

# **The cultural construction of nature -including resources**

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**DRAFT**

## Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of cultural perceptions of nature. With his works, Roy A. Rappaport demonstrates that people act towards nature with reference to cultural constructions of nature - or 'cognized environment', in his terms. The implications of these acts can be traced in an 'operational model' of nature (which of course is also a representation).

The Kulung Rai is an ethnic group living in the remote eastern hilly region of Nepal. They exploit a wide range of natural resources, through cultivation, animal husbandry and utilization of forest products. The focus of my research was originally on 'management of common property resources'. After finishing an MA thesis based on fieldwork conducted in 1991, I realized that I had written it with an insufficient knowledge about how the Kulung Rai perceive nature (e.g. identify something as being a resource).

A short fieldwork in 1994 gave me the opportunity to improve this shortcoming. I found that e.g. some trees were not used for some of the purposes that seems "natural", given the inherent qualities of these trees: *Posing*<sup>1</sup> can be used as firewood by some people and not by others. No one will burn *kaarpau*. A cultural explanation for such usages is needed, and suggestions for describing them in an interpretive framework will be given in this paper.

## The Kulung Rai

The Kirantis together constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Nepal, even though they only comprise approximately 4% of the nepalese population (English 1982). The Kirantis can be subdivided into Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar and Hayu. The Kirantis share many common cultural features. They e.g. consider that they have a common forefather and great parts of the mythical themes are common<sup>2</sup>. We will see that some of the myths told in this paper has been influenced by hindu mythology. The question of the origin of Rai mythology will, however, not be dealt with in detail in this paper. The Kulung Rai, the sub-tribe among whom I did fieldwork, traditionally live in the Hongu Valley, in Solukhumbu District.

## What I wanted to do

Going back to Bung, the village where I did my research, I had one basic assumption: That people utilize nature on the basis of their culturally situated experience of it. How people organize their knowledge about nature is also culturally specific, and something that had to be uncovered. Just before leaving for the field I had read a book about ethnobiological classification and my original intention was to collect data on how the Kulung Rai classify trees. My particular interest in trees is due to having previously written about the management of communal forests in Bung.

By phrasing my questions in different manners I hoped that I could discover indigenous

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<sup>1</sup>Names of trees are written in Kulung Rai language, if not otherwise mentioned. The spelling of Nepali and Kulung is probably not 100% correct. Cf. Appendix for nepali, english and scientific names.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. English (1982:43) for intra-Kiranti comparisons. Gaenszle (1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1994) for intra-Rai comparisons and Mewahang Rai cases. Allen (1974, 1981) for Thulung Rai cases.

ways of perceiving affinity between different species of trees. Although not trained in botany, I had books to help me, so that I would know which kinds of trees that are considered to be related according to western botany. I would e.g. choose 2 or 3 trees from the same family and ask whether or not people considered them to be similar in any way. The answer was always more or less the same: No, they are different types of trees. If I asked whether they are more similar than other trees, the answer would still be: No. This even goes for the different kinds of Pine that can be found in this area. In Nepali there is a common name for all kinds of Pine, namely *salla*. The names of the different kinds of *salla* are all combinations of a name and *salla* (e.g. *thigre salla*, *khote salla*, *dhupi salla* and *gobre salla*). In Kulung Rai language this is not so. There is no common name to denote the trees that are called *salla* in Nepali. These trees have individual names in Kulung (e.g. *rapau*, *ongwapau*, *dhupipau* and *suksupau*; *pau* simply meaning tree).

It soon became obvious that the Kulung Rais do not perceive familiarity between trees the way we do (that is; the way modern botany does). Not organizing knowledge about trees the way modern botany does, does of course not mean they don't organize the knowledge. So the next task was to try to find out just how they do it.

By pressing very hard on people, some of them came up with what they themselves phrased as guesses on the relationships between trees. The similarity could be according to e.g. shape of leaves, whether or not the steam "bleeds" when cut, whether or not they are particularly good as fodder, as building material or as firewood. In most cases, their suggestions of relationship were not in accordance with western classification. I never had the feeling that I was drawing upon indigenous classification either.

#### **What I ended up doing**

Understanding that my attempts of pushing people into making classificatory systems were futile, I decided to leave it. Maybe there is a hidden classificatory system, but my limited time schedule did not allow for more time put into this matter. My insufficient knowledge of ethnobotanical research methods might also have muddled my understanding.

During these early discussions with villagers, I soon realized that they have an enormous knowledge of trees. One informant gave me the Nepali and Kulung names of more than fifty different trees in about the time it took me to write it down. He could also inform me on the usage of these trees. Of course, not all the informants were that knowledgeable.

During these talks I noticed that some trees are not used as firewood although the wood itself is quite suitable. When questioning people about this, most of them would say that they didn't really know why they don't use it as firewood. They said that they had been told by the elders not to use it as firewood; it is their tradition not to use it as firewood; the gods don't like them to use it as firewood.

I don't find that very surprising. If, e.g., you ask a norwegian which colour we use on the candles during Advent (before Christmas), almost everyone would say that the colour is red. But if you ask why we use red colour, most people would not know the answer. They might just say that it is our tradition to use red colour (but as a matter of fact, the correct colour to use, according to the church, is lilac).

### **Posing: The mythical forefathers**

Some people said that they use *posing*<sup>3</sup> for firewood, some said they don't. After some initial confusion, I later discovered that it is the decedents of Chhemsí who do not use *posing* as firewood, whereas the decedents of Tamsi do. Chhemsí and Tamsi are two mythical forefathers. People told me that those who can burn *posing* can also roast pork on the fire, but those who can not burn *posing* can not roast pork either. People made this connection between pig and *posing*, but most of them were unable to tell me why this connection exists. Asking many people, the answer was again the same: It's our tradition, the elders have told us this. The obvious next step was of course to talk with some elders.

I coincidentally came across the answer to why some people can use *posing* as firewood and why some can't, when listening to an elderly villager telling the story about the arrival of the first Rais into the Hongu Valley. Tamsi and Chhemsí originally came from Rawa. Chhemsí came first to Hongu and settled in Chhemsing (hence the name). Tamsi still had not arrived. He was sick at Rawa. Chhemsí went back to fetch him. After returning to Hongu, Tamsi was still sick. Chhemsí performed a healing ritual, and Tamsi became better.

I found the answer to why some people can't use *posing* as firewood when asking questions about the healing ritual. Chhemsí did the ritual under a *posing*-tree. This ritual also requires the sacrifice of a pig. After the ritual, Tamsi felt better. He was hungry and wanted to eat. He roasted some pork on the fire and ate some. Chhemsí could not eat the meat because he had performed the ritual; he had been the shaman (N. *dhami*). Ever since, the descendants of Chhemsí have not been allowed to use *posing* as firewood nor roast pork on the fire. The descendants of Tamsi can do both. The same healing ritual are still used, but not necessarily under a *posing*-tree.

I asked some people whether or not the Nachhirings, another sub-tribe in the area, are related to Tamsi and Chhemsí. They were not sure, but one of them hypothesized (without any intervention from my part) that they must be related to Tamsi in some way since they can use *posing* as firewood and roast pork on the fire.

### **Weipau: Demons, snakes and Shiva**

*Weipau*<sup>4</sup> is the most important tree from a ritual point of view. It is used in almost all the rituals. The reason why *weipau* is so important should be clear after this story:

In the beginning the world was covered with water. There were eight snake brothers (N./K. *naag*). Hutilip is the youngest and most powerful. The eight brothers had to fight with two demons. The brothers were about to loose the battle so Hutilip went to ask Pharu<sup>5</sup> (=Shiva) for help. With the help of Pharu, they won the battle and killed the demons. They cut the demons into pieces and spread the parts around on the earth. From

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<sup>3</sup>posing (K), *Boehmeria rugulosa* (Sc).

<sup>4</sup>weipau (K), *aule katush* (N), Chestnut (E), *Castanopsis tribuloides* (Sc).

<sup>5</sup>The Kulung Rai explicitly associate Pharu with the hindu god Shiva. Also in Mewahang Rai creation myths, is Shiva, according to Gaenzle (1993:121) associated with Pharu (M. Paruhang).

the blood and the flesh there became soil and grass (K. *charsong*, N. *dubo*).

The brothers thought that they needed someone to stay on the earth to use it and look after it. Hutilip, being the most powerful of the brothers, again went to see Pharu to ask for guidance. They discussed how to make people. They fetched some leaves from a *weipau* and shook the leaves. From that there became different kinds of foodstuff. Again they thought that they needed people to look after these things. They collected the bones from the demons and made a stone. They thought maybe they could make a human from this stone, but they only managed to make a chicken. Again they shook the *weipau*-leaves. From that there became a pig. They created a cow and a buffalo in the same manner.

Hutilip and Pharu discussed what to do. Who should use the foodstuff and look after the earth? The chicken said that it could make a human. Hutilip and Pharu did not believe that, but the chicken insisted. They asked the chicken how it could manage that and the chicken laid an egg. Then the egg said that it could make a human. Pharu broke the egg on his forehead. From the yellow part of the egg there became red soil, from the white part there became white soil. From the red soil and cow dung they made a sculpture of a human face. The face told them to put it by the water and then leave. Then it would become a human, it said. Hutilip and Pharu made a place for it to stay near by the water, and then left. Hutilip went back to his brothers, Pharu went back to heaven. From the face there became grass (K. *bairichap*, N. *kus*). A girl came out of the grass.

After eating some food she became ill. She wondered what had happened and asked Hutilip for advise. Hutilip told her that she should worship the snakes, i.e. the brothers (N. *naagako puja*). This was the first time this ritual was conducted. This is the same ritual being done by all Kulunge Rai (called *naagi*), twice a year, after harvesting. Later on she became ill again. Hutilip told her that she needed to do a much bigger ritual, and offer everything she had to the snakes. She collected all her belongings and presented it to the gods. Then she became well. This ritual is called *dedam* and should be performed by all Kulung Rai households once within about three years time. This is a very expensive ritual that most people can not afford to do very often. *Naagi-dedam* is the worship of the Kulung Rai *kul deuta* (N. something like an ancestor god.). As far as I am informed, all the Rai consider the *naags* to be the *kul deuta*, so maybe we can call it the pan-tribal god.

An important aspect of Rai religion is that mythical themes are being enacted in rituals because this is needed in order to preserve cosmos. Myths are not just histories about the past. Forces of chaos are threatening social order.

"If not given regular sacrifices these ancestor deities can harm the living and "appear" in the form of pain and illness in their body (Gaenzle 1993:119)."

As we could see, *weipau* was vital for creating the earth. *Weipau* is also used in other rituals than *naagi* and *dedam*, as for instance in *chinta* (a word denoting many different kinds of rituals). Attending a household-*chinta* (N. *gharako chinta*) I noticed that the shaman shook *weipau*-leaves in the same manner as being described when Hutilip and Pharu created the animals. While shaking the *weipau*, the shaman is wishing good things for the family.

As we all know, one woman is not enough to ancestor all mankind, so here is the rest of the story: The woman got older and needed a husband. One day she heard the sound of wind. It hit her in the stomach and she became pregnant. She first begot seven sons. None of them were good. They did not help her and they could not look after the earth. She drove them away using a tree called *tishiwa*<sup>6</sup>. *Tishiwa* is also used in the type of *chinta* conducted after people die an unnatural death, to drive away the bad spirits.

Then she got a daughter. The daughter was good, like her mother. The daughter got older and she also needed a husband<sup>7</sup>. After suffering lots of difficulties, she eventually ended up being impregnated by Pharu (=Shiva). All people are descendants from this union.

One of the men who told me this story, later on told my field assistant another story, asking him not to translate it to me, in case I might get offended. He said that, according to his ancestors' knowledge, people are descendants from the apes. This he would not tell me personally, since I might find that shocking. Apparently he did not find it the least contradicting that he, a moment earlier, had told us that people are descendants of Pharu (=Shiva).

### **Kaarpau: The blacksmith and the Prince of Death**

*Kaarpau*<sup>8</sup> can not be used as firewood. This is the reason given: A long time ago a blacksmith (N. *kaami*) was building a house. The Prince of Death (N. *jema*) was sent from heaven to fetch the blacksmith. When the blacksmith saw the Prince of Death he said: You have to come back next year; then I will go with you. My sister is about to give me a blessing (i.e. *bhaitika*). The Prince of Death left but came back again the next year. The blacksmith was smart. He had prepared a hollow room with a lock, in a *kaarpau*. When the Prince of Death arrived he brought him to the tree saying: I have made something that you have to see before we leave. The Prince of Death went into the hollow room to have a look. The blacksmith closed the door and locked it. The Prince of Death stayed there for many years and people in heaven wondered why he didn't return.

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<sup>6</sup>tishiwa (K), aule kaulu (N), *Persea gamblei* (Sc).

<sup>7</sup>She sacrificed to the *naags* and even called the wind, but her mother told her that she could not marry him because he was her father. Your husband lives in heaven, her mother told her. He is a star, named Songe Ruo. The daughter said: How can I go to him. He lives in the heaven. I can not reach him, only see him! So they sent two birds to heaven to try to find Ruo (K. *chinchuli*/N. *phisto* and K. *kekuwa*/N. *besara*). The birds did not meet Ruo, they only met Pharu, who had changed into the shape of an old and ugly man. He knew that the woman needed a husband and that she was looking for Ruo. He spoke with the birds, which did not know that he was Pharu. The birds told him that they were there to fetch him, but Pharu knew that this was not the truth. He said that he was old and tired and that she would not want him to become her husband. I can not go now, but I will give her something I have made, he told the birds. The birds brought her a comb and a hair ornament that he had made. She thought that the gifts were very nice and she said that she wanted to marry him. Again she sent the birds to heaven, and the birds told the old man that she wanted to marry him. The old and ugly man went down to her. She didn't like him and was disgusted by his appearance. She told him that she didn't want to marry him. To punish her, Pharu made her blind and made the earth dry. She was blind and almost dying of thirst. Pharu knew that she would become thirsty, so before he left he had left his semen on a *piralu*-leaf. She consumed this and became pregnant.

<sup>8</sup>kaarpau (K), okhar (N), Walnut (E), *Juglans regia* (Sc)

One day there was a party in the heaven. They were drinking beer and liquor (N. *jaad* and *raksi*). The blacksmith was also there and he became very drunk. He boasted that he could not die because he had locked the Prince of Death in the tree. Now people in heaven knew what had happened and they released the Prince of Death. From that experience they learned two things about death: 1. They should try not to collect healthy people and 2. that they should try to come unannounced!

Now people do not burn *kaarpau* because it is *jema's* tree (N. *jemako rukh*). *Kaarpau* is not used for building material for the same reason (bringing death into the house). Its nut (Walnut) is called *jema's* bones (N. *jemako haddi*). During one of the hindu festival (*tihhaar*), sisters smash this nut on the doorstep (on *bhaitika* day). This kills the Prince of Death and protects the brothers.

### **Devithan: Goddess and conservation**

There are several sacred forests (N. *devithan*) in the vicinity of Bung. The use of the sacred forest is very different from other forests. No one are allowed to use forest products from the sacred forest, neither for firewood, building material, fodder nor other things. Even leaves and branches from certain trees needed for rituals are not allowed to leave the forest. Only twice a year when a ritual is conducted, one is permitted to e.g. cut firewood, but only to use during the ritual. The reason given, is that the goddess would punish, not only the perpetrator, but the whole village. Accordingly, there are strong sanctions against breaking the rules. Due to this, people claim that the size of the sacred forest has stayed more or less the same for as long as they can remember. Most of the sacred forests are surrounded by cultivated fields, so it is fairly easy to check whether or not the forests are being nibbled at.

In this case, I believe that it is possible to say that the direct implications of the ideas about the quality and possible use of sacred forest, is the preservation of patches of forest near the villages. Areas close to villages are otherwise heavily deforested. I am, however, not implying that these ideas about the sacredness of forests has originated in order to preserve forest.

### **The cultural construction of nature**

The natural sciences are based on the assumption that nature function on the basis of natural laws and causal relationships, and thus without purpose and meaning. Socio-cultural phenomenon, on the other hand, incarnates human purpose and meaning, and consequently the understanding of such phenomenon must follow a different logic than the natural sciences (Guneriusen 1992:45-46).

"Nature is seen by humans through a screen of beliefs, knowledge, and purposes, and it is in terms of their images of nature, rather than of the actual structure of nature, that they act." (Rappaport 1979:97)

We have, according to Rappaport (1979), to understand how people cognize their environment (the cultural construction of nature) to understand their acts in the environment. People act on the basis of their conceptualizations of nature, not on the basis of how nature "really" is (nature itself). The implication of peoples acts can of course be traced in nature.

The fact that people act on the basis of a less than perfect understanding of nature should not come as a surprise given the constant struggle among scientist to uncover the mysteries in nature and, more general, our fundamental problems in making unbiased representations of the world.

In this paper I have made a distinction between;

1. The cultural construction of nature, which is the knowledge basis on which people shape their acts towards nature and which has implication for nature itself.
2. Nature itself. Being that "something out there" that is only partially understood, but which nevertheless is exposed to human actions.

### **Conclusion**

In order to conclude this presentation I will return to the title of my paper: 'The cultural construction of nature - including resources'. I have tried to show that among the Kulung Rai there are many ideas about trees that are not based on inherent botanical qualities and that is on the basis of these culturally constituted ideas that people act. Being a resource is not an inherent quality of nature. Something in nature become a resource by being identified as such. What kind of resource it is considered to be, is also culturally defined. A tree can be considered to be a resource suitable for firewood as well as for ritual purposes.

These culturally constituted ideas, of which I have only presented a few, show that the Kulung Rai consider that trees have many more, and different qualities, than "we" consider them to have, e.g. that certain kinds of trees have specific relationships with particular groups of people (cf. e.g. *posing* and the descendants of Tamsi and Chhems). Only after understanding their conceptualization of their natural environment could I understand their interaction with it. If I, on the other hand, had tried to make sense of their actions based on the idea that nature is an entity with only objective qualities, I would have lacked vital contextual data.

As you might have noticed, I have not made any attempts to explain why these ideas about the quality and use of trees exists. The object of this paper has been simply to show some implications of these ideas.

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