

MYTHS AND FACTS:  
RECONSIDERING SOME DATA CONCERNING  
THE CLAN HISTORY OF THE SHERPAS

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Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit huscht vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiederssehen im Augenblick seiner eben aufblitzt, Erkennbarkeit ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten.

—Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen*

Many books are written with the motivation of clarifying a particular problem and thus burying it forever. But finishing a book is like leaving a place. Even if you don't return, a scene, a smell, a bell, someone's word may bring it back to mind. A problem is not forgotten by just completing a book.

It has been several years since I left Nepal and the ethnological questions aroused by my stay there. The book stands on the shelf and the subject matter has faded into the distance. <sup>1</sup> And yet there are a few themes I dealt with then which have since come back to my mind time and again. Since these must be the ones that have troubled me most, i.e. the ones that have turned out to be the most problematic, I now present a few of them again, hoping that time has brought me a little closer to their solution.

Some of the questions that were underlying my work on the Sherpas and partly motivated it might be formulated in the following way:

1. Is it possible to get some knowledge of the historical composition of a tribe, its time and place of origin, merely by relying on its own oral or written traditions, provided there are any?
2. If so, is it possible to find the demarcation line between mythological and historical accounts?
3. What is the nature of an historical fact, comparing native and western history?
4. Can the historical study of a social institution help to understand that institution theoretically or sociologically?

The simplest approach to these questions is to summarize briefly the results of my work.

<sup>1</sup> My stay in Nepal in 1965 resulted in the book: *Geschichte und Sozialordnung der Sherpa*, Innsbruck/Munchen, 1968.

Until the discovery of a number of local documents in several villages of Solu in 1965, which were partly mythological and partly historical in nature, knowledge about the past of Solu—Khumbu's inhabitants was scarcely more than a blank page. This fate has been shared till now by other regions and populations of Nepal. The Sherpa documents, most of which are written in Tibetan, helped to change this situation a little. We now have some data at hand.

It was not until the middle of the 16th century that the first ancestors of the Sherpa immigrated into the region in eastern Nepal, then uninhabited, called Solu—Khumbu. According to written accounts and oral information their original homeland was a region in the eastern Tibetan province of Kham named Salmo Gang, a region approximately 1300 miles away from their present home. One of the reasons for this migration can be guessed from a statement in one of the documents, according to which the emigration took place at a time of politico—religious tension between the Kham people and their powerful neighbours to the north, the Mongols.

The migration itself can be divided into two successive phases: first, the march from Kham in eastern Tibet to the Tinkye region in central Tibet; then, from central Tibet to the present dwelling places in Nepal. The intermediary stay in central Tibet appears to have been intended by them as a final one, but again politico—religious pressure seems to have caused the Sherpa ancestors to leave their newly acquired homes. In the years 1533 two Muslim zealots, Sultan Sa'id Khan from Kashgar and General Muhammed Haidar Dughlat, invaded Tibet with their army from the west. Sa'id Khan did not proceed very far—he died of a sudden high altitude illness; and Haidar Dughlat, too, did not quite achieve the common aim; the destruction of the City Temple of Lhasa. He had to give up a few days west of Lhasa. And yet, this martial campaign caused enough fear and turmoil in those parts through which it led that it might well be connected directly to the Sherpa ancestors' escape across the Himalayan Mountain range into Nepal. Supposing this was so, as some indications suggest, we can date their arrival in Solu—Khumbu very precisely. It must have been around 1533.

With the migration of the Sherpa ancestors across the Nangpa La pass into the valleys south of Mt. Everest begins the history of colonization of Solu-Khumbu. The first chapter of this history includes the separate movements of the first clans to arrive. They number four, each of them composed of not more than a few families. A general pattern of settling can be observed:

- Each of the different clans selects a clearly defined locality for settlement and demarcates the boundaries of its clan property.
- The number of a clan's members increases and the small settlements develop into the first discernable clan—villages, the centers of clan activities.
- From the first clan—villages new satellite settlements are founded within the

confines of a clan's area.

- The new settlements also grow and become independent clan villages.
- Dislocation from the old villages produces naturally an increasing disintegration of the original homogeneous proto-clans.
- The final result of disintegration is the split of the proto-clans into several sub-clans which, by adopting new clan names, become independent social units.

Two of the four original or proto-clans—the Minyagpa and Thimmi—first occupied the eastern and western parts of Khumbu, the remaining two—the Serwa and Chakpa—proceeded immediately to Solu, later followed by the majority of the others. In the course of their geographical dispersion only the first two proto-clans mentioned split up into a number of independent sub-clans, which, however, to preserve to the present day their common ancestry. This can be seen from the fact that members of sub-clans belonging to a common proto-clan do not intermarry just as if they still were one single clan, thus strictly following the rules of clan exogamy. The descendants of the four proto-clans, including their different split branches (lineages or sub-clans), now form the central group of Sherpa society in rank, in age, and in number.

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The next historical and hierarchical stratum of Sherpa society was created by the immigration—almost exclusively to Khumbu—of people who had formerly lived in Dingri, the adjacent area north of the main Himalayan range. They started to move into Nepal from about the middle of the 18th century. Because of their general cultural similarity they were easily integrated into the tribal community.

Dating back to about the same time another set of people made its way into Sherpa society. It consisted of members from other Nepalese groups such as Tamang, Gurung, Chetri, and Newar, who had entered into marital or casual unions with Sherpa girls. The offspring of these alliances, now mainly living in Pharak, were also assimilated into Sherpa culture despite the fact that they had come from distinctly different cultural backgrounds. They started to wear Sherpa dress and ornament, took Sherpa names, were converted to Buddhism and adopted the Sherpa language. The ultimate feature of their assimilation, however, was the transformation of their original tribal names into substitutive clan names. Formerly being an indicator for tribal endogamy, the name now changed into a sign of an exogamic practice. This shift of the name's function was a necessary tribute to the social practices of the group into which these newcomers entered. To distinguish them from the newer clan or family groups immigrating from the Tibetan side, I have called these newly formed units pseudo-clans.

The last group of immigrants—predominantly to Khumbu—that was integrated into Sherpa society were the so-called Khamba. Although the word originally means "those from Kham", Khamba is a relatively empty category in local terminology, for all people

who had within the last four generations moved into Khumbu from the North were labelled in this way. Some of them were just northern neighbours, whereas a number of them had their place of origin as far away as the West Nepal areas of Mustangbhot and Manangbhot. Lacking the most important status symbol in the eyes of the Sherpa, i. e. an acknowledged clan name, these Khamba were looked upon as socially inferior.

Finally, there were settlers from other ethnic groups of Nepal who shifted into the regions of Solu-Khumbu, maintaining their own cultural traditions and not mingling with the Sherpa. Most of them came from the west. This movement started in the 19th century and continues to the present. Nearly all of them now live in Solu.

To give a numerical idea of the people I have been speaking of, here are some general figures from the demographic charts I collected in 1965. The present population of Solu-Khumbu is about 30,000, half of which is comprised of non-Sherpa ethnic or caste groups such as Chetri (4,700), Tamang (2,200), Magar (2,000), Kami (1,600), Newar (1,000), Rai (700), etc. The other half is Sherpa of which 13,300 persons belong to the offspring of the proto-clans, 450 to the newer clans, 350 to the pseudo-clans and about 1,000 to the Khamba.

The subjoined chart summarized the foregoing discussion. It has been juxtaposed to the older one in Fürer-Haimendorf's book on the Sherpa<sup>2</sup>, together illustrating two-

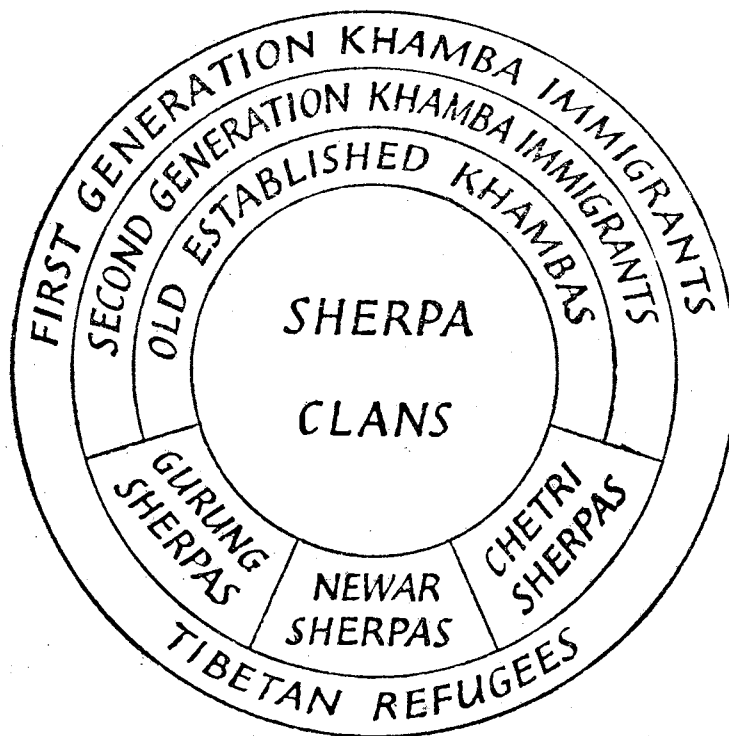


CHART I: FURER-HAIMENDORF

[ Reproduced from: C. Fürer-Haimendorf: *The Sherpas of Nepal*, London 1964, page 27. ]

<sup>2</sup> Ch. von Fürer-Haimendorf, *The Sherpas of Nepal*, London, 1964, p. 27.

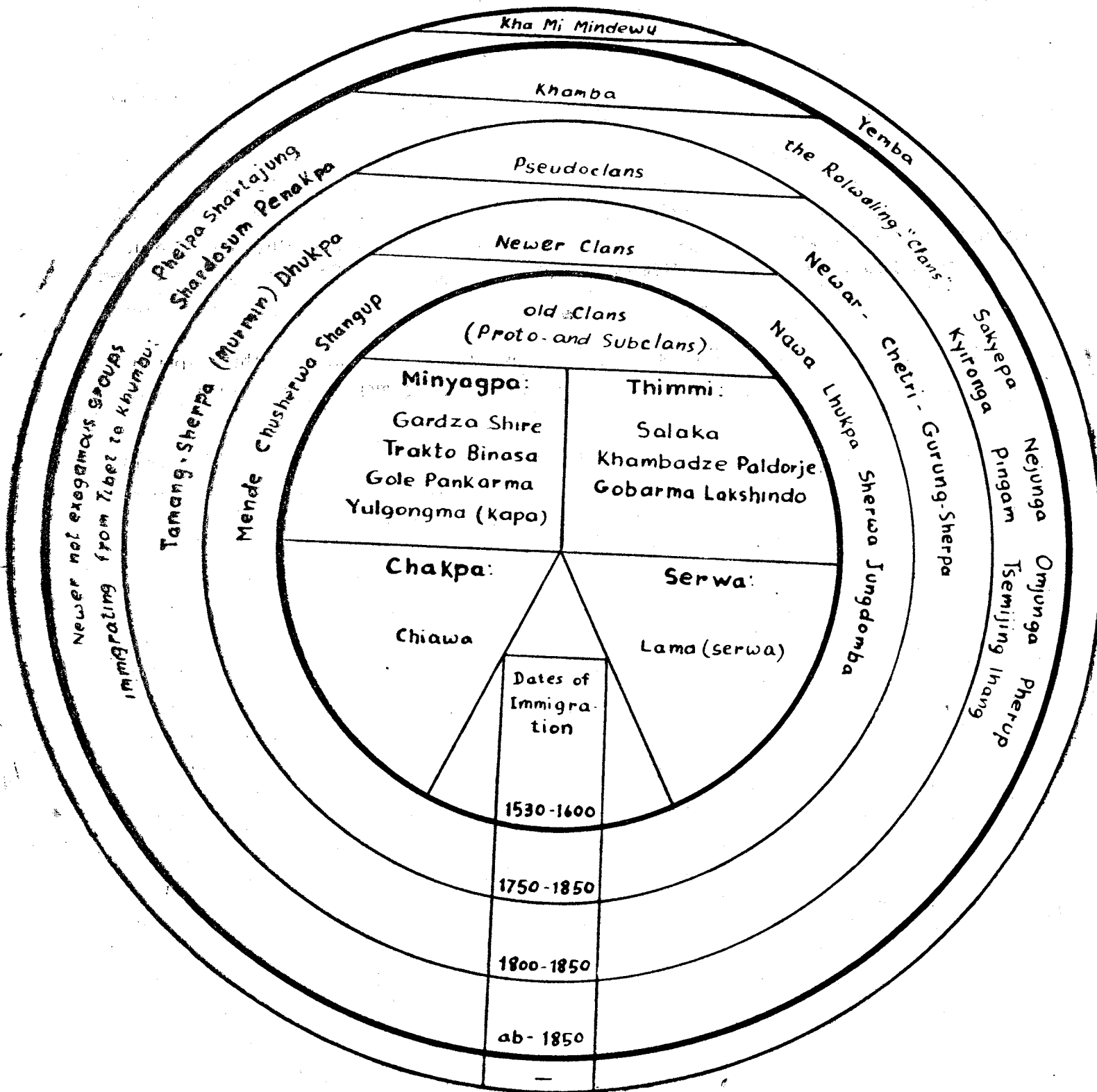


CHART II: OPITZ

[ Reproduced from: M. Oppitz: *Geschichte und Sozialordnung der Sherpa*, Innsbruck / München, 1968, page 100.1

phases of fieldwork, one before and one after the discovery of the native historical documents. Besides the utility of historical investigation, this juxtaposition may also indicate that it is never too late: even if a tribe seems to have been thoroughly studied it is in no way superfluous to visit it again.

As already assumed, the first ancestors of the present Sherpa did not migrate from eastern Tibet to Nepal as a whole tribe, but came in very small numbers. Therefore, and this was my final hypothesis about the history of their colonization, what now is known as the Sherpa, a considerable hill tribe of eastern Nepal, is the result of the numerical expansion of a very small population that followed mechanically its own rate of growth (doubling rate for population in 49 years) within the confines of a single area (Solu-Khumbu) and a in demarcated period of time (ca. 450 years). So much for the résumé.

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Let us now go back to the four questions posed at the beginning of this paper and see if the ethnographical material provides a glimpse of an answer to them, or if in turn the material itself can be slightly illuminated or X-rayed by them.

If one asks the first question and the answer is yes, the second comes up immediately, but let us postpone a discussion of the second question until we have dealt with the first. If the answer is no, one would like to find out what other auxiliary means can be offered to rescue native history from the level of mere conjecture. In the Sherpa case there were two such auxiliary means to support the local oral and written reports on the past: alien historical sources, and statistics. The first of these two means is common practice among historians: to enlarge the quantity of independent sources that reflect a particular time period. In a few instances the Sherpa material allowed a cross-checking from other—mainly Tibetan—historical accounts. Some of the events and persons mentioned in the Sherpa documents also figured in chronicles unrelated to them. This situation was not only an affirmative point for their existence, it also helped to provide markings for the time scheme. The other auxiliary tool—statistics—might seem a little uncommon in this connection. In fact, when I did my demographic enquiries among the Sherpas, I could not foresee that later they would aid the historical ones. Given were some historical data, for the correctness of which there was evidence from other sources. Also given were several genealogies of some of the clans and lineages, which either I extracted from the historical accounts themselves or which existed in pure form, in the guise of written ancestral enumerations. These genealogies comprised 10 to 35 generations. Now, if I could give a fairly precise mean for an average generation among the patrilineal Sherpa, that is the time-span between a man and the son who carries on the lineage, then the historical markings and the genealogies, the generations of which would further serve as rungs of a chronological ladder, could be connected and mutually tested. The answer was provided by my demographic questionnaires. In other words: three different and in isolated form

dead sets of information—historical dates, genealogical charts and demographic details—could be assembled to make a joint message; together they formed the time scheme for Sherpa history.

If on the other hand we look upon the local (native) historical documents as they stand on their own, it is necessary to investigate their nature, i.e. to examine whether they belong to the realm of history or that of mythology. Otherwise one would risk the charge of naiveté. In the case of the Sherpa material this investigation is simplified by the natives' own distinction between the two spheres. In most cases the learned people among them are quite definite about which parts of an account are to be taken as serious historical report and which ones are mythological. And with some accounts, this distinction is quite easily made. I will give two short examples. One of the texts deals with the ancestors of the Chakpa clan before and at the time of the emigration from Kham. Speaking about the founder of one of the lineages, who himself is apparently an historical figure, the text suddenly deviates into telling an adventure this man had with an eagle. Both the form, which instantaneously changes into verse, and the fantastic content clearly unmask the interpolation as a mythical story, the aim of which is to establish the eagle as the protective clan deity and the man as the one who first met that supernatural being. Other documents have their mythological parts in the beginning. For they start with well known and standardized genealogies, borrowed from Tibetan mythological genesis, such as the derivation from the monkeys. That is to say, in the case of the Sherpa documents the demarcation line between historical and mythological account is usually sharp enough to be recognized.

But it would be oversimplifying the matter if one stuck too rigorously to a strict dualization of the two mentioned spheres. In fact, one may ask if history itself does not have mythological qualities. Or to put it into more direct terms: Is it not inevitable that historical data at the moment they are presented take on the quality of mythical, that is to say ideological, statements? That leads us right into the third question, the one about the nature of an historical fact. No one has gone into it with more radical vigour than Lévi-Strauss in his famous controversy with Sartre at the end of "La pensée sauvage." The last chapter, entitled "Histoire et Dialectique", reveals the various descriptions of the French Revolution as inevitably mythological. Since a total history is impossible, or would confront us with undistinguishable chaos, history by definition has to be partial. A historical fact therefore is not just what really has happened, it is what it is only through the declaration of the historian. In a way it is made by him, because it is he who selects what is to be considered as historically relevant, it is he who cuts out other events and puts the ones selected together. In short, history is always a history, depending upon who is talking. It is a conscious or unconscious ideological collage of what has happened,

an interpretation of it. It is a demonstration. And exactly at this point the mythological features of history become apparent.

The difference therefore that normally is made between historical and mythological fact is much less sound than would appear at first sight. Both types of facts serve at times exactly identical purposes: they want to tell and thereby prove something. The lofty attitudes which Western interpreters of indigenous societies often take towards the native's incapacity to distinguish between the two spheres—an assumption that probably is more often wrong than right, as the Sherpa case suggests—return to them like a boomerang. Not seeing the inevitable ideological dimension of historiography, they themselves become automatic victims.

Moreover, it can be observed that the distinction between historical and mythological fact, instead of simply separating what actually serves to establish and confirm another opposition that apparently is one of the dearest to run-of-the-mill anthropology: I mean the opposition between civilized and primitive. In fact, the most general criterion for this distinction is historical consciousness, which, according to widespread agreement, the civilized people possess and the primitive people do not. This extends to the point of making the assumption that there are societies which have no history at all.

All societies have their history, be it written or unwritten, stored or not. What differs is the importance they invest it with. This again depends on the different concepts people have of history. Some of the concepts may be described as linear, according to which all events of the past form a necessary line of development that runs parallel to their chronological order. Others may be described as circular, according to which there is a certain number of events that happen and after exhaustion happen again. The first of the two concepts attributes a teleological quality of the film of history, the other conceives it as repetitive. It can be easily deduced from conditions like these – and they are only two out of many – that the attention paid to the sum of historical events changes from one concept to the next. One could even say that the concept a society has of history in general determines its own history in the same way as the historian makes or manipulates it. As a matter of fact, he is rarely more than the official spokesman of that particular concept.

To sum up: I don't think it is acceptable by the sole criterion of historical consciousness, to introduce the qualifying opposition between primitive and civilized societies. This would equal a deliberate critique on alien forms of consciousness in general. For the neutral denomination of different levels of techno-economic status, however, the opposition might be practical.



Apart from historical consciousness the question remains whether there is a difference between western and native historical facts. And here, I think, one must make a distinction, which mainly results from the size and specification of a population. In a relatively small, unspecified and homogeneous society, like that of the Sherpa, events could be called historical that in our society would rank as anecdotal or biographical. Our societies have, as Lévi-Strauss would put it, a kind of strong history, whereas the native's history more often than not is weak, that is to say, situated on a less explicative scale. "L'histoire biographique et anecdotique est la moins explicative; mais elle est la plus riche du point de vue de l'information, puisqu'elle considère les individus dans leur particularité et qu'elle détaille, pour chacun d'eux, les nuances du caractère, les détours de leurs motifs, les phases de leurs délibérations. Cette information se schématise, puis s'efface, puis s'ablit, quand on passe à des histoires de plus en plus 'fortes'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, history reaches a higher degree of density as the society with which it deals becomes more extended and diversified.

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Before we conclude, let us turn to the last of the four questions that headed this paper. It brings us directly into contact with the principal sceptic concerning the study of history in the anthropological field. This man was Radcliffe-Brown. On the very first page of his most influential work<sup>4</sup> Radcliffe-Brown makes a distinction between historical and theoretical studies of social institutions. The first type of enquiry he calls idiographic. The second one he labels nomothetic. The difference between the two is defined by the conclusions they aim at, which are particular or factual statements in the one case and general propositions in the other. Among the idiographic enquiries besides historical studies he names ethnography, which in turn differs from the former in that it derives its knowledge from direct observation rather than from written records. A field for nomothetic enquiries is comparative sociology, we may add theoretical or just social anthropology.

Now, having made these more or less academic distinctions, Radcliffe-Brown warns us never to confuse historical explanation with theoretical understanding. And in the primitive societies, he goes on to say, "that are studied by social anthropology there are no historical records"<sup>5</sup>, which means that from a historical point of view in anthropology not even an idiographic study is possible.

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<sup>3</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage*, Paris, 1962, p. 346.

<sup>4</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, London, 1952.

<sup>5</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 3 (second edition.)

There are some objections to be raised against these assertions. First of all, there are historical records, at least in some of the primitive societies. They only wait to be discovered. The Sherpas are one example. The first ethnographer to do a thorough study on them, Fürer-Haimendorf, was slightly disappointed on this matter: "Traditions and myths relating to the Sherpas' migration to the regions of Khumbu and Solu and to the establishment of the present villages are almost completely lacking." <sup>6</sup> This was written one year before we went to Nepal and collected just about twenty such documents, aided by the fortunate choice of having stayed mainly in Solu, where nearly all of the scriptures originate, rather than in Khumbu.

The second objection against Radcliffe-Brown is of a more epistemological nature. Contrary to his statement I maintain that an historical study of social institutions can very well support theoretical understanding of them. This does not at all mean that historical explanation is, or necessarily leads to, a generalized comprehension, or that it could replace theoretical reflection that is sociological understanding. Let us confront my assertion with concrete ethnographic experience.

If one compares the present clan system of the Sherpa as it appears to direct observation with the one of the past that can be deduced from the written traditions, the first impression one gets is that there are no major contradictions between the two. Although not identical they share the same features. For both, the most outstanding feature is the clan name, which every person belonging to Sherpa society must have. If a person has not got such a name, he or she can either choose a substitute or else will not be admitted to the social life of the people. The clan name designates whom one can marry and whom one cannot. The Sherpa stick strictly to the rules of clan exogamy. This feature is at present as marked as it was in the past. As a social unit the clan manifests itself in various domains: it has its own and clearly defined clan territory, its exclusive clan villages, its own pastures. As a result of the topographical unity the clan undertakes common economic enterprises. Finally each clan has its own religious habits. Besides the universal deities each clan worships its own. However, it must be borne in mind that these last-mentioned features do not have the same importance today as they did in the past. Nowadays clan territories exist only in Solu. In the whole of Khumbu and Pharak there are no such things as clan territories, clan villages and clan pastures. And of all the villages in Solu only one-half have remained pure patriclan villages. On the other hand, the long list of mountain deities that are worshipped clanwise in Khumbu, is very short in Solu. In other words: the tightness of the clan as a social unit now is partially reduced or even left in ruins.

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<sup>6</sup> Ch. von Fürer - Haimendorf, *The Sherpas of Nepal*, London, 1964, p. 18.

It is here that historical studies of social institutions become valuable. For if one wants to get a full account of the functions a clan may have as a social unit, it is a prerequisite, first to enumerate them. And if one does not find them in the present it is legitimate to search for them in the past. Thus the idiom: *Spuren der Vergangenheit* can be inverted. *Die Spuren der Gegenwart*, that is, the residues of the present, can be compounded to complete images of the past. Discoveries made in this way serve to explain the historical development of a single case just as much as they increase the possibilities for general sociological understanding; they are of equal use for both restricted ethnography and comparative anthropology.

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