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Workshop on 'Kiranti Culture in Contemporary Nepal', Vienna, 4-5 April 2014

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This international workshop was organised by the members of the research project 'Ritual, Space, Mimesis: Performative traditions and ethnic identity among the Rai of eastern Nepal' funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). There has been a growing academic interest in the diverse traditions of Kiranti[1]-speaking groups in East Nepal since the 1970s. In particular, linguists have done extensive research on and documentation of the highly variable languages belonging to the Kiranti subgroup of Tibeto-Burman. However, ethnographic studies have lagged behind: whereas detailed grammars now exist for more than a dozen Kiranti languages, this is not matched by thorough descriptions of cultural traditions. Therefore the workshop aimed at giving a platform for the existing expertise on Kiranti cultures and, bringing together linguists and anthropologists, to discuss the present state of research. A particular focus was put on 'Kiranti religion', which is a label acknowledged in the Nepal Census since 1991 but which is still a little known entity. In the present political context of ethnic politics it will be of particular interest to study the changing configuration of these traditions.

In the opening lecture, 'The study of Kiranti religion as an emerging field', Martin Gaenszle (ISTB, University of Vienna) gave an overview of the published academic work on the Kiranti, focusing on anthropological works. It can be observed that ethnographic work among the Kiranti concentrates on topics identified as core concepts by N.J. Allen and Philippe Sagant in the 1970s, such as ritual and ritual specialists, myth and recitations, as well as kinship and power. Gaenszle characterised Kiranti religion as 'a religion that very much lives through the language'. Even if the *muddum*,[2] a widely recognised term for the oral tradition and cultural knowledge, refers to a common concept, each local group possesses distinct traditions. Given that the Kiranti constitute one of the largest ethnic

1 The designation 'Kiranti' is nowadays increasingly replaced by 'Kirat' in Nepal itself.

2 Also called by other cognate terms.

units in Nepal, it is astonishing just how little anthropological and ethnographic work has been conducted among them. Focusing on religion as a topic, it is important to understand how reformist movements in the 20th century and the impact of the ongoing political restructuring in Nepal shape new practices and understandings of religion.

The traditions of the Kiranti groups are essentially oral traditions, and knowledge and practice are still today mainly handed down from mouth to ear and through performance. The Kiranti traditionally had no script, but today numerous books are printed in what is called the Limbu script, which now is also taught in various schools. Boyd Michailovsky (LACITO/CNRS, Villejuif) pointed out the historical development of this script from its beginnings in the 18th century until today in his lecture 'On the Limbu (Sirijanga) script in the 20th century'. Sirijanga is regarded as the inventor of the Limbu script but until the late 1920s no further documents can be found written in it, after which it was revived by Iman Singh Chemjong in Darjeeling. In a detailed account of the personal histories of the protagonists, Michailovsky traced the development of the script and how it made its way to reach Phalgunanda Lingden Limbu, a key figure in the reform of Kiranti Religion. Through him the script became closely linked to a new form of religion, and we are confronted with the contemporary effects of an old theme in Himalayan mythology: bargaining for religious authority through scripts and books.

Written sources about or from the various Kiranti groups, if they exist at all, hardly ever reach further back than maybe a century. Reconstructing history is therefore a major challenge. Grégoire Schlemmer (CNRS, Paris) suggested in his lecture 'Persistence through changes: evolution of the Kulung Rai religious practice during the 20th century' that by the means of precise and detailed ethnography one can attempt to reconstruct it even under these circumstances. He showed that writing a history of the Kulung Rai – as a model for any local culture lacking written sources – means primarily bringing a chronological order into ethnographic data and linking this chain to the few events that can be dated precisely. In this way he could show that in this specific local case the forest and hunting rituals are among the oldest. Healing rituals followed, as illness is said to have come from outside and therefore has to be healed by rituals coming from outside. House and territory rituals are very important today, but compared to the other ritual types they are a rather recent phenomenon.

He could show that in this reconstruction it makes no sense to search for a 'pure' tradition, for 'what counts here is not what is original, but what is important'.

Ritual recitations are often performed in special languages, the *muddum* languages, which are distinct from the ordinary local languages. The comparison of these two registers stood in the centre of the lecture 'The language of invocation vis-à-vis the language of communication' by Vishnu Singh Rai (Guest Researcher at the University of Vienna, funded by the Open Society Foundation). The language of daily communication is a two-way process between the speakers in a proper dialogue, it is prosaic and features little musicality. The ritual language of invocation, by contrast, is one-directional: a poetic, creative monologue with a high degree of musicality. On the basis of many examples from the Chamling Rai *muddum* language, the creativity of this speech register was shown in order to establish that ritual language is not archaic and fixed. Rai pointed out that the idiosyncratic use of suffixes and binominals often pose particular problems in the translation of such recitations, and because words can have many meanings simultaneously ritual language is more difficult to understand than ordinary language. Kirat ritual language is a field still little researched among linguists and anthropologists alike.

Another aspect of Kiranti religion, and of cultural practice among the Kiranti in general, that has only marginally been researched so far is that of dance and performative movements. In her lecture on 'Dolokumma: layers of cultural knowledge and practice in the *sakela* performance of the Dumi Rai'. Marion Wettstein (ISTB, University of Vienna) examined the themes which are assembled in the *sakela* dance of the Rai, and how they are interlinked. She analysed the layers of performance, such as the mimetic dance movements, the lyrics of the accompanying songs, the ritual event and recitations into which the dance is embedded, the mythological stories connoted, and many more (agricultural techniques, crafts, fauna), and showed how these can be arranged into a densely woven cocoon of cultural knowledge and practice related to the experience of dancing. This, she suggested, and the fact that anyone from the community can participate in this lay dance (while it can be performed independently of territory by opening a dance space on any ground), makes *sakela* highly suited for implementing and embodying community feeling and notions of ethnic identity, a main reason why the dance is currently

intensely promoted by Rai cultural activists in Nepal and in the diasporas.

Another theme recurrent in Kiranti cultural activism is that of territory and ancestral homeland. In his lecture 'Walking with the ancestors: new approaches to the study of ritual landscapes in Eastern Nepal' Alban von Stockhausen (ISTB, University of Vienna) demonstrated how ritual landscape is turned into a statement about political territory. By performing pilgrimages formerly not known among the Rai, by tagging ritual places with inscriptions, by making stations of the imaginary shamanic journey into public ritual spaces for real, landscape becomes democratised and is transformed into a map of ethnic self-definition and identity. In order to document this landscape, von Stockhausen presented a method of ethnographic map-making by the help of GPS logging that allows a precise linkage of detailed ethnographic and geographic data.

In the concluding discussion it was suggested that a researchers' network for Kiranti Studies should be set up which will include linguists and anthropologist as well as researchers from other fields interested in Kiranti culture and history. An online platform that allows academics worldwide to join will be hosted by the ISTB, University of Vienna. On behalf of the Kiranti researchers in Nepal, Vishnu Singh Rai informed that the Kirat Rai Yayokkha, the cultural and ethnic umbrella organisation of the Rai, is planning to organise a conference on Kirat studies in mid-August 2015 in Kathmandu and welcomes the international academic community to take part. Updates on this and other events, as well as the researchers' network, will be given on the Kirat Studies website at http://www.univie.ac.at/kiratstudies/.