are also the persons who are most in contact with and open to this world. As a consequence, in order to cope with this external word and its influences, they sometimes employ ritual techniques coming from far away and officiate in the "language of the outside," namely Nepali. People do not perceive these rituals and elements as specifically related to Hinduism. Nevertheless, in a paradoxical way, these practices strongly contribute to a form of Hinduization in the larger sense of the term, insofar as theses news rituals and elements transmit some specific

values such as purity, devotion, material representation on a permanent altar (both previously absent among the Rai), new rituals technic such as *pūjā*, and a religious vocabulary stemming from the Sanskrit used in these rituals.

This whole spectrum of ritual practices and conceptions that are in one way or another related to Hinduism has also led to the emergence of two new categories of "devotees." The first is the one of *villagers*. Indeed, rituals of specifically Rai origin are performed at the household level or on a landownership basis, but not at the village level, while some of the ritual borrowings that we have highlighted are implemented as village rituals. The second new category of "devotees" that has arisen as a result of these borrowings is that of the *pilgrims*, namely persons who take part in transethnic devotional practices in well-known sacred places. All these practices can be considered, for lack of a better word, as elements of popular Hinduism that contribute to the construction of a regional piety while inscribing Rai religious practice in a larger frame.

Dealing with Belonging and Religious Specificities (H1)

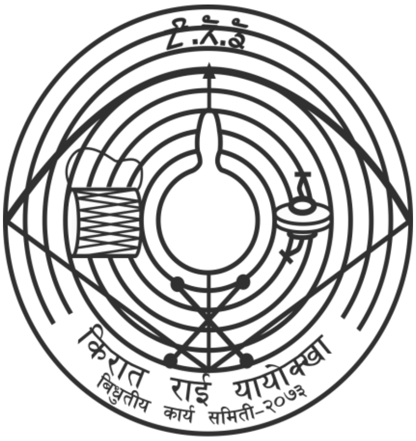
Alongside these broad Hinduization tendencies, a movement of identity assertion has emerged gradually throughout the 20th century. This movement has had an important impact on religious practices. Its origins can be traced back to an ethnic Limbu association (Yakhtunghang Chumlung Sabha) that was formed in 1925 in the area of Darjeeling. The association played an active role in the revival of the Srijunga alphabet, named after an 18th-century Limbu Buddhist monk from Sikkim. This association also produced intellectuals such as I.S. Chemjong, who started to write the history of the Kirant and was one of the key figures in the development of a notion of Kirant identity. He was followed by several Limbu and Rai intellectuals, who authored a significant amount of literature about the history, religion, and identity of their own group.

The 20th century also witnessed the spread of somewhat reformist ideas. The most important movement to promote such ideas is the one initiated by Phalgunanda, a former adept of Josmanī (a Sant reformist sectarian movement). He merged values and practices stemming from this movement with ancient Limbu practices and conceptions; he also promoted the writing of religious texts, the ban of several practices such as alcohol and meat consumption, and the prohibition of the ritual sacrifice of animals. The Phalgunanda movement had an important impact not only on its followers but also on Kirant religious practices in general. Fearing that it could boost ethnic awareness, the Nepalese state has outlawed and repressed this movement since the 1930s, but it still alive today.

At the same time – and especially during times of political unrest such as the revolution of the 1950s, the turmoil of the 1970s, and the Maoist war (which gave rise to a Rai armed group, the Khambuan Liberation Army) - several political and military movements were founded by the Rai and Limbu. They have been fighting, in several ways, against the state and against high-caste domination; some of them have even been fighting for their independence.

After the revolution of the 1990s, ethnic associations that used to be clandestine came out into the open. It was in this period that both the Kirat Rai Yayokkha, an association representing the Rai people as a whole, and the many other associations representing each specific Rai group were founded. This period also witnessed the development of several overseas Rai associations in the countries in which former Rai Gorkha soldiers have settled: in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and the United States. These associations are part of the larger and growing Janajātī ethnic revival movement in Nepal. On the religious level, the Rai and Limbu associations did succeed in having “Kirantism” recognized as a distinct religion, at least in the national census, since 1991. Kirantism is now the fourth-largest religion of Nepal, being practiced by 3.1% of the Nepalese population. Rai associations have also played an important role in implementing new urban practices, such as the circle dances called *sakela/sakewa*, which are presented as a celebration of nature. They have gradually become an emblem of the identity of all Rai groups.

Fig. 3: emblem of the Kirat Rai Yayokkha, the main Rai association, showing ritual artefacts (gourd, drum, cymbal, bow).



Due to the general impact of intellectuals and activists, reformist movements, and scripturalization, new religious practices are spreading among the Rai. This is particularly true among those – nowadays the majority of the Rai people - who no longer live in their traditional territory. The spread of these new urban Rai religious practices is also slowly impacting the original village communities, who have recently developed a will to preserve their tradition, now considered a form of intangible heritage. Using script for the preservation and transmission of religious practices is becoming more and more frequent. Encouraged by urban Rai associations, the Kulung have also begun to celebrate a new year’s festival, called *yeledong*. The precise date of the celebration was fixed according to a Rai lunar calendar (around January) so that it may be celebrated by all the Kulung on the same day and become an emblem of the whole community. The aim of this kind of standardization process is to unify Rai religious practices in order to strengthen the group’s identity.

These phenomena can be seen as a reaction to the threat of an almost total merging of Rai practices with mainstream Nepalese Hinduism, as is already the case for a significant portion of the Rai people. It may also be a response to the expansion of evangelical Christianity, which was very limited for a long time due to an existing ban on proselytism but is now rapidly growing. Will the *mundum* tradition dwindle due to conversions, dissolve in the wake of Hinduization, or adapt itself to the changing world? The future will tell the fate of this living indigenous religious tradition from the Himalaya.

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